The fragmentary Muse and the poetics of refraction in Sappho, Sophocles, Offenbach

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Introduction

The idea of a fragmentary Muse comes from a fragmentary opera, The Tales of Hoffmann (Les Contes d’Hoffmann), by Jacques Offenbach. Such a Muse, I argue, embodies a complex metaphor that I sum up in one word, refraction. This metaphor, which recurs several times in that opera, derives from the idea that light ‘breaks’ through a prism or lens. That is, light refracts or ‘breaks’ just as things break. This idea combines with another idea, that sound refracts or ‘breaks’ as well. When I speak of a refraction of sound, I am aware that there is no such thing in terms of physics. But there is such a thing, as we will see, in terms of a poetic metaphor that extends from the physics of sight to the metaphysics of sound. The optical effect of ‘breaking’ light and the imagined acoustical effect of ‘breaking’ sound combine to form the complex metaphor I call refraction. In the music of Offenbach’s opera, this metaphor is used to express the sensation of experiencing a disintegration of identity, a shattering of the self. That is what I mean when I speak of a poetics of refraction. Besides the opera of Offenbach, such a poetics is found also in two fragments of ancient Greek poetry. One fragment is from a song by Sappho, while the other is from a song embedded within a drama by Sophocles. Though there is no reason to think that Offenbach knew about either of the two ancient Greek fragments I just mentioned, I find his poetics of refraction “good to think with” as I contemplate the corresponding poetics of Sappho and Sophocles.¹

1. The poetics of refraction in a fragment of Sappho

In a fragment from the songs of Sappho, who reputedly flourished around the beginning of the sixth century BCE, we find a remarkable sound effect. It happens in a song known to Classicists as Song 31 of Sappho (F 31 ed. Voigt), the first four stanzas of which have survived in their entirety, while the fifth and presumably concluding stanza has been broken off. In this song, we hear the voice of a singer literally ‘breaking’ at a moment of musical and erotic climax in the singing:

φαίνεται μοι κήνος ίσος θέοισιν
έμμεν ὀνηρ, ὅτις ἐνάντιός τοι
ἰσδάνει καὶ πλάσιον ἄδυ φωνεῖ-


καὶ γελαίσας ἰμέροεν, τό μ’ ἢ μᾶν

¹ The expression “good to think with” derives from Lévi-Strauss 1962.
καρδίαν ἐν στήθεσιν ἐπτόαισεν,
ὡς γὰρ ἐς σ’ ἰδω βρόχε’ ὡς με φώναι-
σ’ οὐδ’ ἐν ἔτ’ εἶκει,

ἀλλὰ κἀ μὲν γλῶσσα ἐγὼ λέπτον
δ’ αὐτικα χρώι πῦρ ύπαδερόμηκεν,
ὅππατεσι δ’ οὐδ’ ἐν ὄρημ’, ἐπιρρόμ-
βεισι δ’ ἄκουαι,

κάδ δέ μ’ ἵδρως ψύχρος κακχέεται τρόμος δὲ
παῖσαν άγρει, χλωροτέρα δὲ ποίας
ἔμμι, τεθνάκην δ’ ὀλίγῳ ’πιδεύης
φαίνομ’ ἐμ’ αὐταί·

He appears [phainetai] to me, that one, equal to the gods [isos theoisin], | that man who, facing you | is seated and, up close, that sweet voice of yours | he hears, | and how you laugh a laugh that brings desire. It just | makes my heart flutter within my breast. | You see, the moment I look at you, right then, for me | to make any sound at all won’t work any more. | My tongue has broken down, and a delicate | - all of a sudden - fire rushes under my skin. | With my eyes I see not a thing, and there is a roar | my ears make. | Sweat pours down me and a trembling | seizes all of me; paler than grass | am I, and a little short of death | do I appear [phainomai] to myself.

Sappho F 31 ed. Voigt

In my translation here, I have marked with a vertical line (|) the rhythmical boundaries of the song, which for the most part fail to correspond to the syntactical boundaries. Such a failure, I submit, is an aspect of what I am calling the poetics of refraction.

What is being imagined in the wording of this song is that the tongue of the woman who is speaking ‘has broken down’. The woman - let us imagine her as Sappho - is not just speaking but singing, so that the tongue that breaks down here is a tongue singing a song. The singing voice, directed by the tongue, breaks because even the tongue breaks down. And the voice of the singing woman breaks at a climactic moment in her song.

At that moment, as represented in the song, the singing woman experiences an uncanny sensation. In the lyrical logic or illogic of the song, it is as if her nervous system had suddenly reached a point of overloading. The breakdown of her voice is felt to be an overall nervous breakdown. At that moment, the singing woman experiences a breakdown in her mind, and this breakdown leads to the sensation of experiencing a
disintegration of identity. At this moment, she feels she has reached the razor’s edge of dying. She is about to lose consciousness. Or, to say it in terms of ancient Greek medical language, she is experiencing a syncope (συγκοπή). And, as she loses consciousness, she can actually see herself losing consciousness. In the original Greek, she ‘seems’ or ‘appears’ to herself to be losing consciousness. Why? It is because she is no longer her own self. There is now another self who is looking at her. That is why she can say that she ‘seems’ or ‘appears’ to herself to be reaching the razor’s edge of dying.

The sensation of losing one’s self is aptly described by the ancient literary critic who quoted this song of Sappho and then added this comment:

οὐ θαυμάζεις ὡς ὑπὸ τὸ αὐτὸ τὴν ψυχὴν τὸ σῶμα, τὰς ἀκοὰς τὴν γλῶσσαν, τὰς ὀφείς τὴν χρῶν, πάνθ' ὡς ἀλλότρια διοιχόμενα ἐπιζήτει

Don’t you just marvel at the way she tries to put two things together as one? I mean, the soul and the body, the ears and the tongue, the eyes and the skin - as if they were all lost to her, as if now they were all alien to her, belonging to someone else [allotria]?

“Longinus” On the Sublime 10.3

The disintegration of the singing woman’s self in Song 31 of Sappho is simultaneous with the disintegration or breakdown of her singing voice. So the sound of the singing woman’s voice fails to come out. The sound is blocked, interrupted, syncopated. In the original Greek, the blockage of the sound of her song, its interruption or syncopation, is expressed by way of a negative sound effect that is ordinarily avoided in Greek poetry and songmaking. Ancient grammarians have a word for such a negative sound effect. It is a hiatus. This term, in the original Latin, conveys the idea of ‘gagging’. In the original Greek of Sappho’s song, the wording kam men glōssa eāge ‘(my) tongue has broken down’ contains a hiatus: the sequencing of the short final vowel -a of glōssa ‘tongue’ followed by the short initial vowel e- of eāge ‘broke’ produces a negative acoustic effect. Technically, this effect is a hiatus, that is, a ‘gagging’. The sequencing has produced a non-sequencing. The negative acoustic effect of gagging has produced an interruption in the flow of language, in the flow of the music of the language. I repeat: such an interruption, which is a hiatus, is ordinarily avoided.

But this is no ordinary hiatus here. That is because the breaking of regularity by way of interrupting the flow of the music is an intended effect. The sensation of a break is actually intended in the music of the language. The music has a breakdown, and the language expresses that breakdown with the word rhēgmunai, which means ‘break’ or ‘break down’. This same word can also mean ‘cut’, as we see in passages of the Homeric
Iliad picturing the moment when a sharp object penetrates a part of the body (VIII 328, XX 399, XXIII 673).  

In the song of Sappho, then, what you see in your imagination when you hear the word that means ‘break down’ is what you hear as the music actually breaks down. The effect is onomatopoetic. To invoke a term used by Roman Jakobson, an iconic effect is being created here by the language. And such an effect is not only linguistic. It is also musical.

2. The poetics of refraction in a fragment of Sophocles

In a fragment from the dramas of Sophocles, poet and musical composer par excellence, who flourished in Athens during the second half of the fifth century BCE, we find a comparable sound effect. It happens in a fragment that survives from a song he composed for his tragedy Thamyras (F 244 ed. Radt), which is named after a mythical master of music who dared to compete with the Muses, goddesses of music.

I must note at the outset that I use the word music here in the holistic sense of the ancient Greek word mousikē, which means ‘art of the Muses’. This art, in the era of Sophocles as also in the earlier era of Sappho, was a holistic combination of song and dance and instrumental accompaniment. The mythical figure Thamyras was a master practitioner of this holistic art, and the Muses punished him for boasting that his music was better than theirs.

The punishment of Thamyras is narrated most explicitly in the Homeric Iliad (II 594-600), where we find that Thamyras experiences a mental breakdown in his ability to practice his art, the art of music. The Muses punish him by taking away his mental ability to sing and accompany himself on the lyre. To translate literally the crucial Homeric verses (II 599-600), ‘his songmaking, | wondrous as it was, they [= the Muses] took away from him, and they made him completely forget [root ek-lēth-] the art of the lyre [kitharistus]’. The use of the word ek-lēth- ‘completely forget’ here is particularly significant: literally, the Muses make the musician forget his artistic self. Thamyras experiences a disintegration of identity, a shattering of the self, in that his consciousness of his artistic self breaks off.

In the fragment of the song composed by Sophocles, there is a pointed reference to this disintegration of Thamyras as a master of the art of music:

ρηγνὺς χρυσόδετον κέρας,
ρηγνὺς ἁρμονίαν χορδοτόνου λύρας

2 Durbec 2006:12.
3 PP 58 notes 67 and 68. On the term iconic, see Jakobson 1960.
breaking the gold-bound curve,
breaking the tuning of the tense-strung lyre

Sophocles F 244 ed. Radt

We see here the actual moment of the musician’s breakdown, as expressed by the same word *rhēgnunai* ‘break’ that we saw in the song of Sappho. The breakdown starts with the use of the word *rhēgnunai* ‘break’ at the first line of the fragment I have just quoted. What is pictured here is the shattering of the musician’s splendid seven-string lyre while he is actually playing it. The frame of the lyre, curving gracefully like the horn of an ox, is broken in the wording of the first line. Next, in the wording of the second line, the breaking of the beautiful frame leads to the breaking of the beautiful sound the lyre makes.

We not only see in our mind’s eye the breaking of the lyre. We also hear the breaking of the sound of the music made by the lyre. In the rhythmical structure of both the first and the second lines, the initial word, *rhēgnus* ‘breaking’, occupies a position traditionally known as the Aeolic base.

Here is a technical definition of the Aeolic base: it is a sequence of two rhythmically irregular syllables at the beginning of an Aeolic line, followed by rhythmically regular syllables in the rest of the line. So the irregularity of the rhythm in the Aeolic base breaks the regularity of the rhythm in the rest of the Aeolic line.

And, in both of the Aeolic lines I quoted, the word *rhēgnus* ‘breaking’ is positioned in the Aeolic base. So the word that means ‘break’ is positioned in such a way as to coincide with the actual break in the rhythm of both lines.\(^4\)

We see here, once again, a musical breakdown, and, once again, the language expresses that breakdown with wording that means ‘break down’. What you see in your imagination when you hear the wording that means ‘break down’ is what you hear as the music actually breaks down. Once again we can say that the effect is onomatopoetic. Or, to invoke once again the terminology of Jakobson, an iconic effect is created here by the language. And such an effect, to echo what was said before, is not only linguistic. It is also musical.

A question remains about the fragment from Sophocles: who broke the lyre and the tune that came from the lyre? We cannot be absolutely certain, since the fragment does not contain any explicit reference. Still, the fact that the participle *rhēgnus* ‘breaking’ is transitive, indicating an active agent, suggests a most compelling answer. Thamyryas himself must have shattered both the lyre and the tune of the lyre at the

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\(^4\) GIM 45.
tragic moment when he completely forgot his music. His act of shattering mirrors his experience of becoming shattered by his mental breakdown. At that moment of breakdown, his own identity as a musician is shattered. The disintegration of the musician’s self leads to the disintegration of the music of his old self at the hands of the alien new self.

Athenaeus (early third century CE) reports that Sophocles played the lyre in the original production of his tragedy about Thamyras (1.20ef: καὶ τὸν Θάμυριν διδάσκων αὐτὸς ἐκιθάρισεν); from this report, we may infer that it was Sophocles himself who played the title role of the master musician Thamyras. In that case, the theme of the lyre-singer’s musical and personal self-alienation would be all the more telling.

3. Musical breakings of sound

As we saw in the fragment I quoted from the Thamyras of Sophocles, the breaking of the music is part of the music. In the rhythmical structure of the Aeolic line deployed by Sophocles, the irregularity produced by the irregular rhythm of the Aeolic base is part of the regularity produced by the overall rhythm of the Aeolic line. Such irregularity, I will now argue, is characteristic of music in general. In music, the discontinuity produced by successive patterns of interruptions or ‘breaks’ in a continuum can create a sense of overall continuity. This overall continuity can be described as a pulsation of sound, comparable to a pulsation of light.

An example of discontinuity as an aspect of overall continuity in music is the sound effect of syncopation, where the sensation of a break in rhythm is created within an overall framework of unbroken rhythm. Similarly, the sensation of a break in consciousness - and we have seen that the Greek medical term for such a break is syncope (συγκόπη) – is created within an overall framework of consciousness. Further, I suggest that the self cannot experience the sensation of disintegration without a preexisting sense of an integral ‘I’.

Another example of discontinuity as an aspect of overall continuity in music is the sound effect of the refrain. To make a refrain, as we are about to see, is to make an echo.

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5 In the same passage of Athenaeus (1.20ef), we are told that Sophocles himself played the title role of the young girl Nausikaa in his play Nausikaa, and that he performed a virtuoso dance with a ball in reenacting the moment in the Odyssey when Nausikaa is playing ball with the girls attending her (ἄκρως δὲ ἐσφαίρισεν, ὅτε τὴν Ναυσικάαν καθῆκε).

6 PP 58n67.
The Greek noun I translate as ‘echo’, ἔχο, refers to a sound that results from a breaking of sound. A single sound is broken or refracted into a multiplicity of sounds, and the single source of the original sound disintegrates into a multiplicity of seemingly alien new sources that echo that original sound. We see an example in the following description of a song performed on a festive occasion by a multiplicity of male singers and dancers, that is, by a male khoros ‘chorus’:

τοὶ μὲν ὑπὸ λιγυρῶν συρίγγων ἰέσαν αὐδήν
ἐξ ἀπαλῶν στομάτων, περὶ δὲ ροιον ἄγνυτο ἀχώ·
They [= the singers and dancers], accompanied by clear-sounding herdsman’s pipes, let loose a voice
from their delicate mouths, and the echoing sound [ἔχο] they made was refracted [= literally ‘broken’] all around them.

Hesiodic *Shield* 278-279

The singing voices of the chorus here are echoing the tune of the herdsman’s pipes, and these voices are in turn echoed by the surrounding pastoral landscape. The tune of the pipes is being ‘broken’ into the multiple voices of the male chorus that is singing and dancing. As in the fragments of Sappho and Sophocles, the word that expresses the idea of ‘breaking’ here is ῥηγμαναί. The tune that is sung by the chorus is being ‘broken’ or ‘refracted’ in the process of responding to an original tune - whether that original tune is being played on a musical instrument or sung by a lead singer of the chorus.

So the *echo* is a *breaking* or *refraction* of sound, and its musical equivalent is the *refrain*, which is the breaking of a single original sound into a multiplicity of secondary sounds that follow. Like the echo, which can only follow and multiply the original sound but never originate a sound on its own, the refrain can only follow and multiply the original tune but never originate a tune on its own. This is the essence of the refrain, and this essence is replicated in the myth of Echo as retold in the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid (3.339-401). The nymph Echo is punished for her idle talk by no longer being allowed to originate any wording, and now she can only replicate the latest pieces of whatever is said by others: *reddere de multis ut verba novissima posset* ‘so that she could only return the latest of many words’ (3.361). The latest pieces she replicates are the last pieces, the final pieces: *tantum haec in fine loquendi | ingeminat voces auditaque verba reportat* ‘only those things that come at the end of speaking does she | replicate, only those voices, as she returns the words she hears’ (3.368-369).

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7 This idea, that an echo can only end on a given note but cannot begin on that same note, is already in play at line 6 of *Epigram* 28 of Callimachus, where the personified Echo can only end with a phrase but not begin with a phrase. This epigram of
Thus when Echo falls in love with Narcissus, she cannot ever initiate what she yearns to say to him. Instead, she can only replicate pieces of whatever he says, mere fragments, and those fragments are always the final pieces of his wording:

\[
\text{natura repugn} \\
\text{nec sinit, incipiat, sed, quod sinit, illa parata est} \\
\text{exspectare sonos, ad quos sua verba remittat.}
\]

Nature resists and does not let her begin, but, what it does allow she is ready for, to wait for sounds to which she can send back her own words.

Ovid *Metamorphoses* 3.376-378

In this myth of the nymph Echo, we can see once again that the metaphor of ‘breaking’ expresses - even mimes - discontinuity as well as continuity. And the same can be said about the metaphor connected with the word ēkhō itself, which is figured as a ‘breaking’. That metaphor is at work in the expression we considered a moment ago, περὶ δὲ φωνῆς ἀγνυτοὶ ἰχώ ‘and the echoing sound [ēkhō] they made was refracted [= literally ‘broke’] all around them’ in the Hesiodic *Shield* (verse 279). Here the hiatus between the final vowel -o of *agnuto* ‘was refracted’ and the initial vowel ē- of ēkhō ‘echo’ produces an onomatopoetic effect. The sensation of discontinuity experienced in the hearing of an echoing voice is mimed by the hiatus heard between the two consecutive vowels. Comparable is the expression we saw in the fragment from Sappho (31.9), κάμ μὲν γλῶσσα ἔαγε ‘(my) tongue has broken down’, where the hiatus between the final vowel -α of *glōssa* ‘tongue’ and the initial vowel ε- of *eāge* ‘has broken down’ produces a similar onomatopoetic effect. Here the sensation of discontinuity experienced by a singer who hears her own singing voice break down is mimed by the hiatus heard between the two consecutive vowels. Once again a discontinuity in the voicing of sound is symbolized by a discontinuity in the sound itself. The sound of gagging - that is, the sound of an interrupted voice - is symbolized by a hiatus that matches the sensation of gagging.\(^8\)

Callimachus is making fun of the poetics of the epic Cycle, in which the beginnings of epics are conventionally presented as the continuations of previous epics.\(^8\)

I must add that such an onomatopoetic effect, as I have argued in earlier work (PP 58n68, expanding on GIM 45), could not have evolved if there had not been a pre-existing pattern of hiatus associated with the inherited phraseology of the root ἀγ- (ag-), which derives from *ϝαγ- (*wag-). When the sequence *ϝέφαγε* (*wewāge) became ἔαγε (*eāge), resulting from the phonological loss of *ϝ (*w), the hiatus was ready made. And there is a similar phenomenon at work in the expression περὶ δὲ φωνῆς ἀγνυτοὶ ἰχώ ‘and the echoing sound [ēkhō] they made was refracted all around’ in the Hesiodic *Shield* (verse 279). As I have also argued in my earlier work (PP 58n67), the hiatus
Looking beyond the ancient musical traditions, we can find a variety of further examples where the idea of ‘breaking’ is part of the process of making music. A shining example is the use of words meaning ‘break’ in medieval Provençal traditions of songmaking. As in the Greek traditions, ‘breaking’ in the Provençal songmaking traditions may convey a sense of continuity as well as discontinuity.

For an example of discontinuity, I highlight a song of Jaufré Rudel (mid twelfth century CE). In this song, the composer tells the intended performer of his song not to fail in its performance, since such a failure would make the song itself ‘break’: *gart se no.i falha ni.l pessi* ‘be careful not to let our song fail or break [pesar]’ (Jaufré Rudel, Song VI version 1b line 4). Such a ‘breaking’ of the song would be a ‘break’ in the tradition of performing that song.

Counterbalancing such a sense of discontinuity is the sense of continuity as expressed by the word *refranhar*, which means ‘break’ in the sense of ‘refract’. We find an example in another poem of Jaufré Rudel, where *refranhar* ‘refract’ refers to the singing of the nightingale and, in response, the singing of the poet. Here is the context:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{qan lo rius de la fontana} \\
\text{s’esclarzis si cum far sol,} \\
\text{e par la flors aiglentina,} \\
\text{e.l rossignoletz el ram} \\
\text{volf e refranhar} \text{ et aplana} \\
\text{son doutz chantar et afina} \\
\text{dretzt es q’ieu lo mieu refragnar}
\end{align*}
\]

When the stream from the spring runs clear, the way it usually does, and the sweetbrier flower appears, and the little nightingale on the branch turns and refracts [refranhar] and polishes his sweet singing and refines it (brings it to an end), it is right that I should refract [refranhar] my own.

Jaufré Rudel, Song II version 1 stanza i

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between agnuto ‘was refracted’ and ēkhō ‘echoing sound’ results from the loss of *ϝ* (*w*) in the word for ēkhō ‘echo’, the earlier form of which was *ϝāχό* (*wākhō*).


10 Pickens 1978.100; I follow closely his translation at p. 101, with some changes.
In my previous work, I made the following observations about the use of *refranhar* ‘refract’ in this passage:¹¹

The metaphor inherent in the Provençal verb *refranhar* can be explained as an auditory equivalent of a visual metaphor, the ‘refracting’ of light (as in Latin *re-fringere*). The driving image of *refraction* also accounts for two Provençal nouns: *refrins*, meaning ‘echo’ (as a part of sound that repeats itself), and *refrim*, meaning ‘birdsong, sound, refrain’.¹² The verb *refranhar* can also refer to the musical process of *modulation* in song: much as light is refracted through glass or a prism, so also the musical sound of song is modulated.¹³ When the nightingale ‘turns and *refracts* [refranhar] and polishes’ his song, the songbird is being envisaged as a craftsman who is constantly engaged in the process of improving the work of his craftsmanship, in principle coming ever nearer to the finished product. The poet echoes the songbird as he reaches the end of the stanza just quoted, and so also by implication the other singers must echo the poet, as they too must ‘turn and refract and polish’ the song, refining it and ‘bringing it to an end’. The end of one singer’s ‘refinement’, however, is the beginning of another’s, and each beginning, each new ‘movement’, is a return to tradition. In this theme of ‘refinement’, we see the ultimate image of improvement as an eternal return to the traditional, which is envisaged as an eternal musical modulation.

So the refractions of a nightingale’s song represent the most sublime form of artistry in these Romance language traditions. But they represent also the most sublime form of passion - which is meant to be seen as natural, not only artistic. The idealized singer’s song of love is meant to be as natural as it is artful. For an example, I draw attention to the poem *Philomena praevia temporis amoeni* by John Pecham (died 1292). The poet of this poem reshapess along religious lines the theme of the nightingale’s love song, and the legend underlying this theme can be summarized as follows:

[The] nightingale knows before-hand the time of her death and when she perceives that it is near, flies to the top of a tree and there, at daybreak, pours out her soul in many songs. At the hour of Prime her voice rises higher and in her singing she knows neither respite nor repose. About the time of Tierce, the gladness and

¹¹ PP 24.
¹² Extended discussion in Pickens 1977.331n20.
¹³ Pickens 1977.331n20. See N 1990a.91-103 for a discussion of ancient notions of *mode* as a system of intervals in pitch and of *modulation* as a process of switching from one given system to another. Pliny *Natural History* 10.85 refers to the *vox* ‘voice’ of the nightingale as *modulata* ‘modulated’ and *varia* ‘varied’ - qualities that he says become diminished in the birdsong as the summer wears on.
passion increase, until at noon, her heart is ready to break as she cries *oci! oci* ['kill! kill!'], and her strength begins to fail until at None she dies.\(^\text{14}\)

I highlight here, for the first time, the metaphor of heartbreak. The broken heart of the singing nightingale, who is imagined here as a female rather than male singer, signals the natural passion of her love song, which is strong enough to kill her.

The songbird’s cry of love and death by heartbreak, *oci! oci* ‘kill! kill!’, is linked with the themes of betrayal. We find an explicit example in *Song* 18 of the troubadour Guillaume le Vinier (13th century CE). Here the nightingale, imagined as a male singer, utters that same passionate onomatopoetic cry *oci! oci* ‘kill! kill!’ (verse 4) because he is denouncing the *trahitour* ‘traitors’ (verse 7), that is, those who betray true lovers - and thereby cause the nightingale’s death.\(^\text{15}\)

From the artistic standpoint of singers practicing their art in the traditional poetics of Romance languages like Provençal and Old French, the nightingale’s cry of betrayal and death by heartbreak is technically a refrain. It is an artistic device, a thing of art, replicating a thing of nature, that is, the cry of the nightingale. And, as we saw earlier, the refrain is metaphorically a refraction, that is, a ‘breaking’. In the refrain of the nightingale, the sound of music ‘breaks’. Further, the heart of the lover ‘breaks’ the same way. In terms of the complex metaphor at work here, a refraction in the artistic world of the poet is like a breaking of the heart in the natural world of the passionate lover. When poets sing of love and death by heartbreak, the artistic refraction that expresses their passion must be natural. The artist who sings must be perfectly natural, not just artistically perfect. What is artistically perfect must be natural, not artificial. So too the perfect artist must be natural, not artificial.

4. *Refractions in The Tales of Hoffmann*

Such uses of the metaphor of refraction in medieval Romance traditions are comparable to later uses in the Romantic literature of the early 19th century. For my main example, I single out *The Tales of Hoffmann* by Offenbach, an opera inspired by earlier literature stemming from the Romantic era. This opera, as we will see, is pervaded by the metaphor of refraction. And there is a character in the opera who figures as the very embodiment of this metaphor. I call this character the fragmentary Muse.


\(^{15}\) Pfeffer 1985.134-137, 140.
As I said at the beginning of my essay, the metaphor of refraction derives from the basic idea that light ‘breaks’ through a prism or lens. That is, light refracts or ‘breaks’ just as things break. In the opera of Offenbach, the lens that makes the light ‘break’ is imagined as various kinds of glass, including mirrors and even a special kind of opera-viewing glass. By extension, this glass can break just as the light breaks. By further extension, the heart of a romantic lover can break just as glass can break - or just as any other precious instrument of refraction can break. And, as we will see in the music of Offenbach, this metaphor of refraction expresses the sensation of a disintegration of identity, a shattering of the self, comparable to what we have seen in the music of Sappho and Sophocles. I have already described such a sensation in terms of a poetics of refraction. Now we are about to see such a poetics at work in the opera of Offenbach. And the goddess who presides over it all is the fragmentary Muse.

When Offenbach died on October 5, 1880, his intended masterpiece of an opera, The Tales of Hoffmann (Les Contes d’Hoffmann), was fragmentary. It was still very much in the making. At the time of his death, the artist’s intentions in shaping the ultimate form of his opéra fantastique could only be second-guessed by his artistic collaborators and heirs. His son, Auguste-Jacques Offenbach, asked Ernest Guiraud to finish the unfinished work. Guiraud is famous for finishing not only the unfinished Tales of Hoffmann by Offenbach: he finished also the unfinished Carmen by Georges Bizet. Most revealing are the anecdotes reported by Guiraud himself concerning the finishing of Carmen, but that is another story.

The opera Les Contes d’Hoffmann (Tales of Hoffmann) by Offenbach was based on an earlier play Les Contes fantastique d’Hoffmann, authored by Jules Barbier and Michel Carré and with incidental music by Joseph-Jacques-Augustin Ancessay, which had its world première at the Théâtre de l’Odéon on March 21, 1851. The world première of the opera took place almost exactly thirty years later, at the Théâtre de l’Opéra-Comique (Salle Favart), on February 10, 1881, just a few months after the death of Offenbach. The libretto for the opera, authored by Barbier alone (Carré, his co-author for the play, had died in 1872), was submitted to the Censor’s Office (Direction générale de l’imprimerie et de la librairie) on January 5, 1881, by the director of the Opéra-Comique, Léon Carvalho. This text by Barbier is known to experts as the “Censor’s Libretto.” Recent research has shown that this version was used as the prompt-text for rehearsals; or, to

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16 D xix n 10.
18 Barbier and Carré 1851. See D 229.
19 D xviii n7, 227.
20 A facsimile of Acts “4” and “5” of the “Censor’s Libretto” has been published by Heinzelmann 1988. See also D xxi.
say it in terms of French theatrical language, it was the text of the souffleur ‘prompter’. With this text begins a lengthy history of additions, subtractions, and other changes that have kept on reshaping this unfinished opera of Offenbach. The reshaping continues to this day, and the opera seems destined to remain a composition in the making. True, there has been considerable progress over the years in finding additional textual evidence documenting various different phases of the opera’s composition. By now a great deal more is known about at least some details - such as the ongoing adjustments made by Offenbach to suit the vocal capacities of the singers chosen for the upcoming world première. To this day, however, the prospects for establishing a final definitive version of the opera remain elusive. Offenbach’s work continues to be a composition in the making, a masterpiece made up of pieces that continue to defy attempts at fitting them all together. The opera, in short, is destined to remain fragmentary for all time.

But there is more to it. I am arguing that the Muse who is pictured as the inspiration of this fragmentary work is likewise fragmentary in her own right. What I call the fragmentary Muse of Offenbach’s Tales of Hoffmann is essential to the poetics of this opera. The musical meaning of the opera comes to life in its fragmentation, and the Muse of Hoffmann is a fitting symbol of that fragmentation.

This Muse of the opera is not recognized as the Muse until the very end of The Tales of Hoffmann. From the start, she disguises herself as a boy named Nicklausse, the faithful follower of Hoffmann. In each of Hoffmann’s three tales about the heartbreak of love, Nicklausse is there. At the world première of the opera on February 10, 1881, the role of the Muse who sings the role of the boy was sung by Marguerite Ugalde, who had replaced Alice Ducasse during the months of planning and rehearsals that had led up to the première. This change may have led to modifications of the Muse’s vocal range as a mezzo-soprano.

There were more drastic modifications as well. For the world première of the opera, the production suffered from massive cuts by the producer Carvalho, and many of these cuts affected the role of the Muse. Omitted was the moment in the Epilogue (Act 5) when the Muse reveals herself by removing her disguise as the boy Nicklausse.

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22 There were even further complications: in the rehearsals, the role of the Muse was assigned to a different singer. See Didion 1988.149.
23 D xviii, 145n1. It has been claimed that Ugalde was a soprano, but Heinzelmann 1988.424-425 disagrees.
24 D 138-139.
Also omitted was the moment in the Prologue (Act 1) when the Muse initially declares her intention to disguise herself as Nicklausse.\(^{25}\)

In spite of such changes, however, one thing remained and still remains a constant in the opera: Nicklausse is really a Muse and Hoffmann is really a poet destined to be inspired by this Muse. But the disguise of the Muse disguises the inspiration. And so the inspiration of Hoffmann the poet by his Muse becomes a fragmented inspiration by a fragmentary Muse.

Whereas Hoffmann is consistently recognized as a poet singing the role of a poet in each of his three Tales, the Muse of Hoffmann maintains her disguise as the boy Nicklausse, and Hoffmann fails to recognize her for what she really is, that is, the Muse who inspires the poet - and who truly loves him. The failure extends throughout the master narrative that frames all three of the Tales narrated by Hoffmann. This narrative is an extended flashback that starts at the very beginning of the opera, in the Prologue (Act 1).

The mental disconnection of Hoffmann from his Muse is all the more striking in view of the fact that his role as narrator of the flashback framing Acts 2 and 3 and 4 is equated with his role as a musician - as a lead singer. This equation is made clear already in the Prologue (Act 1), when the character of Nathanaël, singing as part of the chorus, calls out to Hoffmann:

\begin{quote}
Chante donc le premier, | sans qu’on te le demande.
Nous ferons chorus
So be the lead singer, | without having to be asked to do so.
And we will take up the role of chorus!
\end{quote}

\textit{Tales of Hoffmann Act 1 No. 4 [D p. 27]}\(^{26}\)

Despite such explicit equations, the poet as musician fails to see his role as musician, that is, as one who practices the art of the Muse.

By failing to recognize the Muse as his inspiration in the Prologue (Act 1) and in Acts 2 and 3 and 4, the poet as narrator also fails to recognize the Muse as his one true lady-love. Only in the Epilogue (Act 5) is the goddess finally revealed in that role.\(^{27}\)

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
\item \(^{25}\) D 141-144.
\item \(^{26}\) Except for wherever I indicate otherwise, I follow the text of the edition published by G. Schirmer (1959).
\item \(^{27}\) D 138-139.
\end{itemize}
And what was happening to Hoffmann while the Muse was maintaining her disguise? He has been narrating three different Tales about three different women he has loved - Olympia in Act 2, Antonia in Act 3, and Giulietta in Act 4. By the time the Muse reveals her identity in the Epilogue (Act 5), the romantic heart of the lovelorn poet has been broken by each one of the three lady-loves of his three Tales. It is said most explicitly in Act 4, at the moment when Hoffmann discovers that his self-consuming love for Giulietta has been all in vain. At that moment, Nicklausse exclaims about Hoffmann:

Son cœur va se briser
His heart is going to break.

*Tales of Hoffmann* Act 3 No. 16 bis [D p. 95]

5. Breakdowns in The Tales of Hoffmann

Curiously, the breaking of the romantic poet’s heart in *The Tales of Hoffmann* is caused by - and corresponds to - the literal breaking of each one of the three women he loves in each one of the three Tales of Acts 2 and 3 and 4 - Olympia in Act 2, Antonia in Act 3, and Giulietta in Act 4. That is to say, all three women are destroyed by way of breaking down in one way or another.

The breakdowns of these three women in the opera by Offenbach match closely what happens in the earlier play of 1851, *Les Contes fantastiques d'Hoffmann*. The plot and the characters of this play, authored by Barbier and Carré, are the same as in the opera of Offenbach, the libretto for which was authored by Barbier. The breakdowns of these characters in *The Tales of Hoffmann* - both in the play and in the opera - can be traced back to three separate short stories authored by a celebrated culture hero of German Romanticism, Ernst Theodor Amadeus Hoffmann (1776-1822). Even the character of the romantic poet Hoffmann in the French play and opera can be traced back to this E. T. A. Hoffmann. The poet in the play and opera is a fiction based on this author. As we can see when we compare the Tales of our fictitious poet Hoffmann with the short stories of the real author E. T. A. Hoffmann, whom Barbier and Carré had read in French translations, the breakdowns of the poet’s lady-loves in the play and opera were inspired by corresponding breakdowns in the short stories.

Here is a brief inventory of the variations in the breakdowns experienced by the three different women in the Tales told by the singing romantic poet Hoffmann in the opera by Offenbach. In each case, I add details about the breakdowns of the corresponding women in the three separate short stories authored by E. T. A. Hoffmann himself.

*Act 2 of the opera by Offenbach*
Hoffmann loves a mechanized doll named Olympia. Her body - or let us call it her frame - is literally broken into pieces. This character derives from E. T. A. Hoffmann’s short story *The Sandman* (*Der Sandmann*, 1817). In that version, ‘Olimpia’ is loved by a romantic young man named Nathanaël. She too is broken into pieces.

**Act 3 of the opera by Offenbach**

Hoffmann loves a would-be operatic diva named Antonia. She dies of heart failure - her heart literally breaks down. And this breakdown is timed to coincide with the operatic moment when her singing reaches a peak of sublime musical virtuosity. This character derives from E. T. A. Hoffmann’s short story *Counselor Crespel* (*Rat Krespel*, 1818). In that version, ‘Antonie’ is loved by a romantic young man named ‘Composer B’. The lover is thwarted by Antonie’s possessive father, a musician named Crespel. His Cremona violin breaks at the same moment when the heart of the singing Antonie fatally breaks down. Antonie and the broken violin are then buried together.

**Act 4 of the opera by Offenbach**

Hoffmann loves a courtesan named Giulietta. Her soul is damned, and this damnation is timed to coincide with a shattering of mirrors. Giulietta had used a mirror to capture the reflection of Hoffmann and thus imprison his own precious soul - let us call it his identity. When Hoffmann discovers that his reflection has disappeared, he panics and shatters all the mirrors he sees around him. The moment of shattering is captured in the stage directions of the 1851 play, though it is absent from the unfinished text of Act 4 in the 1871 “Censor’s Libretto” of the opera. By implication, this breaking of the glass signals the freeing of the soul of Hoffmann from the prison of the mirror, but it signals also the damnation of the soul of Giulietta. I will have more to say later about this theme of the broken mirror. The character of Giulietta derives from E. T. A. Hoffmann’s short story *The Story of the Lost Reflection* (*Die Geschichte vom verlorenen Spiegelbild*), which is part of a longer story entitled *The Adventure of New Year’s Eve* (*Die Abenteuer der Silvester-Nacht*, 1815). In that version, Giulietta is loved by a romantic young man named Erasmus Spikher, whose reflection is captured in her mirror. As we will see later, the outcome of the broken mirror is anticipated but not actually narrated in that version.

So the three women loved by Hoffmann in the opera - Olympia, Antonia, and Giulietta - are all destroyed by being broken in one way or another. They all become
fragmented, shattered. Once again, we return to the idea of a disintegration of identity, a shattering of the self.\footnote{28 In this context, I note the title of the 1973 book by Daemmrich, The Shattered Self, which centers on the works of E. T. A. Hoffmann. The book does not engage, however, with the actual metaphor of shattering – as used by E. T. A. Hoffmann and by the librettists of Offenbach’s Tales of Hoffmann.}

The fragmentations of the three women correspond to three refractions. All three of these shattered women turn out to be refractions of a seemingly unique lady-love. Her name is La Stella, and she plays the role of a diva or prima donna in the opera. After the three Tales of Hoffmann are told, the Muse declares in Act 5 (the Epilogue) that the diva Stella is a composite of the other three women:

\textit{Olympia ... Antonia ... Giulietta ... Ne sont qu'une même femme: La Stella!}

\textit{Olympia ... Antonia ... Giulietta ... they are all just one and the same woman, La Stella!}

\textit{Tales of Hoffmann Act 5 No. 25 [D p. 136]}

Hearing the unwanted truth of these words from the disguised Muse, the frustrated poet Hoffmann threatens to shatter his would-be mentor just as he shatters the empty wineglass he is holding:

\textit{Un mot de plus et sur mon âme / Je te brise comme ceci}

One more word out of you and, I swear by my soul, I will shatter you just like this.

\textit{Tales of Hoffmann Act 5 No. 25 [D p. 136]}

Threatened with these words, the Muse expresses her hurt feelings as she responds reproachfully to the poet:

\textit{Moi, ton mentor? Merci!}

(Shatter) me, your mentor? Well, thank you very much!’

\textit{Tales of Hoffmann Act 5 No. 25 [D p. 136]}

The Muse is peevish because she is in love with Hoffmann - she has loved him all along, as she declares at the very beginning, in the Prologue (Act 1):

\textit{Quelle Muse? Une folle | Qui déserte les cieux}

\textit{Pour disputer aux yeux | D'une beauté frivole}

\textit{L'amour d'un fou.}

\textit{Disparais, ô sirène! | Fantôme de ses nuits,}
En vain tu le poursuis, | Je briserai la chaîne
Qu’il porte au cou!

What Muse am I? A mad one, | one who abandons the heavens
to compete with the eyes | of a frivolous beauty,
for the love of a madman.

Disappear, you Siren, | phantom who inhabits his nights.
In vain do you pursue him. | I will break the chain
that he wears on his neck.


So the Muse is a rival of Stella, who is a composite of the three women loved by
Hoffmann. As the Muse declares, Hoffmann will ultimately have to make a choice
between the love of the ‘phantom’ called Stella and her own love for him:

Il faut, en cette heure fatale,
Qu’il choisisse entre nos amours,
Qu’il appartienne à ma rivale,
Ou qu’il soit à moi toujours!

He must, in this fateful hour,
choose between our loves.
He must belong either to my rival
or to me forever!


In her role as a phantom rival of the Muse, the diva Stella belongs not to the
opera that is the Tales of Hoffmann. She belongs to a higher form of opera. She is a diva
who sings in an opera composed by Mozart himself, Don Giovanni. In the Prologue (Act
1) of the opera by Offenbach, the diva Stella is imagined as already singing on stage at
the opera house where the opera Don Giovanni is being presented. There is a pointed
reference to this high opera in the low opera of Offenbach when the disguised Muse
sings in the Prologue of Tales of Hoffmann: Notte e giorno mal dormir ‘night and day, I have
a hard time sleeping ...’. The words and the melody evoke what the character of
Leporello sings at the beginning of Don Giovanni:

Notte e giorno faticar,
Per chi nulla sa gradir,
Piova e vento sopportar,
Mangiar male e mal dormir.
Voglio far il gentiluomo
E non voglio piú servir...
Oh che caro galantuomo!
Vuol star dentro colla bella,
Ed io far la sentinella!
Voglio far il gentiluomo
E non voglio piú servir...
Ma mi par che venga gente;
Non mi voglio far sentir.

Day and night, getting all tired,
for the sake of someone who is never content.
Rain and wind to endure,
eating badly and sleeping badly.
I want to be a gentleman
and I don't want to be a servant anymore ...
Ah, what a dear honorable man he is!
He wants to stay inside with the pretty woman
while I am doing my bit as the lookout.
I want to be a gentleman
and I don't want to be a servant anymore ...
Wait a minute! I think people are coming.
I don't want anyone to hear me.

It is as if Nicklausse as the disguised Muse in the low opera of Offenbach had the same relation to Hoffmann as Leporello had to Don Giovanni in the high opera of Mozart. Hoffmann reacts to the evocation made by his disguised Muse by invoking the devil in anger and telling Nicklausse to be quiet: Tais toi, par le diable ’be quiet, I swear by the devil!’.

Stella is already singing in the high opera of Mozart even before the action of the low opera by Offenbach can begin. As the Muse herself declares, the diva Stella is singing in the opera house the music of ‘the divine Mozart’:

Elle est sur la scène, | un peuple l’acclame;
Le divin Mozart | prête à ses accents
ce foyer menteur, | cette ardente flamme
Qui d’Hoffmann jadis | embrasa les sens.
She is on stage, | acclaimed by all.
The divine Mozart | lends to her musical strains
this fireplace of deception, | this blazing flame,
which had taken hold of Hoffmann once upon a time, | setting all his senses on fire.

Tales of Hoffmann [Oeser ed.] Act 1 Insert 1 [D p. 143]

The character of this diva Stella, described here as the otherworldly phantom of Hoffmann’s intoxicated reveries, was originally created for the play Les Contes fantastiques d’Hoffmann, coauthored by Barbier and Carré. As we have seen, this play or drame fantastique preceded the libretto that Barbier authored for the opera of Offenbach. And, as we have also seen, the play was based on French translations of the original short stories of E. T. A. Hoffmann, whose namesake is the fictitious romantic poet Hoffmann in The Tales of Hoffmann. Now we will see that the character of Stella in both the opera and the earlier play is modeled on a character who appears in a short story by this E. T. A. Hoffmann, Don Juan (1813).

In that short story we see the narrator - let us for the moment think of him as E. T. A. Hoffmann himself - attending a performance of Mozart’s opera Don Giovanni and suddenly experiencing a mystical encounter with an Italian diva who sings the role of Donna Anna in the opera. The encounter happens during intermission, so that the narrator’s experience becomes a kind of syncope. The hiatus of the intermission in the opera corresponds to a hiatus in the narrator’s sense of reality, since he comes into contact with an otherworldly vision that defies reality. Here is a synopsis of what happens:

Hoffmann tells of attending a performance of this opera and being stricken with the beauty and eloquence of the woman who sang the role of Donna Anna. He has a vision in which she appears in his box and explains how difficult it is to step out into the stage and give her whole heart and soul to people who may not even appreciate her. Then she goes back to the stage and sings divinely. The next day, he learns that at the moment he thought she was speaking to him, she was dying, a victim of sudden illness. Once again, the issue of the double appears in Hoffmann’s tale. She is with him and she is dying backstage at the same time, just as, in the three main acts of The Tales of Hoffmann, Stella appears in each act as a different singer. It cannot be emphasized often enough how important it is for the same artist to portray all four characters.29

In the last sentence of what I have just quoted, the author of the synopsis, who is an expert in the opera Tales of Hoffmann, has expressed her opinion about the ideal casting of this opera. As the same expert acknowledges, however, such a casting verges

29 D 170.
on the impossible. It defies the reality of the human voice. I will quote later what she says about this impossibility, which is relevant to the character of Stella in the opera. For the moment, however, I focus on what happened to the Italian diva in the corresponding short story by E. T. A. Hoffmann, the Don Juan.

After the intermission of Don Giovanni is over, the opera resumes and the dying diva manages to sing the aria Non mi dir bell’ idol mio (Act 2 Scene 5) with a sublime virtuosity that leads to a total physical breakdown - and death. The breakdown is pictured as a general collapse of her nervous system, caused by violent seizures (Nervenzufälle). The narrator hears the sad news on the morning after the performance: one of these seizures had happened during the intermission, exactly at the time when the narrator had experienced his mystical encounter with the diva in his opera box. And the final seizure of the diva happened only a few hours later, in the dead of night, exactly at the time when the scent of the her perfume awakened the narrator to hear her voice singing one last time the aria Non mi dir bell’ idol mio.30

The death of this diva who sang her heart out as Donna Anna in Mozart’s Don Giovanni was already presaged in the mystical encounter with the first-person narrator of the short story during the intermission between Act 1 and Act 2 in the opera. As the diva tells the narrator, ihr ganzes Leben sei Musik ‘her life in its entirety is the same thing as music’; whatever she has sung is what the poet is: Ja, ... ich habe dich gesungen, sowie deine Melodien ich sind ‘Yes, I have sung you, just as your melodies are myself’.31

So the diva of E. T. A. Hoffmann’s Don Juan appears to be the embodiment of the poet’s music. It is as if she were the poet’s Muse. But she cannot really be a Muse, since Muses are Olympian goddesses - and so they are immortal. A Muse cannot break because she cannot die. But the diva breaks, and she dies.

6. True diva and false diva in The Tales of Hoffmann

The character of the diva Stella, just as we find her in the libretto of Offenbach’s opera, is evidently modeled on the character of the anonymous diva in the Don Juan of E. T. A. Hoffmann. But there is a big difference between these two characters. The woman who is the anonymous diva in the short story breaks, as we have seen, but the woman who is the diva named Stella in the opera of Offenbach does not break. There are three other women who will break instead of Stella, as substitutes for Stella. And each of these three women is a refraction of a true diva. So, is Stella a true diva? No. The true diva is the fragmentary Muse of the opera by Offenbach. As for Stella, she is a false diva who rivals the true diva - so long as the Muse maintains her disguise.

30 E. T. A. Hoffmann, Don Juan, 1813.
31 E. T. A. Hoffmann, Don Juan, 1813.
Within the narrative frame of *The Tales of Hoffmann*, the setting for the singing of the diva Stella is the high opera of Mozart, performed in an opera house situated near Luther’s tavern, which is where the low opera by Offenbach is notionally being performed. In the Prologue (Act 1) of *The Tales of Hoffmann*, we see the highlighting of this contrast between high and low opera. Bursting into Luther’s tavern is an unruly crowd of students who have been attending the performance of *Don Giovanni* at the opera house. During intermission after the first act, while waiting for the next act to begin, they decide to go down to Luther’s tavern for a drink. In the spirit of the moment, they become intrigued at the prospect of hearing there the three Tales to be told by Hoffmann about his three lady-loves. So they lose sight of the curtain call signaling that the high opera is about to recommence, choosing instead to stay in the tavern and hear the low opera that is *The Tales of Hoffmann*. Although they had earlier been marveling at the prodigious singing of Stella at the opera house, they are now diverted into hearing three different refractions of that singing. The unique identity of Stella as the diva who sings the role of Donna Anna in high opera is now refracted into the three identities of the three different lady-loves of Hoffmann in the low opera as narrated by the poet. The singing role of a unique diva is now refracted into the three different singing roles of Olympia, Antonia, and Giulietta. From the perspective of Hoffmann’s narration, each of the three women he loves is a diva in her own right. There are now three divas to reckon with, not some unique diva named Stella.

Back when Offenbach was still planning to present an earlier version of *Hoffmann* at the Gaiété-Lyrique, in 1876, he had intended the roles of Stella and all three of her refractions - Olympia and Antonia and Giulietta - to be sung by one single diva, Marie Heilbron, already famous for singing the role of Violetta in Verdi’s *La Traviata.*\(^{32}\) But the negotiations for the production of such a would-be earlier version broke down, and the composite diva who would sing all three roles - along with the fourth role, of Stella - failed to be realized. In the course of the later negotiations involving the producer Léon Carvalho, which led to the version of the opera that finally had its world première at the Opéra Comique in 1881, there were changes made that worked against the original concept of casting one diva to sing all four roles - Olympia, Antonia, Giulietta, and Stella. By comparison with these changes, the further change from baritone to tenor in the score for the role of Hoffmann seems insignificant. More radical changes were in store for Stella and her three refractions.

Some of these changes were made in response to the artistic demands of a diva named Adèle Isaac, who had been cast to sing the four feminine roles. Here is how one expert describes what happened:

[T]he four feminine roles were considerably modified to accommodate Adèle Isaac. Isaac had recently triumphed as Juliette in Gounod’s Roméo et Juliette. She had a very high voice and wanted vocal acrobatics added to her part. Offenbach rewrote Olympia’s aria, which up to then had had a very central tessitura. He set the new coloratura aria in the key of G, then later transposed it to A flat.  

The first version of the aria [of Olympia] was written about 1877 for Marie Heilbron, a lyric soprano. This version [in its original key of G] had a lower tessitura and was not written for a high coloratura [as in the case of Adèle Isaac].

These changes made by Offenbach in order to accommodate the virtuosity of a single diva led to an irreversible fragmentation of the four roles of Olympia, Antonia, Giulietta, and Stella. The same expert whom I just quoted puts it this way:

This concession to an individual singer has made it almost impossible to find one soprano to sing all four roles, although it might be more feasible if producers used the original key of G.

After the death of Offenbach in October of 1880 - and shortly before the world première of his opera in February of 1881 - there were even more radical changes to come. Through the direct intervention of the producer Carvalho, the role of Giulietta was cut. What had been meant as Act 4, centering on the role of Giulietta, was cut altogether, and fragments of this act were redistributed into other acts. Here is a description of these changes initiated by the interfering producer:

He cut the whole act [centering on Giulietta] and placed some of its music into other acts. The Giulietta-Hoffmann “Reflection duet” became a duet for Stella-Hoffmann. Hoffmann’s aria Ô Dieu de quelle ivresse [D 86] was inserted into the Epilogue [D 139]. The [Barcarolle] was sung at the beginning of the Antonia act by two anonymous characters who pass by Crespel’s house, and the act was set in Venice instead of Munich [where the house of Crespel, Antonia’s father, was

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33 D xviii. D 51n12
35 D xviii n9.
originally to be located], so that Carvalho could use the expensive stage sets he had ordered for the Giulietta act.\textsuperscript{36}

Though the Tale of Giulietta was restored in later productions of the opera, it was conventionally relocated as Act 3, taking the place of the Tale of Antonia, which was relocated as Act 4.\textsuperscript{37}

Despite the restorations that have been ongoing ever since the world première of the \textit{Tales of Hoffman}, the preexisting fragmentation of the roles of Hoffmann’s lady-loves has persisted. Most notably, the relatively lower vocal range of the role of Giulietta and the recomposed higher vocal range of Olympia have proven to be irreconcilable - without further recomposition going far beyond the intentions of the original composer. As I have already noted, no single singer could ever be expected to encompass the musical roles of Olympia, Antonia, and Giulietta without adjustments to the existing vocal requirements for singing these roles. So the composite diva originally envisioned by Offenbach has been destined to elude the music of \textit{Hoffmann}.

Such a composite diva also eludes the overall story of \textit{Hoffmann}. Just as no unique singer could ever be expected to sing all three roles of Olympia, Antonia, and Giulietta, there is no unique woman who could never be expected to live up to the composite ideal of all three lady-loves of Hoffmann’s Tales. The fictional Hoffmann expects the diva Stella to live up to this ideal, but his expectations are shattered. And his ideal is shattered along with his expectations. Such a shattering happens with the literal shattering of the three different women he loves in his three Tales.

But are these three women really distinct from one another? Clearly, the Muse thinks otherwise. I have already quoted what she says in the Epilogue:

\textit{Olympia} ... \textit{Antonia} ... \textit{Giulietta} ... \textit{Ne sont qu’une même femme: La Stella!}
\textit{Olympia} ... \textit{Antonia} ... \textit{Giulietta} ... they are all just one and the same woman, La Stella!

\textit{Tales of Hoffmann} Act 5 No. 25 [D p. 136]

Already in the Prologue, the Muse challenges Hoffmann when he speaks of his readiness to tell the three Tales of his three mistresses. The dismissive words of the Muse ring true:

\textit{Que parles-tu de trois maîtresses?}

\textsuperscript{36} D xix. See also Didion 1988.149-150. In the facsimile of the “Censor’s Libretto” of 1871 published by Heinzelmann 1998, the words of Ô \textit{Dieu de quelle ivresse} are to be found at p. 455.

\textsuperscript{37} Hadlock 1994.226.
What are you saying, talking of ‘three mistresses’?

*Tales of Hoffmann* Act 1 No. 6 [D p. 38]

The truth is, these three lady-loves of Hoffmann are distinct from one other only in the mind of the beholder who is narrating his three stories of three loves. As the Muse knows from the start, one unique lady-love is being refracted into three ‘mistresses’ through the lens of the narration performed by Hoffmann. That narration is of course the opera that is the *Tales of Hoffmann*. So the lens that produces this refraction is the opera itself.

In the play by Barbier and Carré that preceded the opera by Offenbach, we can find the inspiration for picturing the opera as a refracting lens. It is the lens of an opera-viewing glass used by Hoffmann whenever he gazes at Olympia. The word for ‘viewing glass’ in French is *lorgnon*.\(^{38}\) Technically, a *lorgnon* is a single-lens viewing glass. It was fashionable to use a *lorgnon* for viewing opera and other such theatrical spectacles. The opera-viewing glass used by Hoffmann was made by that master of optical illusions, the demonic fiend Coppélius. So whatever it is that Hoffmann sees through his opera-viewing glass must be an illusion. His illusion is that he fails to see Olympia for what she is, a mechanical doll.

The figures of Olympia and Coppélius as we find them in both the play and the opera derive from the short story of E. T. A. Hoffmann entitled *The Sandman* (*Der Sandmann*, 1817). In this story, an obsessively romantic young man named Nathanaël experiences a fatal breakdown of the mind after falling in and out of love with a mechanical life-size doll named ‘Olimpia’. This original version of the story has a basic theme in common with the later versions we find in the play and in the opera: the lens through which the romantically animated lover views the unromantically inanimate object of his love creates for him an optical illusion. His illusion, to repeat what was said before, is that he fails to see Olimpia / Olympia for what she is, a mechanical doll.

In the German text of E. T. A. Hoffmann, the word corresponding to the French word *lorgnon*, which I translate as ‘opera-viewing glass’, is *Perspektiv*. The form is in the masculine, as distinct from the word *Perspektive*, which is in the feminine and means ‘perspective’. Here is an illustration taken from a publication of E. T. A. Hoffmann’s *The Sandman*, which shows the viewing of Olimpia through the *Perspektiv*:

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\(^{38}\) D 50, 52, 153.
There is a question to be asked about the narrative logic of the original short story by E. T. A. Hoffmann. Why is the mechanical doll mechanized in the first place? Evidently, the purpose of the mechanization is to create the illusion that the doll is alive. This mechanized doll, when she sings and dances, seems to be alive. And she not only seems alive. This Olimpia / Olympia seems to be the ideal woman when viewed through the lens of the opera-viewing glass.

In the opera based on the play based on the short story, Olympia seems to be something even more than the ideal woman - when viewed by Hoffmann through the lens of the opera-viewing glass. She seems to be the ideal diva of opera. I highlight here my use of the word diva it its literal sense, goddess. Olympia now seems to be the Muse, the Olympian goddess of the music of opera. What creates the optical illusion of seeing such an idealization is not just the lens of the opera-viewing glass through which Hoffmann views Olympia. It is opera itself that ultimately creates this illusion.

What, then, does Hoffmann see in Olympia when he views her through the opera-viewing glass of the demonic fiend Coppélius? He sees what the romantic lover of opera expects to see. And he hears what the romantic lover of opera expects to hear. When he looks through his opera-viewing glass, he sees and hears the diva in a way that lives up to the expectations of romantic heroes who claim to have a perfect understanding of opera.
To have such expectations of a diva is to appreciate a need that is felt by the diva herself: she needs to be natural. That is the point of the short story of E. T. A. Hoffmann entitled *Don Juan*. In that story, as we have seen, the narrator experiences a mystical encounter with a diva who sings the role of Donna Anna in Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*. That encounter, to echo what has been said before, leads the narrator to recognize the diva as the embodiment of music itself. Such a recognition is contrasted with the negative reactions of self-styled opera critics who inflict their views on the narrator after the performance of the opera is over. I quote from the *Don Juan* of E. T. A. Hoffmann:

*Man pries im allgemeinen die Italiener und das Eingreifende ihres Spiels; doch zeigten kleine Bemerkungen, die hier und da ganz schalkhaft hingeworfen wurden, daß wohl keiner die tiefere Bedeutung der Oper aller Opern auch nur ahnte. – Don Ottavio hatte sehr gefallen. Donna Anna war einem zu leidenschaftlich gewesen. Man müsse, meinte er, auf dem Theater sich hübsch mäßigen und das zu sehr Angreifende vermeiden. Die Erzählung des Überfalls habe ihn ordentlich konsterniert. Hier nahm er eine Prise Tabak und schaute ganz unbeschreiblich dummklug seinen Nachbar an, welcher behauptete, die Italienerin sei aber übrigens eine recht schöne Frau, nur zu wenig besorgt um Kleidung und Putz; eben in jener Szene sei ihr eine Haarlocke aufgegangen und habe das Demiprofil des Gesichts beschattet!*

The speakers had general praise for the Italians and for their grasp of the performance. But there were little remarks, thrown in mischievously here and there, that showed how none of them had even the slightest inkling of the deeper meaning of this opera of all operas. While they all liked Don Ottavio, one of them said that Donna Anna had been too passionate. In a theatrical setting, he went on to say, one should be moderate in a pretty sort of way and avoid exaggeration. The description [as sung by Donna Anna] of the attack upon her father had given this speaker a fair amount of consternation. At this point he took a pinch of tobacco and - I can’t fully describe how stupid he looked while trying so hard to be clever - he turned to hear the reaction of the man who sat next to him. This next speaker declared that the Italian woman was all in all quite a beautiful woman, but too careless in the way she dressed and the way she put herself together. Why, in that same scene [where Donna Anna sings about the attack on her father], a strand of her hair had come loose and cast a shadow on her profile!³⁹

This diva, even if she is such a disappointment to her Philistine critics, is true to her romantic idolaters. She is true to their romantic ideal of opera because she combines what is natural with what is artistic. The hint of disorder in the arrangement of her hair is a most telling sign of her perfect naturalism in the practice of her art. The narrator himself had noticed the loosening of the diva’s hair during the performance:

³⁹ E. T. A. Hoffmann, *Don Juan*, 1813. The highlighting is mine.
Loose tresses of dark hair flow in curling waves down her neck and shoulders.\textsuperscript{40}

Such a perfect combination of nature with art exemplifies the Romantic ideal of E. T. A. Hoffmann in his short story. The two Philistine opera critics fail to appreciate this ideal. They fail to see that the diva needs to be natural in order to be truly artistic.

This same romantic ideal is represented by Nathanaël, a young student who figures in the opera of Offenbach: he sings the praises of Stella the diva:

\begin{center}
\textit{C'est la grâce de la nature} | \textit{Et c'est le triomphe de l'art}
\end{center}

What you have here is the gracefulness of nature | and the triumph of art all at once.

\textit{Tales of Hoffmann} Act 1 No. 4 [D p. 22]

Pointedly, this Nathanaël is the namesake of the doomed romantic lover in that other relevant short story of E. T. A. Hoffmann, \textit{The Sandman} (1817). That other Nathanaël suffers from the illusion of seeing an ideal combination of the natural and the artistic in his beloved 'Olimpia' when he looks at her through his opera-viewing glass. Such an illusion prevents him from seeing the reality - that his beloved Olimpia is not natural at all. She is totally artificial.

I return to the question: what is it that Hoffmann sees in the Olympia of Offenbach's opera when he views her through the opera-viewing glass? He sees in her something unique and perfect, something that is both natural and artistic all at once. But this something exists only in the performed music of the opera, not in the character of Olympia. What Hoffmann sees is the diva of opera in the act of performance. The light that brings to the eyes of Hoffmann the vision of Olympia has been refracted through the lens of the opera-viewing glass, though the lens of opera itself. Just as Hoffmann sees a vision that is perfect and unique when he sees Olympia through his opera-viewing glass, so also the discerning audience of the opera is meant to hear a sound that is unique and perfect. The sound they hear is the voice of the diva singing the role of Olympia. In opera, the singing diva is supposed to be unique and perfect, an ideal combination of the natural with the artistic.

The optical illusion seen by Hoffmann through the opera-viewing glass matches an acoustical illusion heard by the audience of the opera. The diva who sings the role of Olympia is singing the role of a woman who is not real because she is artificial. But the real woman who sings the role can be a diva only if she is natural. The diva who sings

\textsuperscript{40} E. T. A. Hoffmann, \textit{Don Juan}, 1813.
the role of Olympia is not and cannot be artificial. She is natural. She is real. I quote a most telling formulation by the musicologist Heather Hadlock, who is highlighting a parallelism between the waltz of Olympia with Hoffmann and the finale of the virtuoso song that she sang before the waltz:

But the act’s finale unmasks the singer’s charade and the limits of her mechanical impersonation; for as the puppet’s programmed melody breaks down in her extravagant concluding vocalise, a genuine prima donna replaces the doll-instrument. The moment of revelation undoes the paradox of a virtuoso performance that has vainly tried to efface its own production: the more successfully the singer produces that ‘inhuman’ coloratura, the more astonished the audience becomes at her technical mastery. This finale acknowledges the way that the performance always ‘breaks character’ in a coloratura showpiece: her singing is so breathtaking and strenuous that we cannot avoid acknowledging the particular woman doing it. In such moments the prima donna plays only herself.

Olympia’s manic final performance begins with a solo flute theme, a dance to accompany waltzing guests. She and Hoffmann begin to dance, but the girl suddenly refuses to follow; she lurches around, throwing the bemused poet back and forth and finally flinging him to the ground, where his magic spectacles shatter. Breaking the spectacles destroys the illusion - for Hoffmann, and for the audience, who now see the live soprano dropping her mask of wooden programmability. In response to the paternal command, ‘Assez, azzez, ma fille!’ , she warbles her obedient word ‘Oui’, but goes nowhere: she has not had enough. Her ‘Oui!’ melts into the non-signifying noise of ‘Ah!’ that it was all along, and she takes up the waltz theme, replacing the solo flute with her voice. But almost immediately she exceeds that theme’s formal constraints, and the orderly expectations set up by her ‘doll song’, as she runs away with the tune: her roulades get out of control, she gets stuck in the cadential trills, she rewrites the piece to the surprise and alarm of everyone . . . . Like her crazy dance with Hoffmann, this disorderly music comes from outside the logic of the plot, contrary to paternal programming. Bereft of his magic spectacles, the disillusioned Hoffmann, like the audience on stage and off, can only gape at the new spectacle of a cooperative girl-machine transformed into a disorderly diva.41

The illusion experienced by Hoffmann is shattered when his opera-viewing glass is shattered. His illusion is that he thinks he is seeing and hearing a diva who represents the perfect combination of the natural and the artistic. That illusion is the romantic ideal of opera. That is what gets shattered for Hoffmann, along with his opera-viewing glass. After the glass of his viewing instrument breaks, he can see

41 Hadlock 1994.240. The highlightings in underlines are mine.
Olympia for what she is - a robotic singer, a singing automaton. The audience has seen it all along: Olympia is merely a thing of art, devoid of life. The shattering of the opera-viewing glass through which the poet views his precious love object, this artificial woman named Olympia, is timed to take place just before the moment of her own physical disintegration, which serves as proof that she is artificial and not at all natural.

But there is no such proof. Olympia is not artificial. She is a real diva - so long as she is viewed through the refracting lens of the opera-viewing glass. Only when this glass shatters does the diva who sings the role of Olympia seem totally artificial. When she is viewed through the refracting lens, she seems natural - a perfect combination of nature with art. Only when the romantic poet’s opera-viewing glass is shattered does he see Olympia as a mere work of art, an automaton. For an undiscerning audience of opera, that is all Olympia ever was, an automaton.

For the romantic soul, such an undiscerning view would be typical of unromantic Philistine sensibilities, as if opera had become a victim of bourgeois consumerism. Such Philistinism is echoed by the mocking laughter of the guests attending the party hosted by Spalanzani, who have all witnessed the shattering of Olympia. As Hoffmann cries out his painful discovery that Olympia was an automaton, the unromantic guests attending the party respond by laughing at Hoffmann’s grief over the shattering of his romantic illusion about his lady-love:

Hoffmann: Un automate! Un automate!
Le Chœur: Ha! ha! ha! la bombe éclate! Il aimait un automate!
Hoffmann: It’s an automaton An automaton!
Chorus: Ha! ha! ha! The bomb has gone off. He was in love with an automaton!

_Tales of Hoffmann_ Act 2 No. 12 [D p. 75]

Like the Philistine guests of Spalanzani, the audience attending the comic opera by Offenbach could laugh as well. Olympia was broken because she was not a natural woman. She was an artificial woman, an automaton. If the audience laughs, however, the joke is on them. They would only be showing that they, too, are Philistines, since they fail to grasp the romantic ideal of a diva.

This romantic ideal, as developed in the opera, goes beyond what we see in the original short story of E. T. A. Hoffmann, _The Sandman_. Unlike the Olympia of the opera, the ‘Olimpia’ of this short story is no true diva. She is a false diva, fooling not only the bourgeoisie but also the romantic poet:

She fools bourgeois society because her fixed smile and limited conversation (she can only say ‘Ah! Ah!’) conform so perfectly to their idea of how a young girl should
behave. She fools Nathanael, the poet who has fallen in love with her, because he always views her through Coppelius’ magic spectacles.\footnote{Hadlock 1994.236.}

By contrast, there is something engagingly natural about the Olympia of the opera, since she sings like a true diva, living up to the expectations of a discerning audience of opera. Such an audience would truly appreciate the romantic ideal of a diva as a perfect combination of the artistic and the natural.

The idea of a diva inside a man-made machine masquerading as a woman is already latent in the short story of E. T. A. Hoffmann, but the emphasis there is on the ultimate artificiality of ‘Olimpia’. In the opera of Offenbach, by contrast, the natural singing of the diva who sings the role of Olympia helps bring to life the personality of this ‘poor little automaton’. The interest in such a personality is a romantic impulse, as we see from other French theatrical experimentations involving the character of E. T. A. Hoffmann’s ‘Olimpia’. Two examples are \textit{The Doll of Nuremberg} (\textit{La Poupée de Nuremberg}, 1852), a farce by Adolphe Adam, and \textit{Coppélia} (1870), a ballet by Léo Delibes, after a scenario by Charles Nuitter:

Both the ‘Nuremberg doll’ and the puppet Coppélia seem, at their comic and dramatic high points, to be transformed from mechanism to life, but the plot provides a rational explanation: the ‘ghost in the machine’ is a live girl. The inventor, like the legendary sorcerer’s apprentice, is initially delighted by the success of his experiment, and then made frantic by his creation’s misbehaviour, while the audience remains comfortably aware that the doll is actually slumped in the cupboard, and that the thing dancing wildly is a real person logically accounted for. The boundary between cyborg and woman remains secure.\footnote{Hadlock 1994.237.}

The audience has reason to be far less comfortable about the boundary between cyborg and woman in the opera by Offenbach. As Heather Hadlock observes about the role of Olympia in this opera, “there is a girl in the machine.”\footnote{Hadlock 1994.237.} That is to say, the singing role of Olympia requires an extreme of naturalism to match the extreme of mechanical perfectionism. And only a true diva can be so completely natural as to live up to the absolute requirements of her art. So Olympia requires a true diva to sing her.

But the absolute requirements of her art can cost the diva her life. That is because the natural girl inside Olympia must struggle to reach the Olympian heights of the mechanical goddess on the outside. One part of the diva must be nature itself, with all its imperfections, while the other part of her must be art in its fullest perfection.
The diva is the perfect combination of multiple human imperfections and unique divine perfection. Viewed through the romantic opera-viewing glass of Hoffmann, Olympia is such a perfect combination. She is a romantic ideal. And the discerning audience of opera may continue to look for this ideal. For Hoffmann, however, any such ideal is shattered with the shattering of his opera-viewing glass - and with the grotesque shattering of Olympia herself immediately thereafter.

If his opera-viewing glass had not shattered, Hoffmann could perhaps have seen the shattering of Olympia in an altogether different way. Through the lens of opera, the shattering of Olympia - her fragmentation - could be viewed as the sublime death of a diva. For the discerning audience of opera, there is a hint of this sublimity even in the grotesque fragmentation of the girl. There is something sad, even tragic, about the spiteful breaking of this beautiful automaton, since the girl in the machine, the diva who sings the role of Olympia, must sing her heart out before the machine is finally broken. The fragmentation of Olympia is a sad consequence of the virtuoso singing performed by the diva, who is the girl inside her.

7. Variations on the theme of breakdown

Matching the fragmentation of Olympia in Act 2 of The Tales of Hoffmann is the fragmentation of Antonia in the original Act 3. Like a true diva, Antonia had sung her heart out. She had sung till her heart literally broke, at the climax of her virtuoso singing. She broke when her heart broke. And the fatal heartbreak of her singing is proof that she is a true diva, a perfect combination of nature and art.

The fragmentation of this diva in the Tale of Antonia is metonymic. When I speak of metonymy here, I mean the expression of meaning by way of connection, as opposed to the expression of meaning by way of substitution, which is metaphor. To be contrasted with the metonymic fragmentation of Antonia in Act 3 is the literal fragmentation of Olympia, who is literally broken into pieces in Act 2.

What broke Antonia in Act 3 was whatever was natural in her. By contrast, what broke Olympia in Act 2 was whatever was artistic in her. I say artistic rather than artificial because Olympia is supremely artistic as a diva. Only as a woman is she artificial. What Olympia has in common with Antonia is that she too is a diva. It is the diva in both of them that makes them break.

This line of argumentation about Olympia and Antonia in Acts 2 and 3 of Offenbach’s opera can extend to Giulietta in Act 4. It is the diva in Giulietta that makes

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45 HR ix n1.
her break as well. As we are about to see, the fragmentation of this diva in the Tale of Giulietta, as in the Tale of Antonia, is metonymic.

In order to make this point, we need to look back once again at the Tale of Antonia. The metonymy that expresses the fragmentation of this diva is double. First there is Antonia’s heart, which is an extension of her self. Her heart literally breaks at the climax of her singing. Then there is the violin of Antonia’s possessive father, which is played by the demonic Doctor Miracle to accompany her fatal song - and which also literally breaks at the climax of her singing.

In this light, let us look again at the Tale of Giulietta in the original Act 4. The metonymy that expresses the fragmentation of this diva is more opaque. It has to do with the moment of her damnation, which is timed to coincide with the moment when Hoffmann shatters every mirror in sight after discovering that Giulietta has imprisoned his reflection. This moment is absent from the incomplete text of Act 4 in the “Censor’s Libretto” of 1871, but it is present in the complete text of the original play of 1851 (the stage directions say: il brise les miroirs ‘he breaks the mirrors’).

The reflection of the poet Hoffmann had been captured by the mirror of Giulietta at a moment when the lovers had been passionately embracing. Giulietta had asked Hoffmann to give her his reflection while they were both looking at their reflections at the moment of their intimate embrace:

(Elle enlace Hoffmann dans ses bras et le conduit devant la glace du fond dont elle écarte les rideaux, et où ils se reflètent tous deux.)

Ce que je veux de toi, c’est la fidèle image
Qui reproduit tes traits, ton regard, ton visage
Ce reflet que tu vois sur le mien se pencher!

(She [= Giulietta] embraces Hoffmann in her arms and positions him facing the mirror in the background, opening the curtains [that cover it]. The mirror shows the reflections of both of them.)

What I want from you is that faithful image
that replicates your features, your gaze, your face,
- that reflection of yours, the one you see there leaning over mine ...

Tales of Hoffmann Act 3 No. 16 [D p. 87]46

46 The wording of the stage directions is taken from the “Censor’s Libretto” of 1871 (p. 455 of the facsimile published by Heinzelmann 1988).
Hoffmann at first protests, saying that such a request is insane. But Giulietta contradicts him, insisting that there is no insanity here - and giving this reason for insisting:

\[
\text{Non! car il peut se détacher | de la glace polie}
\]
\[
\text{Pour venir tout entier | dans mon cœur se cacher.}
\]
No! For it can detach itself | from the polished glass
to come in its totality | to hide in my heart.

\textit{Tales of Hoffmann Act 3 No. 16 [D p. 87]}

In this embrace, then, the reflection that Hoffmann sees of himself in the mirror becomes fused with the reflection of Giulietta herself, whose heart absorbs it and thus makes the soul of Hoffmann fuse with her own soul:

\[
\text{Je veux garder, | garder de toi}
\]
\[
\text{Ton reflet, | ton âme et ta vie!}
\]
I want to hold on, | to hold on to that thing that comes from you,
that reflection of yours, | that soul of yours, that life.

\textit{Tales of Hoffmann Act 3 No. 16 [D p. 88]}

The fusion of the reflection of Giulietta with the captured reflection of her enamored victim in the Tale of Giulietta is made more explicit in the source of this Tale, that is, in the short story by E. T. A. Hoffmann that I mentioned earlier, \textit{The Story of the Lost Reflection} (1815). Here is the wording:

... dann ließ sie ihn los und streckte sehnsuchtsvoll die Arme aus nach dem Spiegel. Erasmus sah, wie sein Bild unabhängig von seinen Bewegungen hervortrat, wie es in Giuliettas Arme glitt, wie es mit ihr im seltsamen Duft verschwand.

... then she [= Giulietta] released him from her embrace and stretched out her arms sensuously toward the mirror. Erasmus now saw his own image advancing independently of the movements of his body. He saw it glide into Giulietta’s arms and disappear with her in some otherworldly vapor.\footnote{E. T. A. Hoffmann, \textit{Die Geschichte vom verlorenen Spiegelbild}, 1815.}

In the opera as well, the magic of the mirror produces a similar optical effect. Once the reflection of Hoffmann is captured, his soul is fused with the soul of Giulietta in her heart - just as their reflections are fused while they watch themselves embrace in her mirror. The fusion in the mirror and the fusion in the heart of Giulietta cannot be undone unless the mirror shatters. Only if the glass of the mirror breaks can the soul of Hoffmann break free.
There is a complication in the plot of the play. Even after the soul of Hoffmann breaks free at the moment when he shatters all mirrors in view, the poet still hopes to rescue Giulietta by opening the door of her chamber with a key that belongs to her husband, Schlémil. Hoffmann kills Schlémil with the sword of the Devil in disguise, Dapertutto, and now the poet possesses the key that will open the chamber of her lady-love. But he cannot find Giulietta inside her chamber. She has already slipped away in a gondola, having joined the demonic Dapertutto (the stage directions say: Dapertutto s’assure que Schlémil est bien mort, reprend son épée et descend à la gondole où Giulietta le rejoint ‘Dapertutto makes sure that Schlémil is really dead, then takes back his sword and goes down to the gondola where Giulietta joins him’). Languidly receding from view, Giulietta is being ferried to her ultimate damnation, which had already been signaled by the shattering of mirrors.

So the version we see in the play of 1851 implies that the soul of Hoffmann is released, since he breaks the mirrors. But that is not what happens in the corresponding short story by E. T. A. Hoffmann, The Story of the Lost Reflection (1815). In that version, the mirror that captures the reflection of the character Erasmus Spikher does not get broken. Instead, Erasmus walks away from the scene of the capture, which had taken place in Giulietta’s chamber in Florence. Only later does he fully comprehend what has happened, that his reflection had been captured in the mirror. But by then he has fled Italy. Then, one night, when he is back at home, he hears someone knocking at the door of his chamber:


He opened the door. Giulietta walked in, in all her beauty and bewitching charm. Delirious with love and yearning, he embraced her in his arms. “So here I am, my beloved,” she said softly and gently. “Now see how faithfully I have held on to your mirror image!” She lifted the veil on the mirror and Spikher saw with delight his image clinging on to Giulietta’s; but this image was moving independently of his own self, reflecting none of his own movements. A fit of shivering shook him to his core. “Giulietta!” he exclaimed. “So am I to go insane by being in love with you?
Give me back my mirror image. Take me, all of me, my body and my life and my soul!”

The mirror of Erasmus had been covered by a veil to hide the disturbing absence of his reflection, which becomes visible only when the reflection of Giulietta is embracing his own reflection. But this reflection of Erasmus, fused with the embracing reflection of Giulietta inside his mirror, moves independently of his movements outside the mirror. As we have just seen in the passage I quoted, Erasmus at first panics and offers Giulietta his body and soul in return for his captured reflection. But then his love for his wife and child prevents him from going through with his offer. Failing to capture all of Erasmus, Giulietta now rejoins the demonic Dapertutto as they both turn into crows and fly away. The last we see of Erasmus in the short story, he is wandering the world in his quest to find his reflection and to free his soul. No mirror has yet been broken by him. In the play, by contrast, it is made explicit in the stage directions that the poet Hoffmann breaks all mirrors in sight as soon as he sees that his reflection has been captured.

If the reflection of Erasmus is ever to be released in the future, the mirror that imprisons it must ultimately be broken. The expectation of such an ultimate outcome, I argue, is actually built into the short story of E. T. A. Hoffmann. In support of this argument, I cite a close parallel in another work by Hoffmann. In his short story *The Golden Vase* (*Der goldne Topf*, 1814) a young man named Anselmus falls into a swoon and experiences horrific visions; then he wakes up to find himself trapped inside a crystal bottle, where he experiences further horrific visions - until the crystal sounds a harmonious chord and breaks. Once the crystal shatters, Anselmus is released. In the Prologue (Act 1) of the opera, the poet Hoffmann pointedly refers to the story about Anselmus as he confronts Lindorf, his demonic nemesis and rival for the love of Stella:

*Comme Anselmus, rare merveille,*

*Venez-vous me mettre en bouteille?*

*Will you do to me what you did to Anselmus, and - exceptional marvel! - put me inside a bottle?*

*Tales of Hoffmann* Act 1 No. 6 [D p. 33]

This character Lindorf, who figures in the Prologue (Act 1) and the Epilogue (Act 5) of *The Tales of Hoffmann*, is a refraction of the Devil himself, as are also the characters of Coppélius in the Tale of Olympia (Act 2), Doctor Miracle in the Tale of Antonia (Act 3), and Dapertutto in the Tale of Giulietta (Act 4).

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49 D 169.
I return here to the theme of Hoffmann’s reflection in the mirror of Giulietta. By now we have seen that the mirror itself is to be seen as the space of damnation. If your reflection is imprisoned inside the mysterious space of that mirror, you are damned. But what about Giulietta, whose reflection is already there inside her own mirror? The answer is clear: she is already destined to be damned, even before the mirror breaks. The impending damnation of Giulietta inside her own mirror is most clearly visible in the wording of the “Censor’s Libretto” version of The Tales of Hoffmann (1881):

Dapertutto (which is the Devil’s invocational name here, meaning ‘you see him everywhere!’) sings to a diamond ring he intends for Giulietta, telling it to gleam or ‘sparkle’ in order to capture her soul forever:

(Tirant de son doigt une bague où brille un gros diamant et le faisant scintiller)

Tourne, tourne, miroir où se prend l’alouette,

Scintille, diamant! Fascine, attire-la!
Femme, oiseau, le chasseur est là!
Qui vous voit, qui vous guette!
Le chasseur noir!
L’alouette ou la femme
A cet appât vainqueur
Vont de l’aile ou du cœur,
L’une y laisse la vie | et l’autre y perd son âme.

[He [= Dapertutto] pulls from his finger a ring that has on it a huge shining diamond, and he makes it gleam]

Turn, turn, mirror in which the skylark is captured.

Gleam, diamond, fascinate her, draw her near.

Woman or bird! The hunter is there.
The one who sees you, who stalks you.
The black hunter.

Skylark or woman

Toward this irresistible trap
go by wing or by way of the heart.

One loses her life there, and the other loses her soul.

Tales of Hoffmann “Censor’s Libretto” Act 4.50

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50 I am quoting here from the facsimile of Acts 4 and 5 as published by Heinzelmann 1988. The wording in this part of the libretto matches closely the relevant wording in
The time has come to sum up the theme of Hoffmann’s reflection inside the mirror of Giulietta. For Hoffmann to escape from damnation, his reflection must be rescued, and the only way to rescue it is to shatter this infernal mirror, while leaving the reflection of the damned Giulietta inside.

**8. Variations on a theme of heartbreak**

Parallel to the shattering of the mirror in the story of Giulietta - and to the shattering of the crystal in the story of Anselmus - is the shattering of the Cremona violin of Crespel in the story of Antonia. In the original version of the story as told by E. T. A. Hoffmann, this violin breaks when the would-be diva Antonia sings herself to death by literally breaking her own heart with her own singing. Just as the mirror of Giulietta contains her essence, so also the violin of Crespel contains the essence of his daughter Antonia. When Crespel plays a tune on that violin, Antonia experiences the sensation of actually singing that tune:

*Kaum hatte er die ersten Töne angestrichen, als Antonie laut und freudig rief: »Ach, das bin ich ja - ich singe ja wieder.« Wirklich hatten die silberhellen Glockentöne des Instruments etwas ganz eigenes Wundervolles, sie schienen in der menschlichen Brust erzeugt. Krespel wurde bis in das Innerste gerührt, er spielte wohl herrlicher als jemals, und wenn er in kühnen Gängen mit voller Kraft, mit tiefem Ausdruck auf- und niederstieg, dann schlug Antonie die Hände zusammen und rief entzückt: »Ach, das habe ich gut gemacht! das habe ich gut gemacht!«*

Scarcely has [Crespel] drawn the first few notes from [the violin] than Antonia cried out with joy, “Why, that’s me! So now I shall sing again!” And, in fact, the clear tones of the instrument, clear as silver bells, had an altogether wondrous effect: they seemed to originate from the human heart. Crespel felt stirrings that reached the innermost part of his being. He played more masterfully than ever before in his life. As he was playing musical passages of utmost boldness to the fullest measure of his artistic powers, going up and down the scales with the deepest expressiveness, she clapped her hands together and cried in rapture, “I did that well!”

In the Tale of Antonia as told by the ‘poet’ Hoffmann in the opera, it is the demonic nemesis Doctor Miracle who plays the violin of Crespel to accompany the fatal song of Antonia. That song literally breaks both the heart of Antonia and the accompanying violin of Crespel. And it metaphorically breaks the heart of Hoffmann.

Act 4 Scene 5 of the play by Barbier and Carré, *Les Contes fantastiques d’Hoffmann*, staged in 1851.

The music of the violin that accompanies the fatal song of Antonia combines the dimension of optics with the dimension of acoustics in what I have been calling the poetics of refraction:

*Vois sous l’archet frémissant | vibrez la boîte sonore*

See, under the quivering bow, | how it vibrates, that sonorous box’.

*Tales of Hoffmann* Act 3 Insert 7 [D p. 162]52

Here the sound of the music made by the violin breaks for the ear just as light breaks for the eye. The light that breaks makes it possible for the eye to see a vision of the sound that breaks for the ear to hear. The breaking sound that is heard here is the vibration of the violin. And the sound of the violin breaks just as the violin itself will break, and just as the heart of the lover will break. It will break just as any precious thing that is loved will break. That is why Olympia, Antonia, and Giulietta will all break. All three of them will break because all three are refractions of one single thing that is loved.

So what is the one single thing that is loved by Hoffmann in the opera of Offenbach? Throughout the telling of his tales in the opera, Hoffmann thinks that this one thing is the diva Stella.

Stella finally makes her appearance in the Epilogue (Act 5) of the opera by Offenbach. Descending to Luther’s tavern, she enters the low opera of Offenbach after having finished her performance in the high opera of Mozart. It is quite an entrance. Now that Olympia and Antonia and Giulietta are all destroyed, shattered, it is time for Stella to show herself:

The diva, her performance over, walks out from behind the three dead heroines, having survived them all.53

Here is the moment for Stella to sing in the low opera, but she does not. That is because Stella is a false diva. Just as no single singer could ever be expected to sing all three roles of Olympia, Antonia, and Giulietta, so also Stella the false diva could never be expected to live up to the composite ideal of all three lady-loves of Hoffmann’s Tales. Once she has finished performing the role of Donna Anna in Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*, there seems to be nothing left for her to sing in Offenbach’s *Tales of Hoffmann*. And so the diva Stella does not sing at all.

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52 See D 161n7: Offenbach excluded this sequence from the final version of the Antonia act.
9. The mute diva

The silence of the diva Stella is original to the opera. To be contrasted with the mute diva of the opera is the earlier Stella of the play authored by Barbier and Carré: here she “spoke the same mixture of verse and prose as all the other characters.”

We can see most clearly the silence of the diva Stella in the text of the “Censor’s Libretto” authored by Barbier. In this version, Stella sings nothing. She does not even say anything, not even in prose. In other versions, she only says two words in prose when she sees the drunken Hoffmann in Luther’s tavern:

Hoffmann? Endormi?
Is this Hoffmann? Asleep?

Tales of Hoffmann Act 5 No. 28 [D p. 139]

Only in the version that stems from the world première does Stella sing, but this exception only proves the rule, since her singing is merely an intervention created by the interfering producer Carvalho. This intervention, to which I have already alluded, has been summarized this way:

The Paris première, as recorded in the first published score ([Edition] Choudens, 1881), did feature a duet for Stella and Hoffmann in the epilogue. However, its placement was due only to pragmatic considerations: Carvalho had decided to abridge the opera by omitting the unfinished ‘Giulietta’ act, and reassigned that act’s two best numbers to other parts of the score. Thus the indispensable Barcarolle was sung during the ‘Antonia’ act, and the love duet for Giulietta and Hoffmann [Ô Dieu de quelle ivresse] given to Stella. With the restoration of the ‘Giulietta’ act in the Vienna production that same year, the duet returned to its rightful place, where it has remained in all subsequent editions.

Heather Hadlock explains the silence of the diva Stella this way:

[T]he Stella episode [that is, the Epilogue of Offenbach’s Tales of Hoffmann] overturns the analogous episode in Hoffmann’s tale [that is, in the short story Don Juan by E. T. A. Hoffmann], for whereas Donna Anna represents a fantastical poetic spirit at large

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56 Hadlock 1994.243n43. This formulation needs to be adjusted slightly: as Heinzelmann 1988 has shown on the basis of the “Censor’s Libretto,” Act 4 was not quite as unfinished as had previously been thought. In any case, it was broken up and mined to fill in the gaps of Act 5, which was far less finished than Act 4 at the time of Offenbach’s death.
in the mundane world, Stella is a mundane intruder into the opera’s fantasy. Off-stage and off-duty, Stella should not sing, for it is precisely her not bursting into song that differentiates this final appearance from the preceding episodes, and the role she played in them. And when she strolls away from Hoffmann, we remember that her three prior appearances happened on the stage of the poet’s imagination; her three ‘deaths’ were only his stories. In each tale, the poet imagines her broken or smashed for having overstepped the bounds, but in the end the compulsive repetition of the smashing and breaking gestures only emphasises their ineffectiveness.57

I agree that the diva of Offenbach’s low opera is different from the diva of E. T. A. Hoffmann’s short story. The diva of the short story was a romantic ideal, while there is nothing romantic about the diva Stella once we see her in the Epilogue. But there is more to it. In the low opera, the romantic idealization of the diva is exposed. And, I would add, the lens of high opera is shattered, just as the three divas of the would-be high opera of Offenbach are literally shattered. That shattering, I argue, is expressed by the poetics of refraction as practiced by the fragmentary Muse.

10. The fragmentary Muse and her poetics of refraction

We have seen that the would-be unique voice of Hoffmann’s ideal lady-love is refracted into three different voices matching the three different characters of Olympia, Antonia, and Giulietta. From the perspective of Hoffmann’s narration, each of the three women he loves is a diva in her own right. There are now three divas to reckon with, not some unique diva named Stella. But there is also a fourth diva who sings in this opera of Offenbach. It is the Muse herself. She is the disguised fourth diva in the opera, and she signals the truth about Stella as a false fourth diva.

I have already highlighted the Muse’s moment of truth. It happens in the Epilogue (Act 5), after the three Tales of Hoffmann have already been told. At this conclusive moment the Muse declares that Stella is a composite of the other three divas:

*Olympia ... Antonia ... Giulietta ... Ne sont qu’une même femme: La Stella!*

Olympia ... Antonia ... Giulietta ... they are all just one and the same woman, La Stella!

*Tales of Hoffmann Act 5 No. 25 [D p. 136]*

57 Hadlock 1994.242-243. The highlightings in underlines are mine.
It is essential to repeat here what happens when Hoffmann hears the unwanted truth of these words from the disguised Muse. The frustrated poet threatens to shatter his would-be mentor just as he shatters the empty wineglass he is holding:

\[
\text{Un mot de plus et sur mon âme / Je te brise comme ceci}
\]
\[
\text{One more word out of you and, I swear by my soul, I will shatter you just like this.}
\]

_Tales of Hoffmann Act 5 No. 25 [D p. 136]_

It is also essential to repeat the Muse’s reproachful response to the poet:

\[
\text{Moi, ton mentor? Merci!}
\]
\[
\text{(Shatter) me, your mentor? Well, thank you very much!}.
\]

_Tales of Hoffmann Act 5 No. 25 [D p. 136]_

Hoffmann has neglected the Muse as his true love because he has been madly in love with the false love named Stella, who is refracted in the three women he says he loves. And when I say that the identity of Stella is _refracted_, I have in mind a distinctly _acoustical_ refraction. In Hoffmann’s own words, this refraction has the sound of an _echo_ that resounds forever in his heart:

\[
\text{Nos cœurs et nos amours, | sa voix vibrante et douce}
\]
\[
\text{Aux cieux qui l’écoutaient | jetaient ce chant vainqueur}
\]
\[
\text{Dont l’éternel écho | résonne dans mon cœur.}
\]
\[
\text{Our hearts and our moments of love, her voice vibrant and sweet}
\]
\[
\text{sent up to the heavens that heard it, | sent this song that conquers all,}
\]
\[
\text{and its eternal echo | resounds in my heart.}
\]

_Tales of Hoffmann Act 1 No. 5 [D p. 30]_

In the logic of the metaphor, the refracted sound of the singing that captures the essence of Stella is an _echo_ that eternally repeats the sweetly vibrating voice of Hoffmann’s idealized lady-love.

Comparable is the vibrating sound made by the violin that accompanies the fatal song of Antonia:

\[
\text{Vois sous l’archet frémissant | vibrer la boîte sonore}
\]
\[
\text{See, under the quivering bow, | how it vibrates, that sonorous box.}
\]
The wording here visualizes the breaking sound that is heard as the vibration of the violin. And, to repeat, the sound of the violin breaks just as the violin itself will break, and just as the heart of the romantic lover will break. It will break just as any precious thing that is loved will break. That is why Olympia, Antonia, and Giulietta will all break. All three of them will break because all three are refractions of one single thing that is loved. In the romantic imagination of Hoffmann, that one single thing is Stella.

Once the illusion of that one single thing is broken, then the romantic ideal of the diva Stella can be broken. And who is there to replace this false diva? It is the true diva who is the Muse. It is the Muse, not Stella, who is the one true love for the poet Hoffmann. She is the one true composite of the three breakable divas. As the fragmentary Muse, she presides over the fragmentations of the three divas, over the refraction of Stella into these three refracted divas. And, as a goddess, she is unbreakable, unlike her three breakable substitutes, her three refractions. She will not break when the frustrated Hoffmann threatens to break her like a wine glass. She will be there for him after his heart is broken three times - and then broken again a fourth time by the false diva Stella.

So the true diva who takes the place of the false diva is this fragmentary Muse who presides over the multiple ways of imagining the terrifying but beautiful moment when something most precious disintegrates. That precious something is not only what is loved but also the heart that loves. That precious something is the ideal of the romantic poet, who must love this ideal.

Such an ideal is the Muse who loves the poet Hoffmann. And she declares this love by literally commanding the creation of a metonymy between poet and Muse. That is, she declares that the poet must belong to her:

\[
\text{Et moi? moi la fidèle amie} \\
\text{dont la main essuya tes yeux?} \\
\text{Par qui la douleur endormie} \\
\text{s’exhale en rêves dans les cieux? Ne suis-je rien?} \\
\text{Que la tempête des passions} \\
\text{s’apaise en toi!} \\
\text{L’homme n’est plus, renaît, poète!} \\
\text{Je t’aime, Hoffmann. Appartiens-moi!} \\
\text{What about me? Me, the faithful friend}
\]

\(^{58}\) See again D 161n7.
whose hand wiped the tears from your eyes?
The one who puts your sorrow to sleep,
to be exhaled in dreams that soar to the skies? Am I nothing for you?
May the storm of passions subside for you.
The man who was exists no more. Be reborn, poet!
I love you, Hoffmann. Belong to me.

_Tales of Hoffmann_ Act 5 No. 27 [D pp. 138-139]

So the romantic poet is destined to be reborn - once his ideal woman, the diva of opera, has been shattered in three different ways, refracted in three different ways. The three-way shattering is a three-way refraction. Such is the poetics of refraction practiced by the fragmentary Muse.

**Epilogue: the last word goes to the professor**

What I just formulated is my conclusion. But is it possible for such a conclusion to suffice as the last word in this essay? No, not if we listen to the last word in _The Sandman_, the short story of E. T. A. Hoffmann about the shattering of ‘Olimpia’. In that story, the romantic poet who once loved Olimpia is also shattered. He leaps to his death from a tall tower. The last we see of him, he is lying dead on the pavement, with a shattered head (_mit zerschmettertem Kopf_). What made him do it? After surviving the experience of seeing his old ideal shattered when he witnessed the disintegration of ‘Olimpia’, he went on to see his new ideal shattered as well. That is because he found his old opera-viewing glass, his old _Perspektiv_. Looking through the refracting lens of the _Perspektiv_, he now sees what he had never seen before in the woman who is now his new ideal. This woman, now his fiancée, is the most natural of women - and she sees things with the utmost clarity. Her name is, most appropriately, Clara. What the poet once saw in Olimpia, which made her seem natural, now seems artificial when he looks at the natural Clara through the same lens. Viewed through his opera-viewing glass, Clara now seems just as artificial as Olympia. The romantic poet had reacted to the shattering of Olympia by overvaluing what is natural and neglecting what is artistic. Such overvaluing turned out to be just as artificial as his earlier overvaluing of the artistic and his neglecting of the natural. Once he sees Clara through his old opera-viewing glass, his whole life shatters. The shattering of Olimpia had led our romantic hero to overvalue what was natural and to undervalue whatever was artistic. Once the natural had been exposed as something just as artificial as what he had fancied to be artistic, nothing was left.

After the shattering of Olimpia, other romantics had reacted the same way as our romantic poet reacted - according to the short story of E. T. A. Hoffmann. They too were now overvaluing what was natural and undervaluing whatever was artistic in the
women they loved. In doing so, they failed to understand the words of “a professor of poetry and rhetoric” who had given his opinion about the meaning of the shattering of Olimpia:

> Der Professor der Poesie und Beredsamkeit nahm eine Prise, klappte die Dose zu, räusperte sich und sprach feierlich: »Hochzuverehrende Herren und Damen! merken Sie denn nicht, wo der Hase im Pfeffer liegt? Das Ganze ist eine Allegorie - eine fortgeführte Metapher! - Sie verstehen mich! - Sapienti sat!«

Aber viele hochzuverehrende Herren beruhigten sich nicht dabei; die Geschichte mit dem Automat hatte tief in ihrer Seele Wurzel gefaßt und es schlich sich in der Tat abscheuliches Mißtrauen gegen menschliche Figuren ein. Um nun ganz überzeugt zu werden, daß man keine Holzpuppe liebe, wurde von mehrern Liebhabern verlangt, daß die Geliebte etwas taktlos singe und tanze, daß sie beim Vorlesen sticke, stricke, mit dem Möpschen spiele usw. vor allen Dingen aber, daß sie nicht bloß höre, sondern auch manchmal in der Art spreche, daß dies Sprechen wirklich ein Denken und Empfinden voraussetze. Das Liebesbündnis vieler wurde fester und dabei anmutiger, andere dagegen gingen leise auseinander.

The professor of poetry and rhetoric took a pinch of snuff, then snapped the lid of his box shut, cleared his throat, and said solemnly: “Ladies and gentlemen, so you don’t notice what the meat is in all this [= what the rabbit is in the pepper stew]? The whole thing is an allegory - a sustained metaphor. You understand me? - sapienti sat ['this much is sufficient for one who does understand'].”

But many highly respectable gentlemen were not satisfied with this; the story of the automaton had taken root deep in their souls and, in fact, an abhorrent mistrust of human figures had begun to creep in. To be completely convinced that they were not falling in love with wooden dolls, many would demand that their mistresses sing and dance in an ungraceful way, do needlework or knitting or play with their lapdogs while listening to things being read out loud, and so on. Most of all, the mistresses were expected not merely to listen but also to speak from time to time, and whatever they spoke was supposed to show some measure of thought and

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59 Relevant is the traditional saying *Da liegt der Hase im Pfeffer* which can be translated literally: ‘That is where the rabbit is in the pepper stew’. In the traditional dish known as *Hasenpfeffer*, literally ‘rabbit-pepper[-stew]’, the taste of the rabbit meat may be overwhelmed by the taste of the pepper sauce. Then the question is, which ingredient is more distinctive, the pepper or the rabbit? Despite the distinctiveness of the pepper, the ‘meat’ of the stew is still the rabbit. In pondering what the good professor of poetry and rhetoric really means when he speaks about the ‘meat’ of the story told by E. T. A. Hoffmann, I have had the benefit of a conversation with a good professor I know, Leonard Muellner, who understands about the subtleties of tasting the essence of *Hasenpfeffer.*
feeling. For many lovers the bond of love became stronger and more delightful, while others broke up with each other [gingen ... auseinander] in an understated kind of way.\textsuperscript{60}

Bibliography


D. See Dibbern 2000.


GIM. See Nagy 1974.


PP. See Nagy 1996.