

The Heuristic Value of German Literature: The Eternal Plea for the Relevance of Medieval and Early Modern Literature from a Practical/Pedagogical Perspective

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Introduction¹

The question of what the meaning of the Humanities might be for the current student generation continues to vex us all. We can all try to look backwards and explain the significance of past literary documents as being contributions to the canon of all literary studies. That would be the answer of an archivist. We can also try to understand literary texts from the pre-modern period as expressions of the overarching endeavor to make sense of human life, to figure out the meaning of human life, and to explain the purpose of our existence. At first look, this seems to be quite self-evident, but at a closer analysis we can realize how much both medieval and modern literary manifestations are simply waiting for us to gain deeper understanding of human interactions, conflicts, and cooperation. This article continues with previous efforts to make sense of medieval narratives and to demonstrate how much they can serve as literary expressions for the further explorations of human identity, ethics, morality, and religion. The central argument for the humanistic value of literature, as developed here, is predicated on practical experiences in teaching the history of German literature and has profited from numerous critical reflections on modern challenges to our discipline.

The Relevance of the Humanities

For a long time the very same question has occupied the Humanities most profoundly, and it is a question which will be raised over and over again in the future, irrespective of current answers and responses to the issue at

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stake. What are the functions and roles of this field itself within the academic context and how do we justify our existence in the post-modern world? There are many conservative critics who would be delighted to witness our demise for financial, political, ideological, and other reasons, especially because we are facing an ever-growing pressure on our young student generation that needs to find jobs and careers after graduation and seemingly cannot achieve that goal easily particularly with degrees in the Humanities, here understood in the broadest possible term, including philosophy, anthropology, sociology, history, art history, psychology, and other related fields. Moreover, there is a growing sense among the general public about the true value and significance of college education at large, although the debate seems mostly centered on the cost factor, which in turn is a direct reflection of the declining investment in higher education by conservative governments on the state and federal level – certainly a devious, if not nefarious self-fulfilling prophecy by and for those who want to stifle critical thinking and critical voters and achieve that goal by cutting funding for schools and universities.²

In fact, there seems to be a public opposition to the Humanities and their values for society at large although our students acquire basic skills in critical thinking, writing, and arguing, and gain a global perspective, which altogether makes them resistant to myopic, parochial, and ideologized perspectives and readies them for the task in a global society. After all, those very skills, which might be unwelcome in some political circles, makes our graduates particularly attractive in many economic sectors, whether they have a degree in ancient Greek, medieval German literature,

² For strongly opposing views, see the contributions to Antje Flüchter and Jivanta Schöttli (eds), *The Dynamics of Transculturality: Concepts and Institutions in Motion* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2015). See also Klaas Landsman and Ellen van Wolde (eds), *The Challenge of Chance: A Multidisciplinary Approach from Science and the Humanities* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2016). See also Jennifer Howard, ‘Threats to the Liberal Arts Worry Scholars in the Humanities’, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (8 May 2011), at <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Threats-to-the-Liberal-Arts/127443>. Accessed 22 December 2017. For an analysis of recent polls (2017) of national significance in the United States of America, see Doug Lederman, ‘Is Higher Education Really Losing the Public?’, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (15 December 2017), at <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/12/15/public-really-losing-faith-higher-education>. Accessed 22 December 2017. Cf. also the somewhat optimistic perspectives offered by the contributors to Myra Seaman and Eileen A. Joy (eds), *Fragments for a History of a Vanishing Humanism* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2016); see also Andrew Hicks, *Composing the World: Harmony in the Medieval Platonic Cosmos* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

eighteenth-century British or French literature, or in nineteenth-century Impressionist art history.³ Some of the most critical issues affecting the Humanities were addressed at a conference organized by the British Academy in London and Cambridge in 2011,⁴ and I hope to build on some of those insights both in practical and theoretical terms, focusing, however, on the German perspective.

Fortunately, there are also many supporters of the Humanities, as the flood of relevant monographs and articles indicates, and many of those supporters come particularly and significantly from the fields of science and medicine, for instance. In other words, as embattled as we might feel at times, we are certainly not alone and can look back to a very long tradition of strenuous intellectual and political debates about what the Humanities mean and why they are part and parcel of the academic universe. We can be certain that the public notion of graduates from the Humanities facing an extraordinarily hard time to find meaningful employment compared to Engineering, Physiology, or Business represents a myth which needs to be quickly dismissed.⁵

³ See, for instance, the contributions to Karla P. Zepeda and Ellen Mayoock (eds), *Forging a Rewarding Career in the Humanities: Advice for Academics* (Rotterdam: SensePublishers, 2014); Torsten Husen, *The Learning Society Revisited* (Burlington, VT: Elsevier Science, 2014); Maria Kräuter, Willi Oberlander, and Frank Wießner (eds), *Arbeitsmarktchancen für Geisteswissenschaftler: Analysen, Perspektiven, Existenzgründung* (Bielefeld: Bertelsmann, 2009). As to the myth that graduates in the Humanities have a hard time finding meaningful employment, see 'Liberal Arts Degrees and Their Value in the Employment Market', online at <https://www.aacu.org/nchems-report> and 'IT TAKES MORE THAN A MAJOR', at https://www.aacu.org/sites/default/files/files/LEAP/2013_EmployerSurvey.pdf. Accessed 22 December 2017. For a more critical perspective, see Leonard Cassuto, 'The Job-Market of Digital Humanities', *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (22 January 2017), at <https://www.chronicle.com/article/The-Job-Market-Moment-of/238944>. Accessed 22 December 2017. There are an infinite number of other relevant online opinions published on blog sites, in online newspapers and journals, and other venues.

⁴ See 'Threats to the University Humanities and Science Conference 2011', at <https://www.cpl.law.cam.ac.uk/past-activities2011/threats-university-humanities-and-science-conference-2011>. Accessed 5 January 2018.

⁵ The data about this is easily available online and is discussed from many different perspectives. See, for instance, Max Nisen, '11 Reasons To Ignore The Haters And Major In The Humanities', at <http://www.businessinsider.com/11-reasons-to-major-in-the-humanities-2013-6> and Elizabeth Segran, 'What Can You Do With a Humanities Ph.D., Anyway?', at <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2014/03/what-can-you-do-with-a-humanities-phd-anyway/359927>. Accessed 22 December 2017. Of course, it is very difficult for graduates with a Ph.D. to find jobs at universities since those have always been very limited in quantity.

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To some extent, the pre-modern world would not have comprehended the conflicts we are fighting over today and might have regarded them as absurd since the basis of all medieval scholarship, extending well into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, was the trivium in the first place, including rhetoric, logic, and grammar, hence the foundation of a humanistic approach to all intellectual endeavors. Subsequently, students studied the quadrivium, that is, geometry, astronomy, arithmetic, and music, thereby gaining the ability to comprehend the universe in its physical dimensions.⁶ It might be revolutionary (maybe really refreshing) today to reintroduce this model as part of the undergraduate curriculum, teaching students at first how to think, how to speak, and how to write, but most of the complaints about the declining quality standards at the university level are directly linked to the absence of those basic abilities traditionally acquired in the Humanities.

Several scholars such as Michael Kelly (University of Southampton), Lisbeth Verstraete-Hansen (University of Copenhagen), David Gramling (University of Arizona), Lorraine Ryan (University of Birmingham), Jacqueline Dutton (University of Melbourne), and Charles Forsdick (University of Liverpool) recently explored once again the challenges and opportunities the Humanities face, and offered a wide range of constructive responses, data, and strategies reflecting the current situation worldwide.⁷ Similarly, the online journal *Humanities - Open Access* has subscribed to the same agenda and publishes many articles and guest-edited volumes pursuing a variety of approaches to the Humanities, often in close association with other fields, which has yielded a rich plethora of interdisciplinary insights and concepts that are very meaningful,

⁶ Graeme Dunphy, 'The Medieval University', in Albrecht Classen (ed.), *Handbook of Medieval Culture: Fundamental Aspects and Conditions of the European Middle Ages* (Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2015), vol. 3, pp. 1705-34. See also J. Stephen Russell, *Chaucer and the Trivium: The Mindsong of the Canterbury Tales* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1998); Arbogast Schmitt, '2000 Jahre europäische Bildung: die artes liberales und ihre theoretische Grundlage (ein Überblick)', in Rudolf Benzinger and Meinolf Vielberg (eds), *Wissenschaftliche Erziehung seit der Reformation: Vorbild Mitteldeutschland: Beiträge des 5. Erfurter Humanismuskongress 2015* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2016), pp. 17-38. See also Fiona J. Griffiths, *The Garden of Delights: Reform and Renaissance for Women in the Twelfth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

⁷ 'Do We Need Modern Language Graduates in a Globalised World?', *Times Higher Education* (23 February 2017), at <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/features/do-we-need-modern-language-graduates-in-globalised-world#survey-answer>. Accessed 22 December 2017.

but at times also very academic. Mike Hulme, for instance, has addressed “Climate Change and Virtue: An Apologetic,” Nigel J. T. Thomas has explored the issue of “The Multidimensional Spectrum of Imagination: Images, Dreams, Hallucinations, and Active, Imaginative Perception,” and Iris Clever and Willemijn Ruberg have raised the question concerning “Beyond Cultural History? The Material Turn, Praxiography, and Body History.” This has the unintended, almost ironic effect that those valuable contributions do not fully reach the public and certainly not the relevant decision-makers in politics.⁸ Many of the problems facing the Humanities and the University are house-made, however, resulting from an extreme degree of theorizing and a lamentable willingness to allow socio-economic, political, or anthropological issues overshadow the core subject matter in our field, the literary texts.⁹ We need a good balance and should not throw the proverbial baby out with the bathwater. As important as subject matters such as business German, minority voices, translation studies, etc. prove to be, we ought not to let them replace the canon entirely either.

This article does not intend to argue that the literary canon might represent the panacea of all our woes in the Humanities, but the purpose consists of asking once again, on the basis of numerous practical

⁸ See ‘*Humanities* — Open Access Journal’, at <http://www.mdpi.com/journal/humanities>. Accessed 22 December 2017. I have contributed myself, though mostly from a medieval perspective, several times to this topic. See ‘The Challenges of the Humanities, Past, Present, and Future: Why the Middle Ages Mean So Much For Us Today and Tomorrow’, *Humanities*, vol. 3, no. 1 (2014), pp. 1-18; ‘Transcultural Experiences in the Late Middle Ages: The German Literary Discourse on the Mediterranean World – Mirrors, Reflections, and Responses’, *Humanities*, vol. 4, no. 4 (2015), pp. 676-701.

⁹ Christopher Newfield, *The Great Mistake: How We Wrecked Public Universities and How We Can Fix Them* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), warns especially against the corporatization of the universities, as much as the public seems to favor that. Online, the publisher posted this summary: “Newfield combines firsthand experience with expert analysis to show that private funding and private-sector methods cannot replace public funding or improve efficiency, arguing that business-minded practices have increased costs and gravely damaged the university’s value to society. It is imperative that universities move beyond the destructive policies that have led them to destabilize their finances, raise tuition, overbuild facilities, create a national student debt crisis, and lower educational quality. Laying out an interconnected cycle of mistakes, from subsidizing the private sector to ‘the poor get poorer’ funding policies, Newfield clearly demonstrates how decisions made in government, in the corporate world, and at colleges themselves contribute to the dismantling of once-great public higher education”. See ‘The Great Mistake’, at <https://jhupbooks.press.jhu.edu/content/great-mistake>. Accessed 22 December 2017. This lament, however, is not new at all, and it will not stem the flood of ever new efforts to rely on a purely business model for the university. We need a new reform of the university predicated on the model developed by Wilhelm von Humboldt.

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experiences, how we can convey meaning to our students and help them to grow and to develop, to gain intellectual independence, and a deep understanding of the fundamental values and ethical ideals in human life through the study of poetry or prose. The analysis and discussion of literary texts, a very old praxis, of course, have never lost anything of their importance and impact as intellectual tools. We can observe this both in light of ever new literary publications and also in light of older texts that have gained the status of school readings—obviously for good reasons. Bestsellers, even trivial literature, experimental texts, and so on, all deserve to be recognized as well, but here I want to examine carefully what some of the most seminal poems and narratives in the history of German literature might be able to convey to our present generation and how they might contribute to the ongoing discourse on the relevance of the Humanities at large. After all, why would we even accept such a list of canonical texts, if they did not carry profound meaning?

We find ourselves today caught in a dangerous vortex, constantly confirming the validity of our existence to the insiders, and yet we do not seem to gain tangible influence on governmental entities that hold the purse strings for the universities, whether in the New or in the Old World. After all, the Humanities cost money, as any good education system does, and they do not produce money. In the Sciences, by contrast, our colleagues constantly bring in large grants and seem to support themselves and the rest of the University, which pleases the administrators. However, the latter also ignore the huge costs to sustain the Sciences in the first place, and they do not include into their calculations the basic concepts of epistemology as explored in the Humanities, helping students in the Sciences to develop critical thinking skills, analytic writing abilities, research competence, etc.¹⁰

The central concern within the Humanities amounts to the questions of how to understand our material and spiritual existence, how to establish culture and an identity, and how human life can gain meaning, which has traditionally be answered by way of countless literary reflections insofar as the fictional realm provides a framework to explore many different situations and conditions in our earthly existence, both in the past

¹⁰ The online world is abuzz with comments on those issues; see already Athanasios Moulakis, *Beyond Utility: Liberal Education for a Technological Age* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1994); George P. Brockway, *The End of Economic Man: An Introduction to Humanistic Economics*, 4th edition (New York: Norton, 2001).

and in the present.¹¹ Literature is like a playground where we are allowed to carry out experiments and study the possible outcomes, without being directly confronted by the consequences. We can make mistakes and learn from them without suffering the immediate consequences, so literature can prepare us for real life through its experimental status, its utopian perspectives, and its opportunities to explore alternatives. Good literature is also very political, both on a personal and a public level. Consequently, personal mistakes, violence, war, personal failures, moral debasement, crimes, and generally the lack of virtues have been investigated in a myriad of literary texts both in the Middle Ages and today.¹²

The quest for tolerance, for instance, as formulated in Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's play *Nathan der Weise* (1779), or the quest for profound knowledge beyond the ordinary dimension, as explored in Johann Wolfgang Goethe's *Faust* (Part One, 1806), illustrate this aspect most impressively. Bertolt Brecht's poems and plays are famous not only because they entertain and teach the audience so well, which is true by itself, but because they contain insights into human behavior and social conditions that we continue to struggle with. Thus, the real challenge for contemporary writers, just as in the past, can be easily formulated by posing the question whether the new novel or short story contributes to the continuous search for meaning in human life.¹³

¹¹ Albrecht Classen, 'The *Gesta Romanorum*: A *Sammelbecken* of Ancient Wisdom and Didactic Literature and a Medieval 'Bestseller' Revisited', *Literature & Aesthetics*, vol. 27, no. 1 (2017), pp. 73-98. See also my previous approach, 'Spiritual and Existential Meanings of the Word: Strategies and Function of Reading in the Middle Ages. With Special Emphasis on Hartmann von Aue's *Gregorius*', *Seminar*, vol. 32, no. 3 (1996), pp. 221-239; 'Friendship, Death, and Boethian Philosophy in the High Middle Ages: The Meaning of the Past for Our Present and Future. With a Special Focus on Lawrence of Durham's *Consolatio* (1141) and Aelred of Rievaulx's *De Spirituali Amicitia* (1164-1167)', *Medieval Perspectives*, vol. 28 (2013), pp. 9-31.

¹² See now the contributions to Regina Toepfer (ed.), *Tragik und Minne* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2017); Albrecht Classen, 'The Human Quest for Happiness and Meaning: Old and New Perspectives. Religious, Philosophical, and Literary Reflections from the Past as a Platform for Our Future - St. Augustine, Boethius, and Gautier de Coincy', to appear in *Athens Journal of Humanities & Arts*.

¹³ Cf. Cornelia Wild, *Göttliche Stimme, irdische Schrift: Dante, Petrarca und Caterina da Siena* (Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2016). For modern literature, see now the contributions to Andrea Bartl und Marta Famula (eds), *Vom Eigenwert der Literatur: Reflexionen zu Funktion und Relevanz literarischer Texte* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2017). Cf. Claudia Hillebrandt and Elisabeth Kampmann (eds), *Sympathie und Literatur: zur Relevanz des Sympathiekonzeptes für die Literaturwissenschaft* (Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 2014).

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In this regard, it seems rather unproblematic to explain both to our students and the general audience why we need the Humanities, and yet the political climate looks less and less promising, that is, less receptive to the idealistic concepts sustaining our discipline. On 22 November 2010, Gregory A. Petsko famously wrote an open letter to George M. Philip, the president of the State University of New York at Albany, prompted by the proposed elimination there of French, Italian, Russian and Classics and thus strongly opposed to that administrative move. He demonstrated brilliantly how damaging it would be for the entire university to abandon the Humanities because they represent the central core of everything which constitutes the academy in intellectual and cultural terms. He concluded his deeply inspiring reflections with these words: “You see, Goethe believed that it profits a man nothing to give up his soul for the whole world. That’s the whole world, President Philip, not just a balanced budget. Although, I guess, to be fair, you haven’t given up your soul. Just the soul of your institution.”¹⁴ Interestingly, the question regarding the relevance of the Humanities finds, at times, very different answers in other parts of the world. In various African countries, for instance, German Studies are doing very well and are regarded as the key gateway for a promising career in the future.¹⁵

Nevertheless, the Humanities are in a precarious situation worldwide, which requires us to ask, once again, the universal question challenging us all over and over again how we can learn about and teach the basics of human life. Granted, literature is only one of many venues, it offers only some sets of instruments for this task, but a poetic text or a play can address, as I will argue below, essential aspects much more poignantly than many psychological, anthropological, or philosophical approaches.

Petsko certainly addressed the concerns shared by many in the Humanities, and in the entire academic community globally, without being

¹⁴ Gregory A. Petsko, ‘Open Letter to SUNY Albany’, *Inside Higher Ed* (22 November 2010), <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2010/11/22/open-letter-suny-albany>. Accessed 22 December 2017.

¹⁵ Michael Eckardt, ‘Deutsch als Fremdsprache (DaF) und Germanistik in Afrika - Afrika in Germanistik und DaF (Internationale Konferenz in Windhoek, Namibia v. 14.-16.4.2003)’, *Zeitschrift für Germanistik*, Neue Folge, vol. 14, no. 1 (2004), pp. 184-186. See also the interview with Shaban Mayanja in *Alumniportal Deutschland*, at <http://www.alumniportal-deutschland.org/mitglieder/alumni-geschichten/interviews/shaban-mayanja-daad-lektor-germanistik>. Accessed 22 December 2017.

part of that field of academic research. Unfortunately, despite the great success which he achieved with his comments online, the bureaucracy was not swayed by his comments, and the cuts continued to come down. At the same time, however, the great tradition of university libraries continues strongly, despite radical changes in the way how we publish today, how data is stored, etc., so we could identify the library as the essential icon and beacon of hope for the Humanities, whether in print format or digitally.¹⁶ In many ways, the printed book has never lost its auratic qualities, especially when the voice contained in the text succeeds in speaking directly to us, and this across cultural, linguistic, ethnic, religious, political, and other borders, and from the past to the present.

Medieval and Early Modern Answers

Instead of summarizing the many different viewpoints developed over the last decades and more regarding this burning and maybe not solvable issue inherent in the Humanities, butting intellectual ideals against financial and political constraints,¹⁷ my subsequent reflections will focus on a selection of texts in the history of German literature that simply offer meaning and have always served me very well to convince my students and others about the undoubted and iron-clad relevance of the Humanities with a focus on the German language. The line of arguments proposed here is not at all directed against any other foreign language and pursues its goal by way of reflecting on the relevance of the Humanities at large. Defending German at North American universities constitutes a proxy defense of all other

¹⁶ Alice Crawford (ed.), *The Meaning of the Library: A Cultural History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).

¹⁷ Frederick Luis Aldama, *Why the Humanities Matter: A Commonsense Approach* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008); Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); Albrecht Classen, 'Humanities - To Be Or Not To Be, That Is The Question', *Humanities*, at <http://www.mdpi.com/2076-0787/1/1/54> (Section 6, 16 September 2011). Accessed 22 December 2017. For an economic approach to the question at stake, see the contributions to *Past, Present and Future: The Public Value of Humanities and Social Sciences* (London: British Academy, 2010). See also Robert G. Bednarik, 'Rendering Humanities Sustainable', *Humanities* (19 October 2011), at <http://www.mdpi.com/2076-0787/1/1/64>. Accessed 22 December 2017; Stefan Collini, *What Are Universities For?* (London: Penguin, 2012).

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foreign languages and their literature; the concerns affecting us all are simply the same.¹⁸

Many different cultural identities, individuals, organizations, and political groups have already offered over the years powerful, overarching arguments in favor of the Humanities and of German Studies today.¹⁹ Those are extremely important and useful for the global approach to our task. But they are also at risk of being wasted in face of our current student population, which is easily frustrated and disillusioned regarding the meaning and relevance of their study material. Hence, our task consists of building once again on the meaning of the history of German literature and culture and to probe how the various poets, dramatists, or novelists have been able to appeal both to their contemporary and to the modern audiences. I would suggest that here we can identify the truly central task of all humanistic endeavors, to build bridges between our research interests and the concerns of our students (and the public). In that process we are helping them to come to terms with their own lives by way of looking at a variety of different texts where fundamental human issues are expressed, elaborated on, viewed from various perspectives, and where messages emerge about virtues and vices, about meaning and relevance, and significance and ideals in all of our existence. This does not imply that we would lower the literary texts to the level of being simple material for basic counseling or psychological advice such as 'how to do' in many different circumstances.²⁰

¹⁸ Anthony T. Kronman, *Education's End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 42-45. He particularly warns us about the current trend to give the career the absolute dominance. Careerism, blind acceptance of science and technology, and hence also political correctness, as he calls it, "put the idea of an art of living at risk and undermine the authority of humanities teachers to teach it. ... The secular humanism that once saved us from our doubts must now save us from our convictions", pp. 258-259.

¹⁹ See the contributions to Steven D. Martinson and Renate A. Schulz (eds), *Transcultural German Studies / Deutsch als Fremdsprache: Building Bridge / Brücken bauen* (Bern, Berlin, et al.: Peter Lang, 2008); Rolf-Peter Janz, 'Transkulturalität – in literaturwissenschaftlicher Perspektive', in Maeda Ryozo (eds.), *Transkulturalität – Identitäten in neuem Licht: Asiatische Germanistentagung in Kanazawa 2008* (Munich: Iudicium, 2012), pp. 19-28. See also the contributions to Antje Flüchter and Jivanta Schöttli (eds), *The Dynamics of Transculturality: Concepts and Institutions in Motion* (Cham, Heidelberg, et al.: Springer, 2015).

²⁰ For years I have successfully relied on a textbook I edited, *Medieval Answers to Modern Problems*, 2nd edition (San Diego: Cognella, 2017 [2012]). This is also available digitally. See

Instead, this approach takes every text very seriously and accepts the conditions as presented there as a representative of human life at large. To use a famous example from ancient Greek literature, Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex* from 429 B.C.E. has never lost anything of its relevance until today, and the poet's profound message in this play has resonated throughout the centuries, as we all know. The same can be claimed for countless examples in the history of German literature. Of course, this might sound trivial, and we probably push through already open doors, but it proves to be extremely important to revisit these issues and to reconnect them with fundamental concerns that deeply affect us today just as much as in the past.

In essence, if a literary text is supposed to carry relevance, then there must be some ideas contained in it that address universal issues across time and cultures. Of course, all this is clearly predicated on the notion that there is meaning in human life, and that this meaning makes it worth living in the first place, which some people have, of course, also questioned. Literature mirrors this ever-ongoing quest for meaning and serves as a platform to explore avenues into this confusing labyrinth of human existence.²¹ In a simplified way, any 'consumer' of a literary text desires to gain some kind of 'profit' from the reading, and if the outcome proves to be a growth in the understanding of how to establish meaning in one's own life, then the effort was worth it. This is not to belittle the vast swath of entertaining literature, or bestsellers, trivial literature, etc., but when it comes to defending the Humanities, then we must focus on those narratives that contribute in a meaningful way to the well-being of human existence. We must, in this public discourse, rely on our best tools that convincingly

also, with a focus on archeology and museums, John L. Bintliff, *Extracting Meaning from the Past* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 1988).

²¹ For a specialized investigation, see Bernd Fischer, 'Genealogies and Challenges of Transcultural Studies', *Humanities*, vol. 6, no. 1 (2017), at <http://www.mdpi.com/2076-0787/6/1/4>. Accessed 22 December 2017. The issue is of universal relevance. See, for instance, Alister E. McGrath, *The Great Mystery: Science, God and the Human Quest for Meaning* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2017); Derk Pereboom, *Free Will, Agency, and Meaning in Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); David Benatar (ed.), *Life, Death, and Meaning: Key Philosophical Readings on the Big Questions*, 3rd edition (Lanham, New York, Boulder, and London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016); May Todd, *A Significant Life: Human Meaning in a Silent Universe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015); Raymond A. Belliotti, *What is the Meaning of Human Life?* (Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 2001). The literature on this topic is legion, as is to be expected.

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make the case, and in this regard, many of the canonical texts prove their timeless value above all.

We might have to approach our task by first acknowledging the curious phenomenon that we as human beings are more than just material entities. There is always a certain element of spirituality, whether religiously or erotically determined, perhaps best expressed by the 'principle of hope', as Ernst Bloch had formulated it.²² Consequently, literature is not simply something serving for daily consumption, but a medium for critical self-reflection, for the exploration of all kinds of aspects and phenomena, and for the imagination of alternative worlds, for instance. This implies that we can and must read fictional texts as specifically targeting issues and problems and hence intending to change life, social conditions, people's attitudes, values, concepts, and ideals. Once we accept this basic approach, we can easily fathom the great value of literature for many non-literary fields, such as sociology, political science, religion, anthropology, history, philosophy, and psychology.

With respect to war and peace, such as in the Middle Ages, there are numerous opportunities to recognize an intriguing and far-reaching discourse on peace particularly in many of the most gloomy and gut-wrenching medieval epic poems, such as the Old High German *Hildebrandslied* and the Middle High German *Nibelungenlied*. As removed both might appear to be from the present point of view, both signal, if properly analyzed, major messages about human behavior, social conflicts, lack of communication, and about the consequences of aggressive behavior.²³

Hildebrandslied

The Old High German *Hildebrandslied* (ca. 820) proves to be a most intriguing example even for modern readers because it illustrates fundamental, even universal problems between a father and his son, almost like Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*. The old Hildebrand encounters Hadubrand somewhere on the battlefield, both leading their own armies, originating

²² Ernst Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung in drei Bänden* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1968).

²³ Albrecht Classen, *Verzweiflung und Hoffnung. Die Suche nach der kommunikativen Gemeinschaft in der deutschen Literatur des Mittelalters* (Frankfurt am Main, Berlin, et al.: Peter Lang, 2002); Albrecht Classen, 'Eine einsame Stimme für den Frieden im Mittelalter Der erstaunliche Fall von Kudrun', *Thallosis*, vol. 1 (2016), pp. 69-90.

from a Germanic and a Hunnish kingdom. Hildebrand inquires quickly about the other man's whereabouts and realizes soon that he is facing his own son. The latter, however, has been told by sailors a long time ago that his father had died in a war, as a hero, and he is now not able and willing to accept any alternative to his life story. When Hildebrand tries to reach out to him by means of valuable gold rings, Hadubrand rejects this offer, refuses to take the rings as a gift because he is afraid that they might serve as a bribe and could thus make him subservient to a coward opponent who only pretends to be his close kin.²⁴

Hildebrand realizes that he cannot communicate with his opponent further; hence he readies himself for the combat and then throws himself upon the other man. The outcome of this balladic poem remains elusive because the final lines are missing, which the poet/s could have entered in the manuscript, but apparently chose not to do so. We hence face three possibilities, either that the father will kill his son, or that the son will kill his father, or that both will die in that melee. But whatever the outcome might be, it can only be regarded as horrible and frightful since the closest kin are slaying each other. The fifteenth-century version of this poem, the *Jüngere Hildebrandslied* from 1472, presents an alternative to the imminent killing, since at the end the two men recognize and acknowledge each other, which then makes it possible for Hadubrand to take his father to his mother's court, where the old couple can finally reunify again, which secures the happy conclusion.²⁵

Scholarship has debated this poem for a long time, puzzling about many difficult questions, such as why it was even included in the manuscript, why it has been preserved as a fragment only, and what the scribe/s might have had in mind when he or they copied it down in a

²⁴ Quoted from Horst Dieter Schlosser (ed.), *Althochdeutsche Literatur: Mit altniederdeutschen Textbeispielen. Auswahl mit Übertragungen und Kommentar*, 4th edition (Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag, 2004).

²⁵ Joachim Heinze, *Einführung in die mittelhochdeutsche Dietrichepik* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1999), pp. 51-53. The best introduction to the *Hildebrandslied* still proves to be Wolfgang Haubrichs, *Die Anfänge: Versuche volkssprachiger Schriftlichkeit im frühen Mittelalter (ca. 700-1050/60)* (Frankfurt am Main: Athenäum, 1988), pp. 147-166. See also Albrecht Classen, 'Massive Death and Apocalyptic Experiences from the OHG "Hildebrandslied" to the *Nibelungenlied*, *Kudrun*, and Heinrich Wittenwiler's *Ring*. Poetic Reflections in Medieval German Literature on Tragic Outcomes and Armageddon', in Ernst Hintz and Scott Pincikowski (eds), *The Endtimes in Premodern Germany: The Apocalypse, Last Judgment and Evil in a Literary Culture* (forthcoming).

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liturgical text. How would the *Hildebrandslied* even fit into the context of the liturgical manuscript created at the Fulda monastery?²⁶ While previous comments have normally limited themselves to issues of antiquarian interests by the monks, issues of honor and fighting in the early Germanic world, issues of historical memory, and issues of legal problems when an individual kills a family member, we can easily go much deeper and elicit messages hidden in the text that make this epic poem to such a timeless and valuable literary document.

I must limit myself to just a few indications in order to underscore the prolific quality of this balladic text that has, at least in my experience, always appealed to every new student generation. The idea that either the father kills the son or the son kills the father proves to be monstrous and was also harshly condemned in Germanic law. For the Fulda monks who recorded this text, the same value principle was in place and obviously motivated them to present this song even within the context of a liturgical manuscript. Nothing worse in human society but the murder of a member of the own kin.

But why are those two people even fighting in the first place? They defend their own honor, and they think more highly of their bonds with their liege lord than of their father-son relationship. What is at stake here is primarily the idea of the Germanic warrior value system, which translates, however, as the outcome enigmatically and yet also very ominously signals to us through the fragmentary closure, into killing, and perhaps even both men die there on the battlefield irrespective of their close family relationship. As Haubrichs emphasizes, this song illustrates “die Verstrickung des Kriegers, des zur Herrschaft und zur Macht berufenen Großen, in Gewalt, Tod, Vernichtung und Schuld als eine tragische, auswegslose. Sie ist Pflicht und Verhängnis zugleich” (160; the warrior’s entanglement in violence, death, destruction, and guilt because he is called upon to rule and to assume power, which proves to be tragic and without a solution. It is obligation and destiny at the same time). The poem explicitly condemns violence as practiced here and strongly suggests that the traditional ideals of the warrior society have failed and must be replaced,

²⁶ Albrecht Classen, ‘Why Do Their Words Fail? Communicative Strategies in the *Hildebrandslied*’, *Modern Philology*, vol. 93 (1995), pp. 1-22; Albrecht Classen, ‘Das “Hildebrandslied” im heutigen Literaturunterricht? Eine Herausforderung und große, ungenutzte Chance’, *Unterrichtspraxis*, vol. 38, no. 1 (2005; appeared in 2006), pp. 19-30.

that is, of course, by the new ideals of the Christian Church. It would go too far to recognize here an early 'anti-war' poem, but we can be certain that the *Hildebrandslied* mirrors a deeply rooted concern by the monastic poets/scribes about the dangers resulting from the war mentality as espoused by Hildebrand and Hadubrand.²⁷

All attempts by Hildebrand to reach out to the young man fail, especially because he does not know how to communicate properly and is not willing to share any information about himself. Instead, he resorts to the clumsy use of rings out of gold as gifts, which Hadubrand rejects, of course, who considers such an offer an insult, especially because sailors have long told him of his father's death. In essence, we observe here the collapse of all human communication because of clashing claims that cannot be verified, and after the young man has readied himself for the fight, Hildebrand continues briefly in a monologue, taunting his opponent ("Reizrede") and preparing himself for the clash, the outcome of which can only be tragic.²⁸ Hildebrand has been away from his family for too long, so he cannot develop quickly new emotional bonds with his son on the battlefield, where two armies in the background silently observe these two men.

We know only too well that once their fight has concluded, probably tragically with the death of both, the armies will get into action, and massive killing will ensue. For the poet/s, this was no longer acceptable, and the balladic text served him exceedingly well to drive home his essential message about how to change the military mentality and to develop new values as preached by the Church. The *Jüngere Hildebrandslied* demonstrates what learning process would be possible and what an alternative outcome should look like, but by then a considerable trivialization process had set in already, which subsequently made this poem to a highly popular contribution to many different songbook collections.²⁹

As complicated and obscure the *Hildebrandslied* at first often seems to be, with its curious and actually distorting historical references,

²⁷ Viktor Millet, *Germanische Heldendichtung im Mittelalter: Eine Einführung* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), pp. 24-47.

²⁸ I have discussed this at great length in *Verzweiflung und Hoffnung*, pp. 1-52.

²⁹ Albrecht Classen, 'The *Jüngeres Hildebrandslied* in Its Early Modern Printed Versions: A Contribution to Fifteenth- and Sixteenth-Century Reception History', *Journal of English and German Philology*, vol. 95, no. 3 (1996), pp. 359-381.

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after an intensive engagement with the text it proves to be a highly productive work of literature that carries deep meaning and encourages the modern reader to reflect on the fundamental issues in human life. Does family matter less than honor gained in a military conflict? Is loyalty to one's lord more important than the responsibilities a father has regarding his own son? How can people communicate with each other, especially in such a dangerous, aggressive situation? What language do gifts speak, and should they even be used en lieu of words? What significance do love and family bonds have in face of war? How do we survive in a world where weapons and the ideals of honor speak louder than the heart and mind?³⁰

Considering the endless wars that torture our world today, with no end in sight, the *Hildebrandslied* suddenly gains tremendously in epistemological terms because it conveys a most meaningful message that speaks to us as well, us who are on the constant quest of terminating wars and establishing peace, and yet have to witness an ever-expanding war scenario globally.³¹ The very tragic outcome, irrespective of how it might evolve, highlights some of the critical issues in all human conflicts, the lack of communication, the tensions between the generations, the desire to gain fame and respect, and to fight for superiority at the cost of family bonds, love, and emotional experiences.

³⁰ See, for instance, Hartmut Bleumer, 'Zwischen Hildebrand und Hadubrand: Held und Zeit im "Hildebrandslied"', in Victor Millet (ed.), *Narration and Hero: Recounting the Deeds of Heroes in Literature and Art of the Early Medieval Period* (Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2014), pp. 209-228; Meinolf Schumacher, 'Wortkampf der Generationen: zum Dialog zwischen Vater und Sohn im "Hildebrandslied"', in Eva Neuland (ed.), *Sprache der Generationen*, 2nd edition (Frankfurt am Main, Bern, et al.: Peter Lang, 2015), pp. 175-183. Cf. also Albrecht Classen, 'Fremdbegegnung, Dialog, Austausch, und Staunen: Xenologische Phänomene in der deutschen Literatur des Mittelalters. Vom *Hildebrandslied* bis zum *Fortunatus*', *Mediaevistik*, vol. 26 (2013), pp. 183-206.

³¹ Gert Sommer, and Albert Fuchs (eds), *Krieg und Frieden: Handbuch der Konflikt- und Friedenspsychologie* (Weinheim, Basel, and Berlin: Beltz, PVU 2004); Colin S. Gray, *War, Peace and International Relations: An Introduction to Strategic History* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007). The literature on the history of war and peace is legion. It is, however, always much easier to find relevant research on the history of wars than on the history of peace; see, for instance, Clifford J. Rogers (ed.), *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Medieval Warfare and Military Technology*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). For exceptions, see Thomas Gregor (ed.), *A Natural History of Peace* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 1996); David Cortright, *Peace: A History of Movements and Ideas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Bruno Kammann and Maria-Regina Simmon-Kammann, *Der lange Weg zum ewigen Frieden: ausgewählte Quellentexte* (Aachen: Shaker, 2015).

Nibelungenlied and Diu Klage

Let us briefly consider a rather similar situation in the *Nibelungenlied* (ca. 1200), without discussing the entire epic which would go beyond the scope of this article.³² Already the first part is riddled with monumental issues concerning the conflict between the monstrous Siegfried and the Burgundian kings, Siegfried's rape of the Icelandic Queen Brunhild, and Siegfried's murder at Hagen's hand. The second part of this epic poem is determined by Kriemhild's plans to avenge her husband Siegfried's murder at Hagen's hands, which requires her, however, to invite her brothers and their men to come for a visit in the Hunnish kingdom. Hagen learns from the water nixies just before they are crossing the river Danube, which he organizes and carries out by rowing the ferryboat himself, that none of them will survive, except for the chaplain, who does not even know how to swim. In order to test the veracity of the ominous prophecy, Hagen tosses the poor cleric into the water and pushes him away from the boat when he is trying to rescue his life. Finally, the miserable man manages somehow to swim to the other side of the river, where he is safe. The message for Hagen is loud and clear, none of them will ever return home alive. Consequently, in a most ominous action, Hagen destroys the ferryboat since they will not need it again, although he explains to King Gunther that he wants to avoid that any of their warriors might turn into cowards if more serious fighting would break out at the Hunnish court. In reality, of course, this is a symbolic action signaling that they all have already entered the world of death, a form of *catabasis* as in many other texts of world literature.³³

Nevertheless, when the Burgundians reach Bechelaren/Pöchlarn governed by the famous hero Ruedeger, there is a lull before the tragedy breaks loose, killing everyone involved at the Hunnish court. Ruedeger

³² Ursula Schulze and Siegfried Grosse (eds), *Das Nibelungenlied* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2010); for a recent introductory study, see Jan-Dirk Müller, *Das Nibelungenlied* (Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag, 2015). See also the contributions to Winder McConnell (ed.), *A Companion to the Nibelungenlied* (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1998). As to the notion of tragedy in the Middle Ages, see again Regina Toepfer (ed.), *Tragik und Minne*.

³³ Albrecht Classen, 'Death and the Culture of Death: Universal Cultural-Historical Observations, with an Emphasis on the Middle Ages', in Albrecht Classen (ed.), *Death in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times: The Material and Spiritual Conditions of the Culture of Death* (Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2016), pp. 1-57, particularly pp. 13-14. As to *catabasis*, see Raymond J. Clark, *Catabasis, Vergil and the Wisdom-Tradition* (Amsterdam: Grüner, 1979); John J. Collins and Michael Fishbane (eds), *Death, Ecstasy, and Other Wordly Journeys* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1995).

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strikes strong bonds of friendship with them all and even engages his daughter Dietlind with King Gunther's brother Giselher, hoping thereby to overcome his own sad life as an exile. However, later, once the fighting has broken out and scores of men have been slaughtered, Kriemhild reminds Ruedeger of his promise to exact revenge for her if ever anyone dared to cause her an injury. This now forces him to take up arms as well and to enter the fray against the Burgundians, by now not only his own friends but also his in-laws.

When Hagen realizes this new development, he tries to intervene, appeals to Ruedeger to remember their friendship, and then even begs him for a gift, his own sturdy shield, since his own has been hewn to pieces. Ruedeger does not hesitate to hand it over to him, as the last possible gesture for him to demonstrate his loyalty toward the Burgundians, and the latter, witnessing this amazing act of selflessness and friendship, break out in tears, although they all have already killed many of their opponents and should be obtuse to any feelings, a powerful signal how much emotions matter even in the most brutal context, as recent scholarship has already explored extensively in many different fashions, especially in the world of the Middle Ages.

Nevertheless, Ruedeger's readiness to give up his own protective gear and to use a shield of secondary quality moves those men, which recovers, at least for that precious moment, a sense of humanity. Tears amidst killing of friends and foe might be a complete contradiction, but the poet presents this extraordinary situation in order to contrast it with the horrors of the slaughter that soon continues and ultimately engulfs everyone. The narrator spells out in explicit terms what they are all feeling in that moment: "sie weinten allenthalben, daz disiu herzensêr / niemen gescheiden kunde, daz was ein michel nôt. / vater maneger tugende lac an Ruedegêren tôt" (Stanza 2199, 2-4; they all cried that this heartfelt tragedy could not be lifted; that was a great sorrow. With Ruedeger's death the father of many virtues fell dead).

However, Hagen promises him that he would never fight him, irrespective of any circumstances, and his friend Volker promises the same, pointing out that Ruedeger had promised them peace when they had arrived in his country (stanza 2200), which he now returns, pledging not to raise his arms against him. Displaying the golden bracelets, which Ruedeger's wife had gifted to him, he expresses his hope that the Margrave could be his messenger and send greetings to his wife in thankfulness. Ruedeger

appeals to God that his wife might later be able to give him even more gifts, as if there might be a common future for both (stanza 2201), insofar as he formulates in a conditional phrase, “gesihe ich si gesunde” (line 4; if I am going to see her in good health). However, as soon as that exchange of words is over, the fight begins, and eventually the true tragedy occurs insofar as Ruedeger is challenged by Gunther’s brother Gernot, and both slay each other.

We do not need to pursue the further developments up to the bitter conclusion of the *Nibelungenlied*, in which even Gunther and Hagen finally die, the latter personally decapitated by Kriemhild, who in turn is then killed by Dietrich’s liege man Hildebrand. For the poet, the outcome is completely devastating, and he has hardly any words available to express his grief and exasperation. We only learn that Dietrich and Etzel shed tears and lament the loss of their relatives and vassals (stanza 2374), that the court fest in Gran has come to a horrifying ending (stanza 2375), and that the few surviving knights, ladies, and squires cry over the catastrophic situation. Again, the emphasis on emotions within the framework of this heroic epic strikes us as highly noteworthy, forcing us to realize the fundamental issue at stake, both here and even today, reminding us that even war and killing do not destroy the human element altogether, preserved at least within the literary documents.

If the poet had not included that famous scene with Ruedeger and Hagen, who requests the former’s shield, the personal dimension would have been lost. The narrative focus rests predominantly on the almost foolish figure of Siegfried, then his murder, Kriemhild’s unquenchable desire for revenge, and then on the seemingly endless fighting to the bitter end.³⁴ Significantly, however, a subsequent poet composed a follow-up narrative, *Diu Klage*, which is included in almost all the other major *Nibelungenlied* manuscripts, but pursues nothing but what the title says, the lament about the disaster which destroyed the Burgundian kingdom and also King Etzel’s court.³⁵

³⁴ Lutz Mackensen, *Die Nibelungen: Sage, Geschichte, ihr Lied und sein Dichter* (Stuttgart: Dr. Ernst Hauswedell, 1984), pp. 143-148.

³⁵ Albrecht Classen (ed.), *Diu Klage* (Göppingen: Kümmerle, 1997); Karl Bartsch and Elisabeth Lienert (eds.), *Die Nibelungenklage* (Paderborn, Munich, et al.: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2000); Joachim Bumke, *Die vier Fassungen der ‘Nibelungenklage’: Untersuchungen zur Überlieferungsgeschichte und Textkritik der höfischen Epik im 13. Jahrhundert* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter 1996); Albrecht Classen, *Rituale*

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The poet presents the most curious situation which seems never to have been copied or repeated in world literature, with the few survivors lamenting the devastating outcome, lifting the corpses out of the blood, burying them, talking about their heroism and the reasons why they had to die, which then leads to constant crying. Even though there is criticism against this kind of unmanly behavior, neither Dietrich nor Hildebrand or King Etzel can hold back their tears and break down repeatedly out of sorrow because they have lost so many of their friends, relatives, and soldiers. Later, when the news spread to the west, the family members also turn to lamentations, which intensify the higher the affected person's social standing is, with Queen Brünhilde back in Worms vomiting blood because the pain affects her so badly.

Of course, the situation proves to be extraordinarily horrifying, and no one can really understand why this disaster had to happen, but the survivors have at least the chance to cry and thus to come to terms with their enormous suffering. This poem can well be identified as a literary expression of "Trauerarbeit" (Sigmund Freud) long before it was coined, that is, *avant la lettre*. The only reasonable explanation of the purpose behind *Diu Klage* would be to provide the audience with a literary forum where extreme emotional distress could be formulated and explored as if the poet intended his work as a textual platform where those profound feelings could be reflected on. Grief is a very difficult human emotion, but the literary text lends itself well as an instrument to cope with it, to examine the conditions, and to explore ways out of grief into new dimensions of human existence. After all, death is intimately tied to life, and vice versa, and there is a cyclical experience no one here on earth will have an escape from. But we as human beings have the chance, after having been deeply affected by grief over the loss of a loved one, to engage with those feelings and to work them through, thus utilizing them in a productive manner.³⁶

des Trauerns als Sinnstiftung und ethische Transformation des eigenen Daseins im agonalen Raum der höfischen und postheroischen Welt: Zwei Fallstudien: Mai und Beaflor und Diu Klage, in *Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik*, vol. 36 (2006), pp. 30–54. Most recently, Edward G. Fichtner, 'History and Legend in *Diu Klage*', *Amsterdamer Beiträge zur Älteren Germanistik*, vol. 74 (2015), pp. 201–226.

³⁶ Jennifer C. Vaught (ed.), *Grief and Gender: 700-1700* (New York: Palgrave, 2003).

Kudrun

A third example also deserves to be mentioned here, though only in passing, emphasizing the astounding usefulness and appeal of heroic medieval literature for modern issues. While the *Nibelungenlied* mostly explored the nature of and responses to feelings of hatred and revenge, and while *Diu Klage* illustrated the after-effects, the thirteenth-century *Kudrun* explored the topic of war and peace and presented its audience with a new model of how hostilities could be moved aside and replaced by love if the former enemies simply agreed to marry a person from the other side.³⁷

Kudrun is held a prisoner for thirteen years during which she is harshly treated in order to force her to accept King Hartmut of Ormanîe (Normandy) as her husband, which makes her to a tragic figure. However, when her liberation has finally begun and her mother's troops are causing havoc among their enemies, she intervenes and stops the fighting. Upon her recommendation, Queen Hilde accepts the concept to overcome the old enmity and to strike new political and military connections by means of marriage arrangements.³⁸ Even though *Kudrun* has come down to us in only one manuscript, being part of the large tome of the *Ambraser Heldenbuch*, its literary relevance cannot be doubted. Whereas the early parts are determined by traditional wooing and bridal quests carried out with military means, pitting men against men, the later part underscores most dramatically the great role which *Kudrun* plays, transforming her almost into a tragic figure from a Greek play. Yet, her strategy becomes reality, and she is the one who radically changes the entire political outlook and transforms the traditional heroic world into one determined by love and marriage, although the notion of courtly love cannot be detected here.

³⁷ Karl Bartsch and Karl Stackmann (eds), *Kudrun* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 2000). Cf. Winder McConnell, *The Epic of Kudrun: A Critical Commentary* (Göppingen: Kümmerle, 1988); Barbara Siebert, *Rezeption und Produktion: Bezugssysteme in der "Kudrun"* (Göppingen: Kümmerle, 1988). See also Corinna Dörrich, 'Die Schönste dem Nachbarn: Die Verabschiedung des Brautwerbungsschemas in der "Kudrun"', *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Deutschen Sprache und Literatur*, vol. 133, no. 1 (2011), pp. 32–55.

³⁸ Kerstin Schmitt, *Poetik der Montage. Figurenkonzeption und Intertextualität in der 'Kudrun'* (Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 2002); Ingrid Bennewitz, 'Kriemhild und Kudrun. Heldinnen-Epik statt Helden-Epik', in Klaus Zatloukal (ed.), *Pöchlerner Heldenliedgespräch. Mittelhochdeutsche Heldendichtung außerhalb des Nibelungen- und Dietrichkreises (Kudrun, Ornit, Waltharius, Wolfdietrich)* (Vienna: Fassbender, 2003), pp. 9–20.

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Nevertheless, we easily observe how much the meaning of human life has been addressed each time.

In other words, it makes perfect sense to study heroic poetry such as the *Nibelungenlied* and *Die Klage* as a literary medium to explore fundamental issues in human life; that is, not only hatred, revenge, and murder, but also issues such as the relationship between the human and the divine dimension, the meaning of monsters, the role of the netherworld, and, above all, the aspect of individual responsibility and honor. The tragic component of the epic poem is best expressed by Ruedeger, who would love to establish family connections and to secure his own existence through bonds of loyalty and honor, but whose best intentions are badly foiled because of external circumstances.

We are suddenly confronted by the issues of human identity and global conditions, fate, providence, and happiness, individuality, honor, and self-affirmation. As much as we are facing here a literary text, in reality, the *Nibelungenlied* represents a narrative predicated on deep philosophical, ethical, moral, and religious concerns. Little wonder hence that it enjoyed such a popularity throughout the entire Middle Ages. In other words, it does not come as a surprise that this epic poem continues to appeal to us today because it confirms the overarching concern about why we need literary texts and what they do for our epistemological investigations regarding our existence today. What happens when people dedicate themselves to hatred and revenge, for good or bad reasons? What does revenge mean, and what are its larger implications?

How are we to evaluate, on a different level, the relations between semi-god-like figures such as Siegfried and Brünhild, and their human counterparts, such as Kriemhild, Gunther, and Hagen? Then there is the element of competition for honor, pitting Hagen against Siegfried, and the experience of the otherworld represented by the dragon and the dwarfs, not to forget the nixies. Chaos, destruction, murder, and other strategies dominate the *Nibelungenlied*, a terrible mirror of human lives, poorly managed and organized. The outcome is the massive death of all of the Burgundians, and no one, not even King Etzel or his liege man Dietrich, can profit from the horrible outcome. Just as in the case of the *Hildebrandslied*, the *Nibelungenlied* serves intriguingly until today as a medium to explore the dark side of human existence and the danger of playing with the dark forces always hovering in the background of all beings. There is enormous meaning in this heroic epic, particularly because

of its catastrophic outcome, as poignantly highlighted by *Diu Klage*. Bishop Wolfger von Erla in Passau would not have commissioned the copying down or creation of the *Nibelungenlied* if he and the members of his court would not have perceived in this work both a great literary accomplishment and a medium for some profound teaching about the meaning of life.³⁹

After all, the problems with wars, with feelings of hatred, and the desire for revenge continue to vex our own world, and the horrible outcome of this epic, which proves to be much darker and sinister than most other heroic epics—Beowulf dies in his fight against the dragon, but through his death he rids the world of evil; Roland dies in the battle of Roncesvalles, but Charlemagne returns and wins the war on his behalf and liberates Spain from the Islamic forces—provides us with much to think about. Jan-Dirk Müller calls the Burgundians, who at the end are collectively called Nibelungs, a “Meute,” a pack of hounds, all having become victims of an “Epidemie der Gewalt.”

Something has badly turned wrong, and death of all is the ominous outcome.⁴⁰ *Diu Klage* then shows the human side of the survivors, crying and shrieking in their desperation. We as the audience are hence invited to reflect very carefully about our own actions here in this world in order to avoid copying the situation as it evolves in the *Nibelungenlied*. Despite the poet’s profound pessimism, the literary text actually carries a highly optimistic perspective insofar as the audience is invited to change their lives, to pursue different values and ideals, and thus to leave the horror of the heroic world behind. Revealingly, however, even the Nazis happily resorted to the *Nibelungenlied*, especially in order to urge the Sixth Army caught in Stalingrad to hold out and rather accept complete annihilation than to declare defeat and surrender, which happened after all on Feb. 2, 1943.⁴¹ But we today can choose to pay more attention to the unpopular

³⁹ Uwe Meves, ‘Das literarische Mäzenatentum Wolfgers und die Passauer Hofgesellschaft um 1200’, in Egon Boshof and Fritz Peter Knapp (eds), *Wolfger von Erla: Bischof von Passau (1191-1204) und Patriarch von Aquileja (1204-1218) als Kirchenfürst und Literaturmäzen* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 1994), pp. 215-47.

⁴⁰ Jan-Dirk Müller, *Spielregeln für den Untergang: Die Welt des Nibelungenliedes* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1998), p. 445.

⁴¹ ‘2 February 1943: Germans Surrender at Stalingrad’, *This Day in History*, <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/germans-surrender-at-stalingrad>. Accessed 22 December 2017. See also Peter Krüger, ‘Etzels Halle und Stalingrad: Die Rede Görings vom

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Kudrun than to the popular *Nibelungenlied*, if we do not want to be prisoners of our own past. Nevertheless, I would still insist that the poet of the *Nibelungenlied* also addressed the same central concern, not at all idealizing the tragic outcome of the violent military conflict, although we have to read much more between the lines there than in *Diu Klage* and *Kudrun*.

Angelus Silesius

It might be difficult now to make a transition from the *Nibelungenlied* to late medieval, Renaissance, or Baroque literature. But the question pursued here is not limited to a literary period or to the individual genres, and also not to specific topics or motifs. Instead, we are still pursuing the large issue of how to make sense out of the study of German literature and thus out of the Humanities in order to defend our own existence in the post-modern context. I have dealt with the *Nibelungenlied* above all because it enjoyed such a popularity in the Middle Ages and then again since its rediscovery in the middle of the eighteenth century.⁴² But we have also recognized how valuable the *Hildebrandslied*, *Diu Klage*, and *Kudrun* prove to be, especially when studied through the lens of how to detect meaning in the literary work that carries over to our own time.

As a matter of fact, we can easily pursue the same question and the same inquisitive examination regarding literature from the subsequent centuries, and until today, of course. A great example might be Johannes von Tepl's *Ackermann* from ca. 1400, or Sebastian Brant's *Narrenschiff* from 1494. We could also include an examination of some of the texts by the late medieval mystical writers, especially by Mechthild of Magdeburg (ca. 1207-1282/94) and Meister Eckhart (ca. 1260-ca. 1328), all of whom have offered intriguing insights, poetic images, philosophical and religious reflections that deserve to be taken into consideration also in the modern discourse on meaning and the relevance of the Humanities.

However, since I pursue a global concern, this allows me to move quickly to later centuries and hence to a mysterious and most meaningful Baroque poet, Johann Scheffler (1624-1677), who called himself Angelus Silesius (the Silesian Angel) as his *nom de plume*, whose poetic,

30. 1. 1943', in Joachim Heinzle, Klaus Klein, and Ute Obhof (eds), *Die Nibelungen: Sage – Epos – Mythos* (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2003), pp. 375-403.

⁴² Joachim Heinzle, *Die Nibelungen: Lied und Sage* (Darmstadt: Primus Verlag, 2005).

philosophical, and religious insights opened many new perspectives and today allow us to argue most energetically in favor of the study of literature from the past. He composed his famous epigrams after the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648) and published them under the title *Cherubinischer Wandersmann* in 1657, reflecting on many different aspects relevant in human life, mostly perceived from a religious perspective. Silesius had converted to Catholicism in 1653 and was deeply influenced by medieval and early modern mystics, such as Jakob Böhme (1575-1624), which found most meaningful expressions in his verses, mostly written in Alexandrine couplets. In short, Silesius dealt with and was a great spokesperson of such religio-philosophical movements as mysticism, quietism, and pantheism, reflecting backward on the high Middle Ages and the sixteenth century, and providing messages of great importance for future generations, as his global reception until the present time has confirmed.⁴³

Most famously, he formulated the Latin phrase, “mundus pulcherrimum nihil,” or “the world is a most beautiful naught,” expressing, on the one hand, his delight in this world, after all, and, on the other, his realization that the material existence represents only a veil hiding the spiritual dimension, which could well be considered a reflection of Boethius's famous *De consolazione philosophiae* (525), or, closer to his own time, Valentin Weigel's teachings, such as his Boethian treatise *De vita beata* (1570).⁴⁴ Silesius was a trained medical doctor, but later in his

⁴³ For an easy and useful introduction, see the most accessible article online, ‘Angelus Silesius’, *Wikipedia*, at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Angelus_Silesius. Accessed 22 December 2017. Here I draw from Angelus Silesius, *Cherubinischer Wandersmann*, edited by Will-Erich Peuckert (Bremen: Carl Schünemann Verlag, 1956); see also Angelus Silesius (Johannes Scheffler), *Cherubinischer Wandersmann*, edited by Louise Gnädinger (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2012). See also the English translation, Angelus Silesius, *The Cherubic Wanderer*, trans. and foreword by Maria Shradly, intro. and notes by Josef Schmidt, preface by E. J. Furcha (New York, Mahwah, NJ, and Toronto: Paulist Press, 1986).

⁴⁴ Jeffrey L. Sammons, *Angelus Silesius* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1967), p. 21; Georg Ellinger, *Angelus Silesius: Ein Lebensbild* (Breslau: Wilhelm Gottflieb Korn, 1927), p. 29. See also Georg Stenger, *Ohne Warum: Versuch einer Phänomenologie des Ungrundes im Anschluss an den “Cherubinischen Wandersmann” von Angelus Silesius* (Essen: Blaue Eule, 2014); Lehel Kálmán Sata, *Paradox und mystische Sinnlichkeit - Angelus Silesius' Cherubinischer Wandersmann im Lichte der Theosophie und Sprachphilosophie Jacob Böhmes* (Hamburg: Verlag Dr. Kovač, 2016). For a study comparing Angelus with Boethius, see Albrecht Classen, ‘Boethius and No End in Sight: The Impact of *De consolazione philosophiae* on Early Modern German Literature from the Fifteenth through the Seventeenth Century: Andreas Gryphius and Johann Scheffler

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life was ordained as a priest. He also composed numerous tracts against the Protestants and caused a bit of an uproar because of his biting attacks in his effort to re-introduce Catholicism into Silesia. We cannot say with certainty whether he was a mystic in the traditional sense of the word, but many of his epigrams demonstrate that he was deeply inspired by mystical and philosophical thoughts.⁴⁵

Here I cannot attempt to develop a clear sense of what Silesius was all about since his *œuvre* proves to be too comprehensive, too complex to develop this as fully as it would be necessary in a specialized investigation, but then also too controversial and dialectical in many different regards. We observe, for instance, his profound involvement with an exercise in intellectual contemplation, poetic reflections, the literary reception of medieval mystical writers, and a natural-theological exegesis of the creation story, bridal mysticism, and meditations on Christ's Passion.⁴⁶

By focusing on a very small, probably subjective selection, we will be in a good position to recognize once again how much meaning can be created through a critical engagement with those epigrams. Yet, there is a certain challenge when we turn to Silesius's poetic texts since they consistently resist easy interpretations and at the same time lure the reader into their enigmatic, commonly rather abstract, elusive, and spiritual world. My approach will be determined by deliberate randomness, but each example chosen will allow us to gain deeper insight into his thoughts and to recognize how timeless his poems prove to be and how much they provoke us to search more deeply for meaning, whether religious or philosophical.

(Angelus Silesius)', *Daphnis* (forthcoming).

⁴⁵ Gerhard Wehr (ed.), *Angelus Silesius: Der Mystiker* (Wiesbaden: Marix Verlag, 2011). See also Jeffrey L. Sammons, 'Johann Scheffler (1624-1677)', in James Hardin (ed.), *German Baroque Writers, 1580-1660* (Detroit, Washington, DC, and London: Gale Research, 1996), pp. 279-288. As to the mystical components in his work, the influence by medieval mystics on Silesius, and as to his own influence on later generations, especially the Pietists and then the Romantics, see Franz-Josef Schweitzer, 'Angelus Silesius', in Peter Dinzelbacher (ed.), *Wörterbuch der Mystik* (Stuttgart: Alfred Kröner, 1989), pp. 19-20. See also Wilhelm Kühlmann, 'Scheffler, Johannes', in Gerhard Müller (ed.), *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, vol. 30 (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1999), pp. 83-87. He lists major poets who had responded to Silesius's poetic reflections in their own way: Friedrich Schlegel, Arthur Schopenhauer, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Annette von Droste-Hülshoff, Friedrich Rückert, Gottfried Keller, and others (pp. 85-86).

⁴⁶ Kühlmann, 'Scheffler, Johannes', p. 85.

Repeatedly, scholars have noticed the surprising parallels between Silesius's thoughts and the ideas developed by Martin Heidegger (1889-1976).⁴⁷ For instance, in "Gott läßt sich, wie man will" (I, 21, p. 4), the poet argues that God is not giving anything to anyone; instead He is freely available to everyone. All that matters would be the desire to reach out to God, which could easily be a concept parallel to Martin Luther's concept of *sola fide*, although Silesius was a harsh critic of this reformer. He appeals to his readers to pursue God, since everyone would be able to find Him, as long as there would be just the readiness to turn to Him. Similarly, in "Gelassenheit" (I, 22, p. 4), the poet urges his audience to let go of all artificial efforts to connect with God and to bond with Him. The more one would exercise a relaxed and yet devout attitude, the more God would be ready to welcome the pious person. Nothing can be done in reality to force God to intervene in human affairs, there would be only hope and an open attitude. We can hear clear echoes of Meister Eckhart's (ca. 1260-ca. 1328) theological musings when Silesius underscores in "Gott ergreift man nicht" (I, 25, p. 4) that God is purely a Nothing, that is, an entity beyond all material conditions and beyond time. The more the individual would try to reach out to God and to instrumentalize Him for his or her own needs, the less God is actually present, "je mehr entwird er dir"—a strong parallel with Heideggerian imagery.

Echoes of Meister Eckhart can also be heard in the intriguing epigram "Die Gottheit ist ein Nichts" (I, 111, p. 15) insofar as Silesius here highlights that human terms for the Godhead are not sufficient, since God is beyond all human language. He subsequently formulates: "Wer nichts in allem sieht, Mensch, glaube, dieser sichts" (He who sees nothing in everything, believe me, he sees it truly). Once again, the apophatic nature of the Godhead finds a most intriguing expression here, alerting us to the challenges which the human language faces in trying to come to terms with the *numinosum*.⁴⁸ Addressing epistemological issues, the poet says about

⁴⁷ Michael F. Andrews, 'Religion Without Why: Edith Stein und Martin Heidegger on the Overcoming of Metaphysics, with Particular Reference to Angelus Silesius and Denys the Aeropagite', in Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka (ed.), *Logos of Phenomenology and Phenomenology of the Logos*, vol. 2, *The Human Condition In-The-Unity-Of-Everything-There-Is-Alive: Individuation, Self, Person, Self-Determination, Freedom, Necessity* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006), pp. 399-427.

⁴⁸ Bruce Milem, *The Unspoken Word: Negative Theology in Meister Eckhart's German Sermons* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2002). For Silesius,

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“Die Rose”: “Die hat von Ewigkeit in Gott also geblüht” (I, 108, p. 14; It has flowered the same way in God for eternity), which might have influenced Gertrude Stein to write her verse “The rose is a rose is a rose” contained in her 1913 poem “Sacred Emily,” published in her 1922 book *Geography and Plays*. What we perceive with our eyes, as the first line informs us, appears only as the shadow of the truth, while the idea behind the material flower has been with us forever.

True peace does not rest in external conditions, but originates, as he formulates in “Der innerliche Friede” (II, 239, p. 70), that is, in peace between the human individual and God. Those who entrust themselves to God will enjoy complete and profound peace (II, 240, p. 70). Perhaps in direct response to St. Francis of Assisi (ca. 1181-1226), Silesius emphasizes that those who can sustain to be disdained, abandoned, and to suffer much, without being able to acquire things, to do things, and to be in this world, would ultimately experience full glory (II, 244, p. 70).

Striking a somewhat different tone, Silesius urges the learned theologians to let go all their efforts to understand God and to receive His grace by way of intensive study of the Holy Scriptures. The individual who wants to experience God would only have to enter the shed where Christ was born and to kiss Him: “So wirst du bald der Kraft des werten Kinds genießen” (III, 5, p. 73; you will soon enjoy the dear child’s strength). Moreover, he reminds his readers that the shepherds in the field had been the first to witness Christ. Those who are searching for Him without being entirely devoted to Him would never achieve their goal, as he details in “Die Gottes gewürdigte Einfalt” (III, 6, p. 74).

Trying to understand the miracle of Christ’s birth, he resorts to a mathematical concept: “Als Gott verborgen lag in eines Mägdlein Schoß, / Da war es, da der Punkt den Kreis in sich beschloß” (III, 28, p. 77; When God was resting in a virgin’s womb, that was the time when the period included the circle in itself). Drawing from this paradox, the poet alerts the readers that there is no real understanding of God in human terms, although abstract mathematical notions might assist us in approximating the divine, after all. A direct connection between Silesius and Wilhelm Leibnitz (1676-1714) could also be established, so we are in a good position to extend

see Renate Schaefer, ‘Die Negation als Ausdrucksform mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der Sprache des Angelus Silesius’, Ph.D. diss. Bonn 1958. For the broader context, see Alois M. Haas, *Mystik im Kontext* (Munich: Fink, 2004).

many other intellectual bridges, illuminating the pivotal relevance of this Catholic poet for the future of German literature.⁴⁹

But ultimately we might not be completely capable of comprehending Silesius's mystical messages since they only indicate in some measure what the meaning might be, whereas the inner idea of his thoughts can only be sensed, such as in "Das Wort wird noch geboren" (III, 188, p. 99). Even today, as he notes, the eternal word, i.e., God's wisdom, is still being born in the present time, but only there where "du dich in dir hast selbst verlor" (188; you have lost yourself in yourself).

Returning to the earliest epigrams, we also encounter the stunning statement: "Ich weiß nicht, was ich bin; ich bin nicht, was ich weiß: / Ein Ding und nicht ein Ding; ein Stüpfchen und ein Kreis" (I, 5, p. 1; I do not know what I am; I am not what I know [of myself]: An object and yet not an object; a little piece and a circle). Silesius here expresses the deepest form of humility, but also a philosophical wisdom insofar as the human being cannot really say what s/he is in reality. Again, the poet resorts to a geometric concept reflecting his considerable interest in science. As he indicates subsequently, despite this complete ignorance there is also a profound sense of being part of the Godhead, since the human soul, once it will have been liberated from the body, will leave time behind and achieve a quasi mystical union with the divine: "Ich selbst bin Ewigkeit, wann ich die Zeit verlasse / Und mich in Gott und Gott in mich zusammenfasse" (I, 13; I myself am eternity, one I have left time behind and have found myself in God and God in me).

Finally, drawing from later epigrams, Silesius also emphasizes that there cannot be any virtue without love for God (V, 289, p. 177) and that true love, if felt in the heart, will quench God's wrath and burn away all sins (V, 290, p. 177). Simplicity is to be praised, but it still requires intelligence as granted by God (V, 286, p. 176), while wisdom without love for God would be nothing but foolishness (V, 294, p. 177). Silesius offers profound insights into many aspects relevant to human life, clearly determined by his Catholic faith, his mystical inspiration, but also by an awareness of modern sciences. Little wonder that so many an epigram from the *Cherubinischer Wandersmann* appealed to posterity, as the last example conveys so vividly: "Kein Würmlein ist so tief verborgen in der Erden, /

⁴⁹ August Kahlert, *Angelus Silesius: eine literar-historische Untersuchung: mit zwei urkundlichen Beilagen* (Breslau: A. Gosohorsky's Buchhandlung, 1853), p. 54.

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Gott ordnet's daß ihm da kann seine Speise werden" (IV, 221, p. 139; There is no worm deeply hidden in the earth for whom God would not have arranged to find its nourishment). The poet provides much hope, spirituality, and yet also enigmatic statements about how the individual can find meaning in his/her existence. His simplistic language is deceptive since it contains highly significant insights, perceptions, and epiphanic wisdom. It would be difficult especially today to build a direct bridge from those epigrams to the modern reader, but Silesius easily exerts a tremendous appeal, particularly because of his use of an apophatic language, his insights into mystically perceived truths, and profound philosophical messages.

Conrad Ferdinand Meyer

There would be countless other literary examples with which we could confirm globally the significance and relevance of the Humanities, even though this might amount to preaching to the choir (At the same time, this is not preaching, but a resolute appeal to those who might not understand the full meaning of our discipline). Dealing with the fundamental issues of all human existence, crucial literary texts from all periods and cultures facilitate a discourse which addresses the questions of how to establish meaning and how to lead a fulfilling and satisfactory life. Many times the examples provided present a negative perspective in order to teach a critical lesson, and the protagonists vicariously live through many conflicts which are universal, alas, and yet can be addressed productively. In order to conclude, here now really moving beyond the Middle Ages but still pursuing the same fundamental concern with the Humanities, I want to examine, even if only in the briefest terms possible, the famous ballad "Die Füße im Feuer" (1882) by Conrad Ferdinand Meyer, originally published in 1860 in a volume with the innocuous title *Zwanzig Balladen von einem Schweizer*.⁵⁰ Much anthologized, this ballad belongs to the canon of nineteenth-century literature and has thus been studied already from many

⁵⁰ This can now be accessed through the *Project Gutenberg* website. See also Conrad Ferdinand Meyer, *Sämtliche Werke: Historisch-kritische Ausgabe*, eds Hans Zeller and Alfred Zäch (Bern: Benteli-Verlag, 1963), vol. 1, pp. 382-384. Cf. Marianne Burkhard, *Conrad Ferdinand Meyer* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978), p. 34. See also Monika Ritzer (ed.), *Conrad Ferdinand Meyer: Die Wirklichkeit der Zeit und die Wahrheit der Kunst* (Tübingen and Basel: A. Francke Verlag, 2001).

perspectives. Marcel Reich-Ranicki included this poem in his noteworthy collection *Marcel Reich-Ranickis Kanon* (2005, vol. 4), underscoring its importance for the entire history of German literature.⁵¹

Instead of discussing the historical background and the thematic development, the use of motifs, and the poetic features of this famous ballad, I only intend to consider the aspect of revenge, or rather its repression through religious devotion, which connects this ballad curiously but significantly with the medieval heroic epics, especially the *Nibelungenlied* and *Diu Klage*. Blood feuds and revenge have always entailed a deadly spiral of violence with no end in sight, as the medieval poets warned their audience already. However, those individuals who are in a convenient situation to avenge a tremendous hurt, an injury, or a loss can hardly resist the temptation to exact that revenge.⁵² Yet, what would then prevent the other side to carry out its own revenge, and so forth? We face here a universal problem, which continues to be of virulent power also in our present world if we only think of the Cold War and its principle of mutual deterrence, the realistic threat of retaliation to forestall enemy attack.

Meyer addressed this issue most poignantly in his ballad but situates it in the time of the Huguenot Wars in seventeenth-century France when Louis XIV launched a severe wave of persecutions against the Huguenots especially since 1679.⁵³ The king's messenger happens to request a night's rest in the very castle where had previously tortured the knight's wife to death by putting her feet into the fire in order to learn about the nobleman's hideout.⁵⁴ Years have passed since then. The

⁵¹ 'Der Kanon', *Wikipedia*, at https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Der_Kanon. Accessed 22 December 2017.

⁵² Thomas Möbius, *Studien zum Rachegedanken in der deutschen Literatur des Mittelalters* (Frankfurt am Main, Berlin, et al.: Peter Lang, 1993); Susanna A. Throop and Paul R. Hyams (eds), *Vengeance in the Middle Ages: Emotion, Religion and Feud* (Farnham, Surrey, and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010). For an anthology of relevant texts, see Daniel Lord Smail and Kelly Gibson (eds), *Vengeance in Medieval Europe: A Reader* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009).

⁵³ See, for instance, André Ducasse, *La guerre des Camisards La résistance huguenote sous Louis XIV* (Paris: Hachette, 1978); Barbara Dölemeyer, *Die Hugenotten* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2006).

⁵⁴ It might be possible that Meyer's ballad, which enjoyed great popularity, and this probably also among the German immigrants to the United States, became the source for the American saying 'to hold the feet to the fire', in the meaning of 'forcing someone to tell the

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messenger realizes, however, his mistake, and also observes that the horrified children, who must have witnessed the murder, whisper into their father's ears, which assures him that the widower would take his revenge with him during the night. The ballad provides a most vivid background with a reference to a mighty storm raging outside. Early at dawn, the knight suddenly stands at the side of the messenger's bed, having entered through a secret door, and reminds him that it is time to get up and continue with his journey. Curiously, however, his dark-brown hair has turned grey overnight, which finds its explanation at the end. While the two men ride through the forest, which is strewn with branches broken off the trees everywhere, the messenger squints at him and comments that the knight was clever enough to understand that the power of the king is invested in him. He reveals thereby his assumption that the knight must have been too fearful to avenge his murdered wife.

While the messenger refers to his king as "dem größten König eigen" (67; a servant to the greatest king), the nobleman picks up that phrase but changes it to explain his religious position: "du sagst's! Dem größten König eigen! ..." (69; "you are right in what you say; a servant to the greatest king"). But this is not good enough. He next admits that he knew the messenger's true identity, that he was the one who had murdered his wife, and that he himself had wanted to avenge this evil deed. However, the nobleman is also a devout and pious man, and he lives by the Bible, hence he had to defer to God, "... Mein ist die Rache, redet Gott" (71; "the revenge is mine, so says God"). Because of the long struggle in his heart and soul all night long, his hair turned white, since he had to repress his desire for revenge; he had to live by his religious ideals, and could not allow his human instincts to rule. The count submitted under the rule as formulated in Deuteronomy 32:35, and thus demonstrated the civilizing effect of the biblical teaching. As much as he had longed for getting even with the murderer, who was sleeping under his own roof, he listened more

truth.' However, Wolfgang Mieder, University of Vermont, informs me via email that similar statements connected with medieval inquisitorial practices were documented already for ca. 1500. See Bartlett Jere Whiting, *Proverbs, Sentences, and Proverbial Phrases from English Writings Mainly Before 1500* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), 202 (no. F476).

to his soul than to his heart, and thus could break the vicious cycle of violence, at least for himself.⁵⁵

There are, of course, no direct connections between the *Nibelungenlied* and Meyer's ballad, except that the thematic perspective proves to be intriguingly parallel. What happens, as the poets of both works inquire, when revenge dominates human life? Both Kriemhild and the nobleman, at first sight, seem to be fully justified to pursue revenge at all costs. In the epic poem, the consequences are catastrophic, and not even Kriemhild can ultimately profit from killing Hagen with her own hand. The nobleman would have committed murder against the messenger, even though he would have been emotionally justified in doing so. We do not know what the extended consequences would have been for him and his family, such as if the king would then have learned about the evil deed against his own servant. The issue which Meyer raises, however, does not pertain to legal issues, but to the protagonist's ethical and especially religious stance. He does not forgive the messenger, and he does not change his attitude toward the king's strategy to repress, if not massacre all Huguenots. Moreover, his profound grief over the loss of his wife is not altered either. Most importantly, though, he has succeeded in overcoming his human weakness, his desire to avenge his wife's terrible torture and death since he submitted himself, after a long spiritual struggle, under God. This was never possible for Kriemhild, so virtually everyone had to die in the *Nibelungenlied*, including herself.

Without going into further detail, we can conclude here as well that Meyer offered, with his ballad, a profound literary platform to reflect on the essential nature of human life. Virtues and vices are pitted against each other, as are human instincts and desires that ignore God's commands. The nobleman serves as an ideal example of how hard and difficult it can be for people, in general, to maintain a virtuous, devout, and pious life in a world determined by violence, hatred, and war. Particularly, because Meyer

⁵⁵ Berbeli Wanning, 'Der Gewalt begegnen: Aktualität und Geschichtlichkeit in Conrad Ferdinand Meyers Ballade "Die Füße im Feuer"', in Winfried Woesler (ed.), *Ballade und Historismus: Die Geschichtsballade des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 2000), pp. 280-298; Gaby Pailer, 'Geschichte, Gedächtnis und Martyrium in Conrad Ferdinand Meyers "Die Füße im Feuer"', in Andreas Böhn (ed.), *Lyrik im historischen Kontext: Festschrift für Reiner Wild* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2009), pp. 239-252; Peter Bekes, "'Die Füße im Feuer' von Conrad Ferdinand Meyer", *Deutschunterricht*, vol. 68, no. 3 (2015), pp. 26-31.

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situated his ballad in the seventeenth century and thus provided a historical lens, his narrative poem provides meaning in the deepest sense of the word because it mirrors a universal conflict and shows ways how to overcome the cycle of violence, how to strive toward virtue, and hence how to establish and realize ethical ideals in a chaotic world.

It also deserves mention that the nobleman had let in the king's messenger without any hesitation and did not need the reference to his royal insignia that would guarantee the stranger entrance in that stormy night. While the messenger assumed that he would need to force the host to open the door by means of his official position, the nobleman simply welcomed him because he needed shelter: ““Es stürmt. Mein Gast bist du. Dein Kleid, was kümmert's mich?” (9; “It is stormy. You are my guest. Your uniform, what would that matter to me?”). Indirectly we are told that the Huguenots pursued humanistic values and were tolerant of all people, while the Catholics, under the French king Louis XIV, tried to impose absolute rule and control.

Conclusion

Nothing would require the study of any of the literary examples discussed above all by themselves since they could be easily replaced by other examples in order to reach similar insights. However, my selection intended to underscore how much the literary discourse throughout time continually aimed for the one central goal of establishing meaning, to convey messages about fundamentally ethical, moral, religious, and philosophical values, and to reflect on the basic conditions of all people. Silesius's epigrams stand out somewhat because here the poet employs his verses in order to gain deep insights into the spiritual dimension of human life. We could easily identify other literary examples from the twentieth and twenty-first century, but the outcome of our investigation would not change much. There is, after all, a logical sequence that can be outlined as such: To live means to search for meaning and happiness, to avoid conflicts and vices, and to contribute to the growth of our society. Literary texts from throughout time have addressed those central concerns and mirrored them in a myriad of approaches. In this way, poets continuously emerge, if they produce significant texts that go beyond simple entertainment, as critically important spokespersons for the universal human effort to establish meaning. In short, then, the Humanities serve as a field in which

we examine, analyze, define, question, construct, and especially recognize meaning in human life.

The world of German literature from the Middle Ages until today proves to be a treasure house filled with significant texts, both within the canon and at the margin, old and new. Little wonder that the famous poet and critic Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986) created a paean on German literature, which, despite its post-Romantic notion, deserves to be quoted in a brief excerpt because he pays such an astounding tribute to the value of European, specifically German literary works, allowing us to conclude these ruminations on a highly positive note coming from Argentina, of all places:

Du, Sprache Deutschlands, bist dein größtes Werk:
die verflochtenen Liebschaften zusammen-
gesetzter Wörter, offene Vokale
und Laute, die noch den beflissenen
Hexameter des Griechen möglich machen,
und dein Raunen von Wäldern und von Nächten.⁵⁶

[You, the language of Germany, are your greatest achievement:
the interwoven love affair of conflated
words and open vowels
and sounds which make even the most dedicated
hexameter in Greek possible in German,
and yet also the humming of the forests and the nights.]

While this amounts to a love declaration concerning the German language, it also implies a high recognition of the values and ideals as expressed in the various literary texts. To return to the infamous letter by Prof. Petsko once more, we can now draw on the various examples discussed above in order to study most meaningfully timeless issues in human life such as revenge and hatred, betrayal and murder, war and peacemaking, the mystical experience of God, the generational conflicts, and religious and ethical values and ideals.

Granted, many of those aspects have been addressed many times before as well, but we need to pay much more attention to them today, viewing them through a literary-historical lens, because the Humanities are at risk and must stand up in their self-defense. In fact, considering the

⁵⁶ Jorge Luis Borges, 'An die deutsche Sprache' / 'Al idioma alemán', in *Schatten und Tiger: Gedichte 1966-1972*, translated by Gisbert Haefs (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuchverlag, 1994).

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wealth of poetic creations in German literature, for example, we have many highly valuable tools available strongly to argue in public about the great importance of the Humanities for society at large. The lessons from the past stand ready to come to our rescue and to help us secure the passage to the future. Education is a fundamental human right, and this includes education both in technical and in philosophical terms which will be of tremendous value both for the individual and for society at large.

We must certainly not ignore the huge financial factor since good education costs a lot of money, but, as our discussion of just a few texts from the history of German literature has demonstrated, the messages about the fundamental values of human existence are just waiting for us to rediscover them over and over again. Poetry is not simply a mode of literary entertainment, though this should never be excluded either; instead, it is the central key to unlocking the secrets of the human heart and soul. Many of those secrets, however, require the best possible keys to achieve the desired effect.