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Literature as a Pathway Toward Our Spirituality: Hartmann von Aue, Marie de France, and Heinrich Kaufringer

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines several short verse narratives from the late twelfth and early fifteenth centuries in which the authors offered profound insights into the human quest for spirituality, identity, and meaning, and which continue to talk to us until today because they shed so much light on this fundamental quest in human life in philosophical, religious, ethical, and moral terms. They encourage us to turn our attention to pre-modern literature once again because the various poets offered timeless messages about human identity, culture, and values, maybe in a literary fashion that might allow us to gain deeper insights than countless contemporary narratives that are often extremely self-centered and superficial. I accept the risk of preaching to the converted because in reality at many universities or advanced schools all over the globe, the Middle Ages often do not even exist any longer as a topic of research and education because they seem to be irrelevant for the modern explorations of human life. However, almost four decades of teaching literature courses focusing on the pre-modern world have demonstrated to me that a sensible inclusion of medieval literature, whether in translation or in its original language, promises a considerable advancement in the universal quest for meaning in human existence because individual authors provided profound insights into the global question of what constitutes happiness and meaning.

Keywords: Relevance of Medieval Literature Today; Medieval Spirituality; Hartmann von Aue; Marie de France; Heinrich Kaufringer; Friendship; Love; God

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1. Introduction

In the anonymous verse narrative, *Del Tumbeor Nostre Dame* (French, ca. 1230), a deeply religious tale of a miracle that occurred to a street acrobat turned Cistercian monk, a secret message can be detected that proves to be highly attractive and meaningful also for modern readers. While the protagonist cannot perform any of the liturgical tasks like all the other monks, he finds a way to worship the Virgin Mary all on his own. Deeply frustrated with his failure to comply with the official expectations of a monk, he retires to the crypt and performs his best acrobatic acts (tumbles) in her honor. As the abbot and another monk then discover, the Mother of God and a throng of angels finally appear and refresh the exhausted tumbler who has collapsed to the ground after a full hour of religious and physical exercise. This miracle confirms that the tumbler was right and in fact understood much better than the entire monastic community what true devotion would mean, resorting to one's own self and pursuing one's idealistic goals to the fullest. The reward for him is obvious, and everyone eventually worships him as a saint because his profound dedication to the Virgin Mary was honest, passionate, authentic, and unswerving. Of course, the poet did not directly imply criticism of the other monks, but he certainly emphasized that purely formalistic performances would not live up to the ideals translated into actual practice as demonstrated by the tumbler. This article will pursue this idea in a number of selected medieval and secular verse narratives and illustrate how literature from that time period contains great relevance and importance also for us today in our own quest for spirituality within modern life.

2. Theoretical and Methodological Concepts

In the Humanities, we constantly face the same problem of explaining why we would engage with pre-modern texts or any literature not written during our day and age. Popular and academic opinion often holds that there are so many problems within our society in the twenty-first century that need close analysis, which then should be carried out by means of reflections on contemporary issues and hence also narratives. This would imply that we would study only those works that have been published recently as if relevant comments for us could be found only in novels and other texts from the last few decades. Such a myopic perspective, however, blinds us to the universal issues concerning all peoples throughout time. The Greek and Roman classics, for instance, still enjoy high respect today more than two thousand years later, but even they are considered to be simply outliers and belong only to the canon any educated person should know about to some extent. As soon as we move to the Middle Ages and the early modern age, the same category, canonicity, no longer seems to hold sway, and we might then easily face global conflicts as to what we ought to study and write about in the Humanities. Neither a somehow construed canon reflecting an advanced level of education nor intrinsic or spiritual values seem to support the claim that those texts might have any relevance for us today, although all intellectual activities have been the result of an intensive process of interaction with sources, so medieval philosophy and literature, for instance, continue to have a direct impact on us, if we think, for instance, of the powerful concept of spirituality discussed in a continuous line of reception from Meister Eckhart, Jacob Böhme, Valentin Weigel, Angelus Silesius, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Friedrich Nietzsche, and then Martin Heidegger and other modern philosophers.

The real problem with the proposition to limit ourselves to modern literature for modern people rests in the misunderstanding of what literature constitutes in the first place. When a literary text offers valuable messages about human life in a large variety of situations, public and private, then it does not matter when it was composed, by whom, and for whom. The external circumstances, i.e., real life in its material dimensions, change at any rate all the time, and so does the physical framework of human existence. The central issues, however, whether religious or philosophical, individual or collective, fundamentally stay the same, whether they pertain to the conflict between an individual and a dictator, to the tensions between the genders, the search for love, the quest for spirituality, or the inquiry into the nature of death. All human beings search for happiness, whatever that might entail or how it can be achieved, so, studying pre-modern approaches to this task promises to be highly valuable also today. In short, there have always been essential issues at stake that we cannot really answer but are confronted with on a regular basis. Even if we fail to break through the epistemo-

logical barrier, our effort to make sense out of our existence, as reflected through the vast world of literature, past and present, is ongoing and relies on the profound storehouse of human experience.

That is the reason why we continue to enjoy, to reiterate this simple example, classical Greek tragedies, Latin love poetry from the Roman period (Ovid), or heroic epics, such as Homer's *Iliad* and *Ulysses*, or Virgil's *Aeneas*. By the same token, the texts making up the Old and New Testaments, the Torah, or the Qur'an continue to speak to us profoundly, providing us with guidance and values in religious, ethical, and moral terms. When we widen our perspectives, we also realize the true extent to which classical Chinese, Japanese, Indian, or Arabic texts matter until today because we find contained in them notions addressing issues in all human life, and this is conveyed throughout the ages. For that reason, scholarship has turned to global literature, which represents a much wider scope, although the fundamental concerns regarding the value of older texts continue to remain the same (see, for instance, the contributions to the six volumes edited by Seigneurie [1]).

This then leads us to the phenomenon that while this universal concept is generally accepted in a superficial manner, particularly medieval literature often suffers from disregard and neglect because it is viewed today often through a mythical lens as something outlandish and hence dismissible. Of course, the various editors of anthologies dedicated to global literature certainly pay lip service to pre-modern texts, but those do not seem to enjoy the same respect as those that bookend them, as if the arc between late antiquity and the period of classicism around 1800 casts too large a shadow. Of course, medievalists have energetically revolted against such negative opinions or broadly displayed ignorance, but in many cases, the question as to why we should concern ourselves with medieval literature today remains rather elusive. Not surprisingly, Renaissance and Baroque literatures, then again, enjoy greater respect, probably because they were deeply steeped in the classical tradition that the modern world wants to consider as its fundamental cradle.

The methodological approach pursued here is not predicated on reception theory, comparative literary analysis, intertextuality, or philosophical hermeneutics. Instead, I rely more on historical anthropology and the history of mentality (cf. the contributions to Ackermann and Egerding [2]), both concepts interlocking with each other, emphasizing the human dimension in our historical investigations and acknowledging the value of past experiences as guidelines for present reflections (Burke [3]; Schmitt [4]). Undoubtedly, we do not investigate past cultural manifestations and expressions simply for their own sake, which would be a positivistic cul-de-sac. Instead, even the most esoteric analyses must be embedded in a social-cultural framework open to modern readers; otherwise, we might fall into the trap of 'l'art pour l'art.' Jones, Kostick, and Oschema [5] argue that there are numerous cases "that demonstrate the way in which Medieval Studies can contribute solutions to urgent challenges" in the modern age.

This paper attempts to take the next step, even at the risk of walking the fine line between scholarly objectivity and individual, subjective spirituality, illustrating the deep impact a close reading of specific literary works can have on our modern quest for meaning. Pierre Monnet simply stated that the study of the Middle Ages provides "food for thought" and "strengthens our sense of history, our sense of democracy, our understanding of society, which is inevitably multiple and complex in nature" (Monnet [6], p. 287). As I will argue, however, we need to go further in our historiographical and philosophical reflections and recognize the importance of certain ideas and realizations from the Middle Ages also for us.

3. Historical Perspectives

There are many good reasons to pay much attention to medieval European literature, and this in the twenty-first century. It is undoubtedly the backbone of most Western fictional writing and has deeply impacted modern thinking, religion, aesthetics, ethics, and morality. The influence might have been interrupted between the late sixteenth and the late eighteenth centuries, when the book market conditions changed fundamentally, but once some Enlightenment scholars and then the Romantic poets and philologists discovered the Middle Ages again, that past period has played ever since a huge role in virtually all fields of the Humanities, in contemporary popular culture, in the world of movies, and now of the internet, the video game, and other popular forms of entertainment. In many ways, this process took place through the re-enactment of medieval art, architecture (Neo-Gothic, Neo-

Romanesque), the responses to medieval literature in theater and opera productions, and the creation of a vast body of modern movies with medieval themes (Harty[7]; D'Arcens, ed.[8]).

On the one hand, we observe the still quite strong academic, that is, scholarly interaction with pre-modern literature and the arts at least at some elite institutions; on the other, we can confirm the soft adaptation of medieval themes, tropes, topoi, motifs, and concepts in modern novels and plays, whether popular and trivial or sophisticated and learned—a ludic reception process deeply affecting the general readership and audience. Both academic conferences and book publishers focused on the Middle Ages can easily confirm the huge impact medieval culture continues to have on the present (Aldama[9]). For many, of course, that past age serves as a narrative and imaginary quarry for their own ideological purposes, whereas others embrace the medieval world for pedagogical intentions but then also miss the point of what pre-modern poets tried to express (see, e.g., Schuppener[10]; cf. also the contributions to Czarnowus and Wilson, eds.[11]).

There would be a third potential avenue to approach that age and its cultural manifestations to confirm their relevance throughout time, and so for us as well (cf. Hoenen and Engel, eds.[12]; Tracy[13]). In this paper, I want to explore a philosophical and ethical dimension commonly hidden in medieval literature, which manifests itself, upon closer analysis, as a medium for spiritual self-investigations and the determination of one's own identity and cultural framework. We can approach this task both academically and subjectively, embracing the quest for human ideals and values within a religious context as an essential component of medieval culture. Subjectively, it is rather appropriate to accept that the medieval search for spirituality can provide us today with narrative and philosophical models to follow the same path. The highly popular pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, a mass phenomenon of only the recent past, serves as an excellent example of the meaningful transition from medieval ideas, customs, or strategies to overcome one's personal imprisonment in a material existence to modern approaches regarding one's own self.

Easy and convincing examples in medieval literature would be Wolfram von Eschenbach's Grail romance *Parzival* (ca. 1205), the masterpiece of the human pilgrimage through Inferno, Purgatorio, and Paradiso by Dante Alighieri, that is, his *Divina Commedia* (completed ca. 1320), Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* (ca. 1350) as a perfect example of storytelling as a mirror of social, ethical, moral, and religious issues at large, or Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (ca. 1400) with its magisterial reflections of human life through the many representatives of late medieval society telling their stories to each other while on their quest for salvation (cf. now the contributions to Blurton and Reynolds, eds.[14]; however, the focus is highly narrow and leaves out most Continental works; see also the contributions to Toepfer, ed.[15]; Toepfer and Lordick, eds.[16]). Obviously, research over the last two hundred years and more has intensively engaged with these works, and this for very good reasons since we face here truly canonical works of timeless value (see the contributions to Barti and Famula, eds.[17]). They have been recognized as canonical because the messages contained in them have met with universal interest, enthusiasm, and admiration, leading to an infinite stream of adaptations, translations, and transformations. Unfortunately, the linguistic barriers and the general notion that anything from prior to, say, 1800, would be irrelevant for us today make it harder for the current student generation to engage with those fictional works, although, as I like to claim, their future has already been mirrored in countless texts from the past. And many medievalists have made excellent efforts to translate those poems and other narratives into modern languages because the ideas hidden in them prove to be valuable for all people throughout time (see, for instance, Ulrich Bonerius's *Der Edelstein*, ca. 1350; trans. Classen[18]; or see Gottfried von Strassburg's *Tristan and Isolde*[19]).

But what makes those texts, and many others, so relevant even for us today? Why do we count them as part of our literary canon, that is, as a crucial body of literary works that contribute to the establishment of our culture, identity, and personality, and hence continue to have value for us? What happens with us when we study those works of literature in a modern context? Why could we not be content with those narratives or poems created more recently, say, from the last hundred years at most? However, such questions, which are seriously raised at many universities worldwide, would be tantamount to wondering why we still need to read the Bible, or the ancient Sanskrit texts. Why would we bother with Homer's epics, or why would we want to follow Aeneas from

burning Troy far to the West (Carthage) and then Italy, where he founds future Rome? Would Shakespeare, Goethe, Emily Dickinson, or Ralph Waldo Emerson still matter today?

As an easy and initial answer, in a few words, here we encounter in innumerable manifestations the archetypal quest, the voyage, the challenge of nature, the power of magical beings, the hero's catabasis, the ideal of love and marriage, and examples of heroism and triumph against all odds, for instance (Pereboom [20]; McGrath [21]). Major topics addressed already in classical literature continued to appeal to medieval poets, and their ideas were carried on by early modern and modern writers until today, as Ernst Robert Curtius has taught us already a long time ago (Curtius [22]). However, globally speaking, the Middle Ages are much closer to us today, as the countless examples of modern receptions confirm (Grosse and Rautenberg [23]).

4. Spiritual Perspectives

The more specific intention of this paper consists of exploring several short verse narratives from the high and late Middle Ages in which we discover, at closer analysis, most intriguing strategies to explore the quest for spirituality within a secular context, and this as a literary projection of how the individual can discover his or her self and thus recover physical health. The modern reader would, of course, have to learn quickly how to translate the text both in linguistic and cultural-historical terms. However, that is the case with virtually all older literature, whether from the thirteenth or the nineteenth century. After all, a fictional narrative constitutes a sort of human laboratory in which fundamental concerns in life can be addressed, examined, and experimented with so that the individual can gain new insights into one's own problems, conflicts, issues, and tensions.

Turning to any literary work makes it possible to reflect on extreme situations in human life and to learn in that process how to handle those, at least in theoretical terms. If we can accept that position, then any fictional narrative from any period would satisfy that need, serving as an epistemological tool to analyze and comprehend the essentials of human existence (Classen [24]). Countless courtly love poems, Arthurian romances, erotic verse narratives, heroic epic poems, and the vast body of allegorical and religious literature such as the anonymous *Pearl* (late fourteenth century) or Johann von Tepl's *Ackermann* from ca. 1400 confirm that humans in the past already struggled with the basic questions of life, pertaining to honor, friendship, trust, heroism, erotic attractions, the quest for God or anything transcendental, and for answers regarding the meaning of death. They might not have gotten closer to the desired answers, but they provided us today with narrative models to explore those issues. Their answers might not satisfy us today, but we can be certain that countless medieval poets struggled deeply with their issues and tried their best to come to terms with them, a struggle which certainly resonates with us today as well, as is beautifully illustrated by the Middle English didactic and religious poem *Piers Plowman* by William Langland (ca. 1380). As Michael Calabrese firmly states: "The poem asks eternal questions that pertain not only to Christians but to all communities . . . for *Piers* depicts not only the quest for salvation but also the hunger for justice here and now on earth, in society, clergy, and government" (Calabrese, trans. [25], xvii). The purpose of this paper cannot and should not be to argue in any way that pre-modern literature carries more value than modern literature. Instead, the intention is to reestablish a reasonable balance between both fictional worlds and to affirm the significance and relevance of older texts for us today as well.

5. The Quest for the Lost Soul

Many times, medieval poetry experiments with the tension between the material and the spiritual, trying to build meaningful connections so that the individual can learn how to integrate the transcendental into his/her own life. Not surprisingly for that age, religious concepts dominated, but at a closer interpretation, we can often recognize that the intention was also directed at a rather rational explanation of something spiritual. Since we today live in a rather secularized world—at least in the West—it makes good sense to reflect on alternative approaches and to reflect on the question of why the pre-modern world was so much focused on the spiritual and what that might have meant for the poets and their audiences. After all, we could identify true literature as a fundamental teaching tool for the individual, recognizing the meaning of ethics, morality, values, and ideals, and hence the critical value of the social context, the community (Proksch [26]).

This phenomenon can be conveniently summarized

with a list of seven or eight C-words: communication, community, commitment, compromise, coordination and cooperation, compassion, care, and courage (Classen [27]). Without the ability to live within a community, lacking a sense of cooperation, being dominated by the focus on the self without regard for all the others, the individual has always faced serious troubles and extensive conflicts. But in order to give back to the community in the endeavor to create constructive partnerships, one has to learn from the own mistakes and those from others to adjust the selfish orientation and to gain a more inclusive attitude, which ultimately leads the individual toward a more spiritual perception. To move from here, which almost sounds like a sermon, to a more academic reflection, we could draw from a wide range of biblical, Qur'anic, or Hebrew texts, or examine what many of the medieval didactic writers had to say about the same issue. Instead, however, the focus will rest on literary works where the essential question rests on this question regarding the balance between the material and the spiritual dimension.

6. Hartmann von Aue's *Der arme Heinrich*

As we can easily recognize in the case of Hartmann von Aue's *Der arme Heinrich* (ca. 1200), without the capacity to look into oneself and to gain a clear understanding of one's interiority, perhaps simply described as the 'soul,' the body is at risk of losing itself. Even though this introductory statement might sound either deeply theological hard to digest for us today, or very psychological, which would be almost anachronistic for a literary work from the Middle Ages, it appears to be the critical approach to a full understanding of this text and hence of the universal message contained in it (for the critical edition, see Hartmann von Aue [28]; for a solid English translation, see Tobin, Vivian, and Lawson [29]). As our discussion will demonstrate, however, the protagonist, the poor Heinrich (Henry), regains his corporal health only once he has had the chance of looking deeply into his own soul and accepting it as it is, pure, innocent, but ready to die for whatever reason.

Amazingly, in that process of looking, the protagonist suddenly realizes what is really at stake, notices that he is about to have the most beautiful creature being killed just for his selfish needs, so he finally accepts his own mortality and can thus regain his physical health. Body and mind, soul and the material being must be in harmony with each other, otherwise life might not be possible. In many ways, if we did not know for sure that this poem had been composed in the late twelfth century, we might mistake it as a modern psychological drama (for relevant research on Hartmann, see McFarland and Ranawake, eds. [30]; cf. also Cormeau and Störmer [31]). Hartmann was obviously deeply invested in that issue, as his first major work, the *Klagebüchlein* (ca. 1170; the Little Book of Lament), had already indicated where body and soul debate with each other and realize at the end that they intimately belong to each other (Classen [32]).

In essence, the seemingly idealized protagonist, the prince Henry of Swabia, already in his youth, contracts leprosy and soon desponds because the doctor in Montpellier tells him that he is dealing with a mortal sickness. Worse even, the doctor in Salerno holds the same opinion, but he dangles in front of him a curious solution for him, which is out of this world and, as Henry himself quickly realizes, impossible to achieve. A young nubile woman must be willing to die for him, donating her blood or heart to him. In other words, only if she were to be ready to grant him her own life for his own, would he have a chance of survival. Already in the Middle Ages, this would have constituted breaking the Hippocratic oath for the medical doctor, but eventually, he is ready to carry out the surgery to cut out the heart of such a young woman and thus to heal the prince. Nevertheless, even the Catholic Church would have imposed a ban on such a form of suicide (Murray [33]), and Henry, fully cognizant of this ethical and moral conflict, thus withdraws from life, hands out all his properties to whoever might want or need it, and takes on a residence with one of his farmers whom he had always treated well as his lord.

During his time there, waiting for his death to occur, he develops a close, almost erotic relationship with the farmer's young daughter, whom he showers with small gifts fitting for a beloved woman and whom he calls his fiancée. All this, so it seems, only in a playful manner, but the relationship between both persons grows in the course of time, though we are not told of any specific events or details of their emotional bonding. Scholars and other readers have always noted with deep concern that she is only eight years old at the beginning, and maybe thirteen at the end, but we would misread the entire narrative setup if we viewed all this as

a realistic framework. As I suggest here, we need to read her as a metaphor or rather a symbol of what Henry is really suffering from (Duckworth [34], pp. 62–64, 119).

At one point, she learns of the only solution for her lord to heal, and she quickly decides to sacrifice herself for this end. Her arguments and extraordinary rhetorical skills, which stun both her parents and also Henry, seem to be out of this world, being highly sophisticated in their rational, economic, social, and religious orientation. Basically, she wants to avoid life as a woman, as a peasant's wife, and as a mother, meaning that she wants to preserve her virginity and enter a spiritual marriage with Christ (see the contributions to Bendheim and Jennifer Pavlik, eds. [35]). Of course, after having spent such a long time in closest contact with Henry, who has treated her in a rather endearing fashion, there is little in the way to prevent us from assuming that she harbors a passionate love for him.

Granted, she never addresses this very point in explicit terms, but her burning desire to die for him and her deep anger when she is denied this opportunity at the end speak a clear language, at least in psychological terms. The outcome of the entire story also underscores it because after having returned home, once Henry has suddenly recovered his health, and this completely without her blood and hence her death, he decides to marry her, which all his friends fully approve of, although such an arrangement between a high-ranking prince and a peasant's woman was basically unheard of in the entire Middle Ages and, really, until today. We face here, in other words, an erotic utopia of an extraordinary kind that requires further investigations from us to make sense out of this story. Moreover, Hartmann's verse novella has greatly appealed to modern audiences, the reasons for which still remain somewhat elusive (Classen [36]).

The key moment leading to Henry's transformation of his heart takes place when he has the opportunity to gaze through a hole in the wall separating him from the girl in the operation room. She is lying on the table, made ready for the deadly surgery. The doctor has sharpened his knife to make her death less painful, but the noise has raised Henry's curiosity, or anxiety. When he espies her on the table, naked and absolutely beautiful in her pure youthfulness, he suddenly realizes, looking at himself on the outside, how ugly he himself is both in body and mind, greedy to the point of accepting the death of this young innocent woman for his own survival and recovery.

We cannot tell for sure whether he feels so much erotic attraction to her, or so much admiration of her youthful beauty and her innocence, that he no longer wants to take her life for his own. As the narrator explicitly mentions, his heart, and hence his mind, changes, he accepts his own mortality, and submits under God, and the latter, called "speculator cordis" (gazer of the heart), acknowledges this transformation and thus lets him regain his health. Although the peasant's daughter, who is never named as such, expresses greatest anger and bitterly laments the denial of her greatest wish to die and thus to join with Christ already during her youth while still being innocent and not affected by the sinfulness of the material world, Henry disregards all this and takes her back home where he then marries her as the ideal wife for himself because she had really helped him to recover from virtual death.

The crucial moment bringing about this internal transformation is specifically associated with his looking through the hole, or crack in the wall. While he is situated on the outside, she is bound on the operation table, hence inside. Henry looks first inside and perceives absolute beauty and innocence on the inside, then he looks outside, and recognizes his ugliness as a person in body and mind, cruelly determined to use her life for his physical recovery. But, as soon as he has handed himself over to God's grace, his healing sets in. Both the protagonist and the divine power meet in this exchange of gazes, which confirms the epistemological insight that understanding in metaphysical terms depends primarily on the ability to see beyond the material limitations. On the one hand, we clearly recognize the theological mindset behind this scene, and this in a very medieval context; on the other, we observe a philosophical turn of events because the protagonist begins to gaze into the dark, into the interior, or toward the illuminated space, where he discovers what his own self is really missing, this beauty, innocence, and willingness to die. We could go so far as to claim that she is the sacrifice on the altar, similar to Isaac whom Abraham was asked to kill in the name of God (Genesis 22), and she is spared her death as well because Henry, parallel to Abraham, had only been tested, and once he has proven his true devotion to God, his health is restored and so his life (for a parallel analysis but pertaining to Hartmann's *Gregorius*, see Duckworth [37]; and as to *Der arme Heinrich*, Duckworth [34]).

Once he has embraced this young woman as his savior, his own life begins to return. So, in modern terms, having realized that his life's harmony had been amiss, that he had been focused only on external matters, the healing process sets in. Looking through the hole thus proves to be a metaphor of the epistemological transformation resulting in a dialectic symbiosis of life and death, which are intimately interlocked with each other. Only this way, in theological and psychological terms, as the narrative suggests, can we hope to grasp why the author projected the female partner as such a young girl, certainly still in pre-puberty and yet, at least intellectually, or spiritually, far superior to her parents, Henry, and also the surgeon. Thus, the story makes full sense only once we have acknowledged that she represents an idea and is a symbol of Henry's inner self that he is actually missing or that is revolting against him, almost leading to his death.

From this perspective, we suddenly realize the true extent to which we are invited to recognize the meaningfulness of this and many other verse narratives through which the various poets experimented with the essence of human life as consisting both of the physical and the spiritual dimension. The protagonist learns his ultimate lesson only once he is given an opportunity to gaze deeply into his own self, where he finally re-discovers his soul, or his spirituality, and acknowledges his mortality, submitting under God's will. As much as the poet had initially characterized Henry in glowing colors, he really lacked badly in humility and devotion, which found its expression in his contracting leprosy. Basically, as we could say, this high-ranking man is blind to himself and ignorant of the demands of life in spiritual terms. Only once he has learned to gaze into himself and recognize the vulnerability of his soul (the girl), does he regain his health (his body) (for a good overview of older research, see Duckworth [34], pp. 101–105).

7. Marie de France: "Eliduc"

Hartmann's contemporary in England, Marie de France, is famous for her *lais*—erotic verse narratives in which the central question constantly aims at the pursuit of individual happiness—her fables, and a religious text pertaining to the alleged purgatory. Whether she also composed a hagiographical text remains debatable (for a broad introduction, see Kinoshita and McCracken [38]). Just as in the case of Hartmann von Aue's *Der arme Heinrich*, Marie endeavored to compose short verse narratives in which the quest for human happiness dominates, commonly residing in love and marriage. Her literary skill consists of the intriguing combination of magical elements with realistic aspects, which makes possible the fictional imagination of possible outcomes of difficult gender relationships (Marie de France [39]).

While previous research has discussed Marie's works already from many different perspectives, one of her *lais*, "Eliduc," remains highly problematic, resisting a reasonable and rational explanation. We might even recognize here the phenomenon that the poet deliberately worked with paradoxical elements in order to explore the intricate nature of love within and outside of marriage, while at the same time voicing severe criticism of the political system badly influenced by ideological factions harming the well-being of the royal court.

As we often hear in medieval and early modern literature, the protagonist Eliduc is badly maligned by jealous forces at his king's court and thus eventually exiled (see also the Spanish *El poema de mío Cid*, ca. 1000, or Elisabeth of Nassau-Saarbrücken's *Königin Sibille*, ca. 1437). Having left home in disgrace, he finds an English king in Exeter who is in great military need and whom he then supports so effectively that the enemies are soon defeated. The real struggle for Eliduc, however, begins only then because the king's daughter develops a strong love for him, which he returns in equal measures. Yet, he is happily married back home and does not know how to solve the social, emotional, religious, and ethical conflicts. Eventually, he elopes with the young woman who has to learn during the crossing of the Channel that her lover is married. In utter despondency, she falls into a coma, and Eliduc then takes her 'corpse' to a chapel where a hermit had died only recently. He places her on the altar and begins with a ritual of worshipping his seemingly dead mistress, which his wife eventually finds out. The parallels with Hartmann's verse narrative are striking, considering the placement of the young woman on the table/altar, a sacrifice to love. But at that point, magic enters the picture because a weasel manages to bring its companion back from death to life with the help of a petal, and the same one the lady uses to recover the young comatose woman.

In a shocking turn of events, this wife realizes that

her husband's true love rests with this young princess, and since she highly respects him and wants him to be happy, she voluntarily withdraws from their marriage, establishes a monastery, and governs it as the abbess until the end of her life. As I have argued before, we might recognize here echoes of the love relationship and then marriage between the two intellectuals, Peter Abelard (d. 1142) and his former student, Heloise (d. ca. 1165) (Classen[40]). This stunning move, a profound expression of her selflessness and respect for her husband, allows Eliduc to marry his mistress, and both enjoy their union also until they have grown old. At that point, which might be Marie's central argument, the princess joins the first lady's monastery, whereas Eliduc creates his own to live out the rest of his life.

All three exchange letters expressing their friendship and their shared values and feelings, which brings closure to this extraordinary story in which the wife emerges as the true protagonist because she can read her husband's heart, because she commands the inner strength to withdraw from their marriage, and because she maintains the bonds of friendship with Eliduc even after decades of separation. The wife realizes herself that the young princess is the most beautiful creature, and she feels great pity for her, indicating that she understands why her husband has fallen in love with her. In fact, she mourns the other woman's presumed death and sheds tears out of grief that such a beauty could have passed away (vv. 1029–1030).

Significantly, she does not seem to feel any jealousy and is only sad for her husband, who lost, as she believes, such an amazing human creature to death. In other words, just as in the case of Hartmann's novella, she recognizes the absolute beauty and personification of the sublime in the princess, the ultimate ideal of a human person. Heinrich recognized the same phenomenon when he had gazed into the locked room and discovered the true beauty hidden inside following his deep contemplation (this according to Richard of St. Victor; cf. the contributions to Jaeger, ed.[41], and especially his own article, pp. 157–158). For that reason, she makes every possible effort to revive her, although she will then lose her husband. In both stories, the protagonist (not Eliduc, but his wife, and Heinrich) recognizes the true beauty and makes room for it to come forth.

At first, the princess, once having woken up from her coma, strongly reprimands Eliduc for having betrayed her, but the wife assures her that he is deeply in love with her and that she herself will arrange it for the two to get together again and thus to marry because they truly belong together. Out of her self-sacrifice, which does not, however, end in her death—she takes the veil—results in deep happiness for Eliduc and his beloved. As the text underscores, the wife grieved deeply for Eliduc (vv. 1094–1095) because her only concern is his happiness, and once she has granted freedom to him, she also finds her own self, turning her existence toward God.

The erotic tensions here translate into spiritual connections based on friendship across the gender lines. Marriage is not absolutized in this case because the wife is independent enough to liberate her husband from their bond so that he can pursue his ideals and desires to the fullest extent, both in material and spiritual terms. As Marie indicates throughout her story, Eliduc certainly knows how to handle his public life, especially as a knight and leader of the people, but he fails completely when the story turns toward his private life, or his heart and soul. The same could be said about the English princess, but both are sustained and supported by the wife because she grants them their own freedom and, hence, a new marriage. As an abbess, she takes on the role of protectress or as the representative of the Virgin Mary here on earth, like the *Schutzmantelmadonna* (cf. Anderson and Gilbert[42]).

Throughout her *lais*, Marie tends to assign the female protagonist the superior role as agents of their own destiny and agency. In "Eliduc," the first wife proves to be a highly virtuous and strong lady who operates as her husband's friend and advisor, but she does not control him and allows him all the independence to fall in love with another woman. The text belongs to the secular sphere of courtly life and yet operates with deeply spiritual components through which the individual learns to recognize the ideals of life in happiness and friendship. While Eliduc, just as Poor Henry, successfully navigates his external life, he is not competent enough until almost to the very end to recognize the interior dimension where his soul or spirit rests. Both characters stand out for their masculinity in social terms, but both are failures in emotional and spiritual terms.

Only through the intervention of his wife can he find himself and thus gain true happiness, although this also means that she is, in a way, the victim of her own actions,

losing her husband and marriage. In both cases, the female protagonist brings it about that the male hero can gain healing in spirit, and in that process, the women also find their own happiness: the young woman in Hartmann's novella as Henry's wife, and the wife in "Eliduc" as the abbess of a newly founded monastery. Only when there is an intimate cooperation at place, can the material prison be overcome and thus the path cleared for future developments where interiority—the inner space of the spirit—and exteriority—the limitations of the material existence—merge to create a harmonious whole once again (for a range of critical approaches to Marie's poems, see Whalen, ed. [43]). We could easily expand on this observation and include also other examples in these finely developed *lais*, whether we were to consider the knots in "Guigemar," the trail of blood in "Yonec," the brocade blanket in "Le Fresne," or the magical potion in "Les deus amanz."

8. Heinrich Kaufringer: In the World and out of the World

Neither Hartmann's nor Marie's story offers an easy solution; instead, they are deeply challenging even for us today and alert us to read our own lives much more deeply, to say it metaphorically. We just do not understand all the profundity of our existence and can only hope to shine some light into the dark behind our daily lives in material terms. Only when we as individuals receive some crucial help from another person, normally someone who loves us, can we hope for critical illumination, hence growth and discovery of the deeper, interior dimension. True love, as both poets suggested, consisted of giving and not of taking. But in both stories, we also realize that human identity requires the merging of the interior with the exterior, the material and the spiritual.

This finds its literally perfect realization in the first story written by the South-German poet Heinrich Kaufringer from the area of Landshut, or Augsburg, somewhat further away (fl. ca. 1400) (Kaufringer, trans. [44], no. 1). In "The Hermit and the Angel," the motif of which can be traced back to French and Jewish sources (Classen [45]; Classen [46]), we are confronted with a narrative with no satisfying outcome except that the protagonist learns that he has not understood anything in spiritual terms and will not be able to comprehend the ultimate operations by God (for a critical approach to Kaufringer's work, see Rippl [47]). In an odd way, this proves to be a sort of Socratic epistemology insofar as the hermit realizes that his ultimate ignorance represents already a major step forward in reaching out to God as the creator of the world.

As a hermit, he is, at any rate, virtually in the dark about the operations in the world outside of his cell. But one day, curious to find out what God's creation might look like, he embarks on a journey without a specific direction, only intending to observe what he might discover in human society. Soon, he is joined by a stranger who quickly proves to be a true monster, at least in the hermit's eyes. Both men are invited in by a generous innkeeper who does not charge them for room and board. But, in the morning just before they are to depart, the stranger murders their host's only child by way of suffocating it. After the second night, the stranger steals another host's most valuable chalice, which he then turns over as a payment to a third innkeeper who had terribly mistreated them, not granting them any room to stay. Finally, when the poor hermit feels already completely disgusted and horrified, more than ready to leave that stranger, the latter kills a young man by hurling him into the river when they are just about to cross it via a bridge.

Nothing makes sense to the hermit, and he can only curse the stranger complaining bitterly about God's willingness to let all this happen. At that moment, the stranger finally reveals his true identity, being an angel sent by God to teach the hermit some lessons, and thus us as the readers of this story. He explains the reasons behind all his actions, by which the victims were really rewarded in spiritual terms. For instance, he had killed the young man because he had been on his way to a priest to confess his sins, but would not have been able to avoid committing more sins in the future. Thus, the angel had saved his soul. The killing and stealing are explained in similar terms, all of which leave the poor hermit in complete disarray and shock. But the angel then instructs him to return to his cell, to accept the world as it is, because all actions would be the result of the divine wishes. Those, however, the hermit would never comprehend.

This then happens, and we are left with the rather uncomfortable situation of an intellectual conundrum, being just as much in the dark as the hermit. Basically, the message is that God is far beyond all human comprehension, and

it would be useless to question His decisions and His will. Significantly, once the hermit has accepted that position, as uncomfortable as it might be, he lives happily for the rest of his life due to his humbleness and submission under God.

9. Conclusions

There would be countless other examples of medieval (verse) narratives that provoke us today just as much as they must have done so to the medieval audiences. The literary discourse as touched upon here does not fully provide answers because those ultimately do not exist. At first sight, much does not make sense or is simply beyond our comprehension. However, we cannot simply take an intellectual shortcut and talk about absurdity as it emerged in twentieth-century literature (Kafka, Sartre, Camus, Kusenberg) and still is with us today. Virtually all medieval and early modern poets made the greatest effort to explore the meaning and relevance of human life since the Christian (or Muslim) faith informed them so deeply. The question raised did not pertain to existentialist rationality as the *modus operandi*, but to the spiritual purpose of all human beings here on earth.

Granted, all three stories are superficially predicated on rather different narrative plots, but in essence, the three poets investigated the dimension of the interior or spiritual in religious and ethical terms. All protagonists pursued their path through life by gazing ahead or inward and discovered in that process something about themselves which the material framework kept hidden. In Hartmann's case, the secret rested in the loss of his soul, which could only be overcome once the body had recognized this fact and welcomed the soul to return home. The girl's outburst of anger thus finds its explanation in the fact that the soul was already badly distanced from the material self and felt betrayed at the end when it was not allowed to die and thus to join the creator.

In Marie's *lai*, true happiness can only be achieved when it is not sought in material conditions. The wife needs to free her husband from their marital bond so that he can live with the beautiful princess. Even the wife acknowledges this fact because she has recognized the very sublime in the young woman, the ideal of a woman (Jaeger[48]). Last but not least, Kaufringer reactivated an old account derived from the Jewish and then also French tradition for his own purpose to reflect on the abstract epistemology according to which there are simply two dimensions, the human and the divine, and as close as they are connected, the ultimate interlocking would not be possible. As the poor and simple-minded hermit has to realize, there is no way for him to comprehend God's works here on earth since He operates with a different justice system than humans do.

The purpose of this article was not to carry out a comparative analysis, although we observed a number of significant parallels among those three texts concerning the investigation of the own self, the experience of love, and the realization that God's working in this world remains incomprehensible. There would be countless other examples to deepen our understanding of the literary, ethical, philosophical, and religious discourse during the pre-modern period through which poets endeavored to come to terms with the spiritual dimension behind the material existence.

While theologians and philosophers explored the sublime and esoteric aspects mostly within a religious context, medieval and early modern authors of short verse and prose narratives developed intriguing narratives in which the common perception of life is undermined by a spiritual one, which tends to be elusive and yet is permanently present. Even if it might seem to be somewhat far-fetched, in light of this realization we could proceed and tackle also other provocative literary accounts that have puzzled generations of readers and scholars alike, such as Boccaccio's tenth story told on the tenth day in his *Decameron* (ca. 1350) dealing with the enigmatically submissive Griselda, always demonstrating a startling equanimity despite her husband's cruelty and brutality against her in his tests of her loyalty (Morabito[49]; Rüegg[50], Tellini[51], and many others).

Undoubtedly, we can recognize here as well a ludic element through which the reader/listener is encouraged to participate in the critical examination of fundamental human issues. Those differ only in format and type, but not in their deeper meaning and in the quest for happiness and personal fulfillment. We could also identify this literary discourse as an exploration of what it entails to be human, where our limits are, and in what ways we are encouraged to probe the necessary strategies to achieve the realization of our dreams. None of the authors consulted here were philosophers or had, as far as we can tell, a philosophical training. Nevertheless, their narratives provided a textual basis for philosophical and religious reflections about the spiritual dimension of human

life, about personal relationships, love, and happiness.

For the modern reader, a certain degree of cultural translation is certainly necessary to make these stories palatable, digestible, and hence applicable. That constitutes, so to speak, the hermeneutic mechanism through which we are empowered today to engage with these fundamental issues that challenge our existence. Epistemologically speaking, pre-modern literature holds up a mirror that we are encouraged to gaze at and through, but once we have succeeded in that effort, gaining insight into the inner spheres of our soul, we are richly rewarded with a deep understanding of the fundamental values, ideals, concepts, and dreams of all humankind that make life really worth living.

In short, we can easily recognize the specific values and relevance also of medieval literature for our own quest today. All three poets, Hartmann von Aue, Marie de France, and Heinrich Kaufringer provided powerful literary examples of the need for the individual to look beyond his/her material limitations and to seek out the spiritual inner self, whether in religious or philosophical terms. None of those poets were mystics or had, as far as we can tell, mystical experiences, but they certainly predicated their tales on mystical themes, so to speak, demonstrating the working of the spirit within human material existence. This is not to say that modern writers would not be able to provide us with similar narrative images to reflect or stimulate the individual's search. But here we have simply recognized the enormous potential of medieval literature also for us today to gain new insights and to grow in intellectual and spiritual terms.

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