
FORUM

The Never-Ending Story of the (German) Middle Ages: Philology, Hermeneutics, Medievalism, and Mysticism

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The unequivocal intention here is to preach to the “converted,” that is, to the Medievalists, to reaffirm the validity of their scholarly premises, to strengthen their position within the proverbial academic parish, and to convince those critics who reject the relevance of the medieval and early modern period as important forerunners of and significant contributions to modern and postmodern literature. Although it sounds like anathema, a number of literary scholars have indeed proposed to close the doors to medieval literature and, along the same lines, to any subject matter prior to 1800 in order to preserve the viability of foreign language departments at North American universities. Keith Bullivant, in his efforts to develop universal strategies by which to guarantee the survival of German Studies here in this country, suggested that some departments should “go the extra step and define the focus of our subject as *Modern German Studies* in the sense of a delimiting of the period of study to, for example, 1750 up to the present, which would make room for the extensiveness needed to examine the range of German culture in the period adequately” (110). Others have pointed out the need to change our historical perspective altogether and to follow an exclusively postmodernist, deconstructionist path both in research and teaching of literature: that is to say, to turn away from the Middle Ages and begin with “more relevant” interpretive work, resisting traditionalist orientation and stifling canon building. This has led, indeed, to practical consequences in a number of graduate programs across the country (Paden 21f). In the famous 1990 issue of *Speculum*, Lee Patterson laments, “[i]n the current academic milieu, at least in the Anglo-American world, medieval studies is a marginalized institution. Most literary scholars and critics consider medieval texts to be utterly extraneous to their own interests, as at best irrelevant, at worst inconsequential; and they perceive the field

itself as a site of pedantry and antiquarianism, a place to escape from the demands of modern intellectual life" (87).

Some scholars, however, have rallied to the defense of the Middle Ages and have argued that its future as an academic discipline has only begun, considering the enormously expanding spectrum of critical approaches, the unforeseen degree of academic activities (conferences, symposia, etc.), and the vibrant book market filled with monographs, anthologies, editions, and translations focused on the history and culture from ca. 750 until 1600 (Paden; Dahood; Classen, *Medieval German Voices*). Small wonder, of course, that medievalists defend their field, whereas modernists suggest that the time might have come to jettison the older period in favor of contemporary literature, considering the shrinking financial resources within academia and the rapid transformation of modern society through the computer and the internet.

My intentions are not directed at the worn-out arguments that no literary period can stand on its own, that most modern traditions hark back to the Middle Ages and antiquity, and that the history of modern English or German cannot be understood without the study of the classical writers and texts, such as *Beowulf*, Chaucer, and Shakespeare, or "Hildebrandslied," *Nibelungenlied*, Wolfram von Eschenbach, and Martin Luther. To appeal to the converted and the unconverted at the same time requires new perspectives and puts particular pressures on medievalists to identify innovative theories and literary materials that can shed new light on the issues at stake here.

If modern critics shy away from medieval literature or even condemn it for its archaic, historical irrelevance and outdated value system, they most likely react to their own study experiences and express their revolt against antiquated teaching methods and interpretations to which they had been exposed during their learning phase fifteen to twenty years ago when traditional philology still was in its heyday. There is no question, however, that both have radically changed since then (Peters; Karg), and this not only as a consequence of the internet which has made the Middle Ages so incredibly attractive, accessible, and alive again (Coletti). Not surprisingly, for instance, the medieval period has proven to be highly appealing to middle-school and high-school students especially, as testified by the plethora of web sites focused on that time period.¹ The same phenomenon is currently taking hold of academia as well, but the theoretical debate has not come to a satisfying closure yet.

The significance of medieval German and, for that matter, any other literature even in the twentieth and probably also twenty-first century can be demonstrated if we draw on reception theory primarily developed by Hans Georg Gadamer and

Hans Robert Jauss (Holub). A careful reading of some of the twentieth-century masterpieces, such as the novels by Robert Musil, Thomas Mann, Hermann Hesse, Günter Grass, and Adolf Muschg will powerfully illustrate how much these writers profited from medieval sources and continued a tradition of critical investigation already begun in the high Middle Ages, resumed by the Romantics in their enthusiasm for the past age, and continued by twentieth-century writers (Ganim 163). All of them prove to be deeply influenced by Middle High German texts and other literary documents from the Middle Ages and later periods. In fact, they would not have reached the same level of philosophical insights without the help of their medieval and early-modern sources. Since the early nineteenth century when philological research had first turned to that time period (Bluhm; Peck), a vast number of poems, dramas, novels, and short stories had reflected an intimate dialogue with medieval literature (Grosse and Rautenberg). Surprisingly, this influence did not wane during the following decades, but continued and perhaps even increased, though it followed different paths. Similar observations could be made with regard to modern French, Italian, English, or Swedish literature, to mention a few examples.

The Austrian writer Robert Musil (b. 1880) died in 1942 before he could complete his *Mann ohne Eigenschaften* (*Mann without Qualities*; the first volume appeared in 1930). In this monumental fragmentary novel, which many consider, along with James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Gabriel Marquez' *Cien años de soledad*, among the most important contributions to modern literature, the protagonist Ulrich makes an attempt to break through the barriers of traditional science, ethics, and morality by means of studying medieval mystical literature. Musil, originally trained as a mechanical engineer and mathematician before he turned to literature, had learned of medieval mysticism through the study of Martin Buber's anthology *Ekstatische Konfessionen* (*Ecstatic Confessions*, 1909; cf. Goltschnigg). While he wrote his *Mann without Qualities* he utilized an extensive selection from this anthology for Ulrich's extraordinary attempts to reach unexplored shores in his quest for a new epistemology, that is, mysticism coupled with modern science (Payne 187). While the protagonist spends time together with his twin sister Agathe after the death of their father, he investigates how the medieval mystics described their visionary experiences of love with the godhead. Under the influence of these medieval revelations Ulrich attempts to connect his own life as a scientist with the images presented by the mystics in their religious revelations (Classen, "Mittelalter-Rezeption"). The novel's narrative framework, however, is focused on a circle of high ranking Austrian officials, artists, poets, musicians, and military searching for representative but traditional cultural icons of their time to

celebrate the emperor's birthday and thereby to outdo their German-Prussian neighbors. Whereas this so-called "Parallelaktion" increasingly is spinning its own wheels without ever creating any meaning, Ulrich embarks on his own journey into religious experiences derived from the past but viewed from the perspective of modern rationality. Having encountered his sister Agathe after a lengthy time of separation, they both fall in love with each other and probe new meaning of love. It remains uncertain whether Musil fully intended to experiment with the moral consequences of incest, as brother and sister never seem to sleep with each other. But they spend long periods of time together reading and studying, and discussing the limitations of life; in this process they also fall upon the mystical texts.

In the early parts of the novel, Ulrich and his compatriots in the Parallel Action intensively study the meaning of their life and society in science, theology, literature, the arts, anthropology, etc., but they never accomplish any of their globally defined goals. By contrast, the brother and sister's mutual reading of medieval mystical literature opens a hermeneutic gate heretofore ignored entirely. Undoubtedly, as specific elements in the fragmentary ending indicate, Musil intended to demonstrate how the western world unavoidably slid into the First World War, and subsequently became prey of fascism, which in turn triggered the Second World War. Ulrich and Agathe's experiments, however, indicate how much the author hoped to find an avenue out of the intellectual, literary, religious, and ethical stalemate of his times by means of paying attention to the curious but fascinating world of medieval mysticism and mystical visions from other than Christian religions. Undoubtedly, apart from Musil, many other modern writers have also espoused mysticism and interacted with the medieval documents as a springboard for their personal illumination. Consequently, many of the medieval mystics have received extraordinary interest by modern writers, such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Leo Tolstoy, and Ingeborg Bachmann (Peter van Lier), not to speak of the flood of English translations of and studies on their revelatory documents (Hildegard of Bingen). But no other modern author has ever reached out to this spiritual dimension in such a rational manner as this Austrian writer has done who aspired to combine mathematics with mysticism as the only feasible avenue to transform traditional human existence and gain insight in a new form of epistemology.

Thomas Mann (1875-1955), who received the Nobel Prize for literature in 1929 for his master novel *Der Zauberberg* (*The Magic Mountain*, 1924), was equally concerned with the fundamental question of how to interpret his own time and how to develop a critical analysis with which to cut through the dichotomies

of modern twentieth-century culture, philosophy, and literature, especially after the devastating impact of the First World War. The sanatorium in the Swiss Alps provides the same isolated refuge from the world as the little palace where Ulrich and Agathe live in the outskirts of early twentieth-century Vienna. Hans Castorp at first only intends to visit his brother Joachim Ziemssen for three weeks, but soon he also contracts tuberculosis and is forced to join this remote community without hope of physical recovery. In his previous life he had not developed any significant interest in learning, but here, far removed from the hustle and bustle of ordinary life back in the business center of Hamburg, he encounters two teachers, the humanist Settembrini and the Jesuit Naphta, a converted Jew. Both are also infested with tuberculosis, but both use their time high up in the mountains to expose the young man to their own worlds of learning. Whereas Settembrini adamantly defends humanism, the Renaissance, and the age of scientific discoveries, hence also rationality and modernity in its myriad manifestations, Naphta draws all his inspiration, idealism, and knowledge from medieval theology and literature, defending spirituality, interiority, rejection of the flesh, dedication to God, and the liberation of the human mind from the bonds of nature in light of the eternity of the human soul. Their teaching efforts, however, only provide a narrative framework for Mann's actual concerns, as Castorp's interests and curiosity allow them to discuss among each other fundamental aspects of the development of Western history, philosophy, religion, the arts, literature, and politics from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century. Castorp proves to be a highly attentive and open-minded student, but he irritates both his teachers because he refuses to take sides and tends to agree with both of them in specific areas, especially as both are striving for a human utopia through their reliance on past thinkers from their respective cultural periods (Blaw).

At one point late in the narrative development, while on a skiing outing in the woods, Castorp loses his way in a snowstorm. While he is trying to recover from his exhaustion and awaits the end of the blizzard, he suddenly experiences a vision in which he is confronted with the image of an idealized classical landscape; but when his inner eyes turn into the depth of that world, deep in the background he observes a gruesome scene of cannibalism and murder of innocent children (485). In this moment the "dialectics of enlightenment," as Max Horckheimer and Theodor W. Adorno had called it, dawn upon him and destroy his idealism inspired by Settembrini's teachings. At the same time, Naphta reveals a frightening fascination with terror and the Inquisition, betraying himself as a ruthless defender of an extremely orthodox church doctrine which does not shy away from violence, intimidation, manipulation, and a drive toward absolute dominance over

soul and body as it had been developed in the late Middle Ages. In other words, Thomas Mann betrays a healthy skepticism both of a romanticized notion of the Middle Ages, travestied by the aberration of a fanatic defender of the Catholic Church, and of the falsely idealized image of the Renaissance and Humanism. At the end of the novel Castorp finds himself increasingly isolated and frustrated because neither intellectual and cultural tradition—the Middle Ages and the Renaissance—offers hope for the future in the twentieth century. Consequently, when the First World War begins, Castorp throws himself into the fray and volunteers as a soldier, liberating himself from the physical imprisonment in the sanatorium. Tragically, for Castorp, at this point all his learning and studying of the Middle Ages and of humanism have led to the realization that actions remain the only feasible solution for the individual saturated by the overly rich inheritance of European culture and literature. Nevertheless, Mann still harbored hopes that Castorp's spirit would survive the Armageddon of the war of the trenches, and so his love as well, but not because the young man would return home safe and whole, but because he had learned European culture and history and had imbued the past as an intimate part of his own self.

Hermann Hesse (1877-1962) also embraced a very positive view of the Middle Ages, as we know from his many attempts to deal with St. Francis of Assisi and the legends surrounding his life (Wagner). Most important, however, proves to be his *Glass Bead Game* from 1943 in which he explores, parallel to Robert Musil and Thomas Mann, the dialectics of intellectual, abstract learning or pure knowledge, on the one hand, and the realities of everyday life on the other. He won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1946 in honor of this novel. Although the protagonist Josef Knecht accomplishes the highest goal in the world of Castalia, an intellectual Order outside of the Christian Church, strictly separated from regular society, and climbs to the very top, assuming the role of the Master Glass Bead Game Player, he soon realizes that the artificiality and lifelessness of Castalia represent its greatest dangers from the inside. At the end he abandons his post and leaves the Order to become a private tutor for Tito, the son of a friend in the outside world (Plinio Designori) because he considers Castalia as a social parasite and an intellectual prison.

Unfortunately, Knecht drowns in his first effort to reach out to the young man when he offers himself as a companion and friend. Nevertheless his death brings about a significant change of heart in the student who suddenly reflects upon the true meaning of life and what impact Knecht's death might have on him. In other words, only through his death does Knecht achieve a true teaching effect on another human being.

The protagonist does not simply quit from his post as master of the glass bead game; he rather makes this move as the consequence of a long thought process that began during his extensive learning period, especially when he spent a prolonged time in a Benedictine monastery where he was confronted, for the first time in his life, with the world of history, especially the medieval period when the Benedictine Order had flourished. Both the medieval library and the medieval convent emerge as symbolic windows looking out to the struggle of real people in a real world for their spiritual well-being, and the longer Knecht spends time there, the more does he realize that the voluntary withdrawal from society and its people into Castalia does not lead to new levels of happiness; instead, it takes the individual to unexpected levels of intellectual hubris and blindness in face of the actual needs of society. Hesse suggests, in other words, a return to the study of our past in order to stay in touch with our future. The survival of humanity cannot be guaranteed by the exclusive focus on highly abstract subject matters which are no longer anchored in the ground of social reality. Consequently, Knecht eventually learns that Castalia is as much a prison as the world outside has lost its ability to deal with itself in a rational, mature manner and at the same time fully conscious of its own past. By contrast, Tito's arrogance, lack of discipline, and flagrant insubordination against the authorities prove to be the result of the relativity of all values and ideals, and a sense of loss of history. Knecht's sacrifice to him, as we might call his death, builds new bridges between our past and present, and points out new avenues for human interaction. Once again, the realization that Castalia represents a stifling world of intellectual pursuits without any moral and ethical commitments dawns upon Knecht first while he lives in the medieval convent and takes lessons from the old librarian. "Knecht learned from the Benedictine something he could scarcely have learned in the Castalia of those days. He acquired an overview of the methods of historical knowledge and the tools of historical research. . . . But far beyond that, he experienced history not as an intellectual discipline, but as reality, as life; and in keeping with that, the transformation and elevation of his own personal life into history" (192). In reaching out to the Middle Ages—not necessarily the Church—Knecht begins to understand the importance of the past for the present and hence for the future as well; this observation *mutatis mutandi* also applies to the world of medieval literature and its fundamental impact on the twenty-first century (Classen, "Hermann Hesse's Approach").

Similarly Günter Grass (b. 1927), winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1999, expressed his conviction of the overarching significance of the past for the understanding of the present when he wrote his intriguing short story *Das Treffen in Telgte* (*The Meeting in Telgte*, 1979). Here he chose the history of the Thirty-

Year War as background for a fictional meeting of German Baroque poets who attempt to reach out to the various military, political, and religious factions in this devastating conflict. Grass has authenticated his text to a point making it necessary for the editor, Christoph Sieger, to provide extensive explanations about the historical context and the individual seventeenth-century writers, as most modern readers would otherwise not be able to follow the intensive discussions within the narrative. The meeting in Telgte takes place in 1647, one year before the peace treaty of Münster and Osnabrück brought an end to the war, but which also finalized the total division of Germany into more than fifteen hundred political units. Both here and every else throughout his work, however, Grass pursues specific modern political purposes by means of the historical framework. In 1979 Germany was still divided in East and West, and with his narrative Grass tried to address the common basis of German culture both then and today which had always superseded and compensated for the political state of being torn apart (*Zerrissenheit*). In 1979 this *Zerrissenheit* was still a political reality—and has remained so perhaps even today after the unification in 1989—but as the meeting in Telgte demonstrates, poets and authors have always striven toward universal goals common to all people and have shared in basic utopian principles (Schmidt).

The situation in Germany in 1979 still reflected the consequences of the Second World War for Germany, though Grass' *Treffen in Telgte* projects this situation back to 1647 when Germany had experienced a similar tragedy in which poetry and the arts had been the only factors guaranteeing the survival of German culture (Sieger 272-274). In his introduction Grass explicitly points out the significance of the past for our understanding of the future, as human destiny is not only determined by present circumstances, but always proves to be framed by a long-term history: "Yesterday will be what tomorrow has been. Our stories do not need to take place today. This one began three hundred years ago. Other stories as well. Each story which deals with Germany has such a long history" (6). In the face of unspeakable horrors all over the country, the large group of Baroque poets tries to find new words for their concerns, and despite the inhumanity of the times they have lived through, the power of literature provides new bridges into the future. Undoubtedly, Grass has the devastations of the Second World War in mind, but it could be any other human tragedy against which the poetic word rises and appeals to all people to remember the basics of human existence and to preserve peace wherever and however possible (151). His hope to reach out to his contemporaries by means of reactivating historical events might well be characterized as a naïve effort to influence modern politics and military conflicts, but the human

spirit continues to feed from its past experiences that both the chronicler and the poet must preserve for posterity.

Finally, the famous Swiss writer Adolf Muschg (b. 1934), himself a philologist and medievalist, demonstrated the enormous potentials of medieval literature for a modern writer when he published his novel *Der Rote Ritter* (*The Red Knight*) in 1993, directly based on Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* but conceived as a very modern novel with powerful messages about love, war, religion, history, the role of reading as an epistemological process, and the human quest for self-understanding (Obermaier, "Adolf Muschgs ..."). Parzival is once again on his quest to free his sick uncle Anfortas from his suffering by asking the simple question what ails him, a symbolic expression of the love for one's neighbor. But whereas Wolfram had pursued a highly religious agenda, projecting the world of Muntsalvæsche as superseding the world of King Arthur, Muschg outlines a new quest. This time Parzival realizes the relativity of human existence, he understands that the ultimate questions will never find absolute answers, and life continues even under the worst circumstances brought about by people. The protagonist feels disappointed at the end as he realizes that he was not a savior, but only a discoverer. Yet he has discovered the inner connections of life and the essential features of human existence. Parzival still trusts in God, but he has learned to comprehend that life is a game that God presents to human beings as an intellectual and spiritual challenge. "We must be playing pieces of his game, and we are asked which move we would consider to be the most effective within the constellation of our pieces on the board. And if our answer offers entertainment for the [divine] player—he never would be surprised about what we might say—this move will be done with us, and what we have been asked will happen. This does not seem to be much, but without our answers things would not happen in such a happy fashion. We are allowed to play with God as if we mattered. This false impression contains the entire miracle of our life" (984). Wolfram placed the greatest emphasis on Parzival's quest for God, whereas Muschg argues that the hero's love for his wife suffices to find God. *The Red Knight* is not an attempt to reintroduce a strong religious focus into our life; instead, the novel explores the relevance of human language, human community, and human spirituality. Not surprisingly, Muschg has Parzival and his wife Condwîr âmûrs share their most inner secrets with each other without talking about them, as the most important words between man and woman are exchanged by means of silence. And the reader is challenged to follow this path in that the final chapter of *The Red Knight*, the hundredth in fact, has to be written by himself: "The READER Where the protagonist of this

book gives away its secret and completes the hundredth (*hic et ubique*)” (1006; Classen, “Seinskonstitution”).

Modern scholarship has only begun to investigate the full meaning of this remarkable novel for which Muschg was rewarded with the Georg-Büchner Prize in 1994, one of the highest literary awards in Germany today. It is obvious, however, that *The Red Knight* can only be understood in light of Wolfram von Eschenbach's early thirteenth-century *Parzival*, that is, as Muschg's intricate response to, play with, and transformation of the literary model (Obermaier, “Die Geschichte”).

There is no doubt that each of these five authors, all of them highly influential contributors to the history of modern German literature, clearly illustrated the significance of medieval literature and art both for their own writing and hence also for their readership. In fact, in each case when the authors turn to the Middle Ages or the Baroque period, they obviously gain crucial inspiration to let their protagonists develop innovative perspectives and grow beyond the limits imposed on them by their social background, institutional frameworks, and their traditional life style.

For those among us who are medievalists and therefore belong to the “converted,” from a German or any other language-specific perspective, these observations will certainly invigorate our emphasis on the literary world from the premodern period. The modernists, however, now might also accept the argument that the historical dimension continues to be of greatest significance for all of us and that a thorough familiarity with medieval literature, just as with the Bible and the classics, represents a *conditio sine qua non* also for the study of contemporary literature. This observation might be considered a self-fulfilling prophecy, but we live in a world where history as such is no longer unquestionably accepted as essential and elemental, although we all live through history and create our lives via a critical discourse with the past as text (Spiegel).

None of these five authors followed the nineteenth-century concept of history as a glorious past, leading to the creation of historicizing novels such as those by Felix Dahn, Adalbert Stifter, and Gustav Freytag (Huber). But they all deliberately returned to experiences from the Middle Ages and the Baroque period in order to break through the barrenness of their own time and in search of new visions. The future as outlined by Musil, Mann, Hesse, Grass, and Muschg derives its major inspiration from the past. Modern scholarship is called upon to accept this challenge and to collaborate with medievalists to understand the voices from earlier times as signposts for the future. This holds particularly true in light of Michel Zink's observation that scholars from many different disciplines have “found in medieval literature ... a mirror that sent back a reflection of their own

illusions. True illusions, however, since these false perspectives are truly set up by that literature” (13). *

Notes

¹ An assortment of such sites includes the following:

<http://www.kyrene.k12.az.us/schools/brisas/sunda/ma/mahome.htm>

<http://www.occdsb.on.ca/~sel/world/middle.htm>

<http://www.halsted.org/Wmiddleages.htm>

<http://www.mrdowling.com/606islam.html>

<http://school.discovery.com/lessonplans/programs/timesmedieval/>

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