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Literature Is Us and We Are Literature: Global and Universal Perspective

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Abstract

This paper takes into view literature on a global scale and from throughout time to investigate what we can say about its general and specific relevance for human society. The issue raised here pertains not only to the relevance of literature per se, but specifically to the question of how it relates to us as human beings, defining us in endless ways. In order to illustrate the central points addressed in this paper, numerous examples from the Middle Ages to the modern world are drawn from, such as Hartmann von Aue's *Der arme Heinrich* (ca. 1190), Don Juan Manuel's *El Conde Lucanor* (1335), Bertolt Brecht's ballads, and Robert Frost's modern poetry. The conclusion emphasizes that the critical function of literature in all human societies cannot be overestimated. At the risk of preaching to the converted, here we are confronted with the ultimate challenge in the Humanities once again. Insofar as literature has always mirrored, or engaged with, the fundamental issues in human life, we can establish its function as life-determining in philosophical, religious, political, ethical, or moral terms.

Keywords: relevance of literature, medieval literature, modern literature, poetry, Hartmann von Aue, Don Juan Manuel, Bertolt Brecht, Robert Frost

The Humanities have always faced difficult times, from antiquity to the present, for not creating material or monetary goods, for not being useful for business or engineering, or for not contributing to medical healthcare in specific terms. Nevertheless, every society across the globe and throughout time has produced immense amounts of literature, either oral or written, however we might define it. So, we always face the perennial questions what literature is by itself, what it does as such, why it exists in the first place, how we perform and consume it, and with what purpose. In that process, we are forced to engage with the paradox

of literature generally being fully accepted as part of our culture, and yet being disrespected when it comes to the question what matters in life (job, family, house, community, politics, etc.). Society likes to decorate itself with literary accolades but does not deem it necessary to pay for literature or its study in the Humanities. So, the question actually needs to be qualified further since literature would have to be explained more or less both in a scholarly and a global, popular fashion. More important, however, would be the issue what literature does, or why it exists, and how we can or should justify it as an object of most serious investigation, providing meaning, relevance, and also enjoyment (Kellner 1999; Grimm 2000; Kaus and Günther, ed., 2017; Robson 2020).

This paper, certainly more essayistic than narrowly scholarly in its approach, reviewing many different texts from the Middle Ages to us today, will hence look at the philosophical, ethical, religious, and political background and foundation of the literary manifestation and probe from a more universal perspective what this unique human phenomenon might be and how we as literary scholars are to deal with when we pursue lofty goals by means of literary expressions. Ultimate, this will be a very political paper by being very unpolitical, a philosophical paper by being non-philosophical, etc., identifying literature as one of the fundamental representations of what we call the 'human' in us (Classen 2021, "Happiness"; Classen 2020, "The Amazon"; Classen 2020, "Literature as a Tool"; Classen 2020, "In Defiance"; Classen 2019; Classen 2017).

Addressing once again the meaning of literature might be tantamount to carrying the proverbial owls to Athens or coal to Newcastle. The field of literary studies, originally called philology and focused on classical literature, rhetoric, and grammar, was founded around 1800, and much ink has been spelt ever since then to come to terms with our own research field as an academic subject matter and as a critically important discipline for the university and society at large. Literature also constitutes a major economic factor considering the modern book market (publishing houses, bookstores, literary societies, literary prizes, public readings, libraries, etc.; cf. Classen 2020, "Jens Walthers"), but the question to be pursued here focuses primarily on the issue of literature being of social, philosophical, spiritual, ethical, and political significance.

Our libraries are actually filled with relevant studies focused on this very question regarding the definition and relevance of literature, and it seems as if everyone who would have ever opened a book would immediately know how to develop an answer. The more we engage with literature, however, the less we seem to have a good grasp of what we mean by it. Each period, each culture, each social or ethnic group has pursued its own understanding of this curious phenomenon, and although we seem to understand in general terms what fictionality might be, at the current moment we are further away from any consensus regarding its definition than maybe ever before. What philosopher, philologist, humanities scholar, or artists would not have raised this issue at some point in his/her life? I can only attempt here to revisit the issue and to add my own practical and theoretical experiences and insights based on more than thirty years of teaching literature in English, German, and also in Spanish. Much of what I will explore below in a critical fashion I have already reflected on in a creative fashion, in haiku, under the title *Deep Poetic Gazes* (Classen 2021).

Discussing literature as such might not lead us to many specific results, definitions, or precise descriptions concerning our material existence, but this would not be so untypical of the Humanities at large, a rather amorphous field of scholarship where we engage with virtually everything humans tend to think and write about, to do, to feel, or to perceive. Hence, the study of contemporary or medieval literature, here not yet clearly defined, could easily lead to a cacophony of highly contrastive perspectives, including architecture, anthropology, medicine, psychology, mathematics, sciences, foodstuff, textiles, etc. Literature has something to do with what constitutes human existence, but all that somehow in an abstract framework. Its esoteric character makes it hard for us to explain its relevance to people on the outside, especially to administrators and bureaucrats.

The Literary Laboratory

One of my favorite metaphors concerning literature is the 'laboratory,' as in chemistry, where the infinite scope of human attitudes, ideas, values, principles, norms, or practices is examined theoretically. We all have to go through many different stages in our lives, and the situations and circumstances change all the time. Experiences help, of course, and we regularly grow the more we learn about our options, limitations, weaknesses, and strengths. But who is a true hero, and who is a true monster? How do we cope with seduction and corruption? Who has the strength and ideals of a saint, and who is a veritable villain?

In most cases, we all live fairly ordinary lives, and we are neither heroes nor monsters, whereas the literary world operates like a theater stage where we can observe extreme cases which amplify dramatically our own potentials and serve as mirrors of what could be the case with us in negative terms. Hence the idea that literature is a human laboratory in which we are allowed to play with our own existence. We are, as a species, determined by play, as Johan Huizinga had already determined (1938/1980), according to whom play is clearly distinct from ordinary life and pursues its own rules and regulations in order to explore the potentiality of human existence (for a very useful synopsis and structural analysis of his concepts, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homo_Ludens; last accessed on Aug. 1, 2021).

There on that stage we perceive tragedy and comedy in extensive terms and are invited to reflect on the extraordinary and the exotic, while we commonly witness only mundane drama, as bad as it might be. However, literary works from throughout time make it possible to recognize the extremes which thus set the limits of our existence and provide a framework for all human existence. Within the literary sphere we encounter hope and dreams, terror and disgust, wonder and faith, that is, the entire gamut of our lives, all our values, virtues, and vices, in an ever-growing assembly of literary works.

The Material Dimension of Literature

Literature can mean both fictional and non-fictional texts; we tend to talk about primary and secondary literature in scholarship, but both could overlap, depending on the circumstances. If we limited ourselves to a corpus of texts determined by their so-called 'fictionality,' we would exclude a huge body of other texts situated in related fields, such as travelogues, manuals, letters, diaries, and treatises, which recent historians have recognized as valuable

ego-documents.

If we resorted to the alternative term of 'narrative,' we would face less difficulties in an interdisciplinary context, but then we would be left with nothing but a rather limited and very generic definition. It would be impossible in this esoteric space to come to terms with these paradoxical phenomena, but it deserves to be mentioned that scholarship dealing with pre-modern texts proves to be much more open-minded and inclusive in that regard than those working with modern narratives.

In fact, when we consider Anglo-Saxon or Old High and Low German texts, we suddenly encounter a much more open-minded, inclusive concept of literature insofar as magical charms are as much acknowledged as valuable contributions to the literary annals as are heroic epics (*Beowulf*) and geographical discussions (*Wonders of the East*). In general, pre-modern literature would best be defined as a world of texts or narratives that tried to come to terms with individual and social issues in abstract and concrete terms at the same time. It would not be too far-fetched to accept even fencing manuals and cookbooks as part of the larger literary canon. Chronicles and philosophical treatises from that old period need to be accepted as narrative expressions of the contemporary world view.

Many times, we can discover that authors of historical accounts harmoniously blended fictional with moral, political, or religious comments, which invites us to view many of those massive volumes taking us from Genesis to the late Middle Ages as a form of *bricolage* as formulated by Roland Barthes. Only modernity has moved away from such an inclusive approach, driven by the ideals of the poetic genius and the values of narrative aesthetics, especially if we think of the Classical and Romantic period, while post-modernity appears to have returned to some extent to an older notion of literature, as best expressed by the academic term 'Studies' (French Studies, Italian Studies, Religious Studies, German Studies, etc.).

All these efforts to categorize and privilege specific texts as being true 'literature,' to the disadvantage of countless other texts, proves to be the result of the efforts especially in the western world since the early nineteenth century to develop literary history as a discipline *sui generis*, to categorize texts more narrowly, and to accredit poets as ideal figures, as spokespersons of their society with a unique mandate, substituting for the traditional high priest who demanded absolute sovereignty and authority in terms of interpreting our world and the spiritual dimension. There might have been some value to that, but the current situation seems to indicate that post-modern literature tends to return to the notion of literature as was prevalent already in the early Middle Ages, to be inclusive and to accept the narrative collage or the textual patchwork as a valid concept.

Definitions?

How could we define literature more effectively, then, moving away from formal criteria, from genre definitions such as drama, epos, and poetry, from social and economic perceptions as valid as those certainly are? What happens with us as readers or listeners when we engage with a text that we might identify as literary in contrast to a text we might relegate to the

factual side of writing (cf. Wolfgang Iser's and Robert Jauss's concept of the reader-response criticism)? We would not face any difficulties in distinguishing between newspaper articles or technical instructions in a physics textbook on the one hand, and sonnets, dramas, or short stories on the other. But would we acknowledge ancient and medieval graffiti or marginal glosses, word explanations or riddles for children as literary? Would there be an age limit, separating clearly between novels for young readers and novels for older readers?

The famous German novel by Michael Ende, *Momo* (1973), definitely addressing the former group. proves to be determined by profound insights concerning the issue of time and the meaning of happiness, of communication, and the community, and offers almost prophetic lessons regarding the dangers for humanity when we allow mechanical, robotic systems to take over the control of all human existence by means of the systematic management of time (Classen 2020, "Reflections"). As the young female protagonist has to learn from the turtle, Cassiopeia, who leads her to the master of time, Hora, slowness translates into speed, or the slower you move the faster you get ahead (cf. also the novel *Erfindung der Langsamkeit* by Sten Nadolny, 1983; Invention of Slowness). Similarly, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry created an astounding epistemological bridge between children's literature and adult literature when he published his story of *The Little Prince* in 1943.

Could we not claim that literature represents a narrative medium through which we are empowered to perceive the world like through a kaleidoscope and to reflect or refract ourselves in the text so that we can begin to understand the meaning of all life in concrete and hypothetical terms, if not the opposite, to ambiguate it for hermeneutic purposes? If either one is acceptable, we need to explore the metaphor a little further because life is not simply a straightforward affair we accommodate ourselves into. This kind of mirror is perhaps something like a fractured glass and makes us see ourselves in many fractured ways. Those fractures provide endless possibilities, including mystical revelations, which authors such as Mechthild of Magdeburg (ca. 1207–ca. 1282) or Julian of Norwich (1343–after 1416) expressed in highly erotic terms. We have a past and are moving forward into the future. We are motivated and inspired by our traditions, previous experiences, grandparents, the community, etc., which explains why we cannot dismiss older literature at all, the fictional archive of countless experiences. As foreign as a literary text sometimes might appear, it regularly provides us with most valuable insights into all human affairs, often expressed in much more different ways than we are used to today.

Human Values and Ideals Contained in Literary Works

The Old Spanish heroic epic *El poema de mío Cid* (ca. 1000) illustrates this phenomenon quite dramatically (Bustos Tova, ed., 2005). The archaic character of this text must have been felt already in the high Middle Ages, and we are certainly much further away from the ideals represented there. The protagonist has lost his honor, has been expelled from the royal court, apparently because jealous courtiers of higher social rank have maligned him. We follow the hero through many stages in his struggle to regain his honor and to recover his identity as the king's most favored warrior, and we are in awe as to how he works incredibly hard to earn his men's respect. He is strong and yet submissive, he is glorious yet humble, he is brave and yet

prudent, he operates as a fantastic warrior and leader of his people, while he demurs to the king and treats him with extraordinary admiration. El Cid fights for himself and his family, and yet he is a true role model for all of his men, and for that reason his army is quickly swelling in force as soon as he is beginning to achieve victories on the battlefield (Zaderenko and Montaner, ed., 2017; Classen 2019; Classen 2020, "Violence").

However, when the king finally asks him to let the two Carrión brothers marry his daughters, he agrees, though with considerable trepidations, which later come true when those two horrible men try to murder their wives by beating them to death. There is a witness, and the evidence against them is completely solid, and yet El Cid does not take up arms against them. Instead, he appeals to the king, secures a court assembly convened by the king, and hence a trial, and has his closest friends and allies fight on his behalf, who then achieve great triumph against the Carrións and their allies, which leads to El Cid's complete victory over his enemies, but not by means of military might.

As the epic poem illustrates, true honor rests within a person, in the ability to control oneself, to observe one's own limits, and to judge one's conditions in a balanced and rational manner. El Cid exerts force when appropriate and self-constraint and submissiveness whenever called for. Despite, or just because of all those challenges, this hero gains highest honor and thus surfaces as a supreme role model until today, although we live in a non-heroic world and normally have little to do with weapons, war, and violent conflicts which might determine one's honor, identity, and self-respect.

El poema de mío Cid belongs to the classics of medieval Spanish literature, so it would take very little effort to figure out why it deserves our full recognition today. However, the wealth of research on this poem also indicates that there are many different levels of meaning, profound statements about human values, vices, and virtues, so despite its fairly straightforward narrative account, the poem reveals a kaleidoscope of aspects mirroring ideals and evilness at the same time. Despite its old age, we can easily recognize why this text continues to appeal to us today so deeply because the poet addresses so powerfully the perennial conflicts among individuals operating in public.

It sheds extraordinary light on what it means to be a hero and to operate as the leader of one's people. In other words, because of its literary character, the poem emerges as a fictional work which does not demand from us to be similar heroes but invites us to consider the meaning of heroism and to follow the protagonist at least to some extent in our own lives. The situation in that regard proves to be much more problematic in *Beowulf*, in the Old French *Chanson de Roland*, or in the Middle High German *Nibelungenlied*, where the protagonist appears as a rather problematic figure and who ultimately succumbs to his own shortcomings (Classen, "The Downfall of a Hero," 2003). That is to say that heroic poetry does not constitute or provide an absolute role models; instead, it represents a literary model which deserves to be admired and criticized as any other text.

The heroic epos, whether Homer's *Iliad* or the ancient Indian *Mahabharata*, the Persian *Shahnameh*, the Finnish *Kalevala*, or John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, invites our admiration and reflection; it tells the story of origins and yet metamorphizes our own identity, transporting us

also today beyond our material existence by presenting heroes who rise to fame and glory and who also fail and come to a crushing end, all depending on the circumstances (Jansen and Maier, ed., 2004; Reitz and Finkmann, ed., 2019). Heroic literature could thus be defined as the equivalent of religious texts, offering mythology in fictional terms, providing entertainment and deep instructions about the absolute and final meaning of human existence at the extremes of life's ultimate challenges.

As Jean-Paul Sartre once said, "the collectivity passes to reflection and meditation by means of literature; it acquires an unhappy conscience, a lopsided image of itself which it constantly tries to modify and improve" (Sartre 1949, 297). Sarcastically, he added that the world could do very well without literature, but that it would even better without us. Nevertheless, as he also emphasizes prior to that, certainly revealing a streak of idealism, true and good literature speaks to fundamental morality, the goodness of humans, and our freedom to express our ideas and to explore the meaning of life (Sartre 1949, 62–63). Literature can, to be honest with itself, not embrace hatred, racism, and fascism, for instance, because it would be contradictory to the very nature of the written word in its highest spiritual nature: "the writer, a free man addressing free men, has only one subject – freedom" (Sartre 1949, 64).

It would be the freedom of the human spirit: "Writing is a certain way of wanting freedom; once you have begun, you are engaged, willy-nilly" (Sartre 1949, 65). This would certainly apply to all time periods, whether a society enjoyed modern democracy or not. The true literary work draws on the spirit hidden in the word, and makes that word speak out and sing its messages to a hungry listener/reader. We could thus conclude that the literary work brings to the surface what is the foundation of human existence, transforming the unspeakable into something speakable, making the ineffable comprehensible, translating the fundamental values of all life into narrative works.

What poem would not aim for just that goal? In that regard, I would identify and characterize poetry as the soul's music, as the sound of all living beings, the hidden harmony behind the material existence (Lerner 1964; Classen 2012). And poetry is also the very question regarding the meaning of the creative word; and from that perspective all literature reveals an hermeneutic dimension allowing us to embark on a fundamental investigation of who and what we are as human beings beyond our material dimension.

As Sartre emphasizes elsewhere, "the essence of the literary work is freedom totally disclosing and willing itself as an appeal to the freedom of other men" (Sartre 1949, 151). True literature hence brings about a form of spirituality and true self-consciousness, which is rarely if ever the case, though the poetic works of Mechthild of Magdeburg, Friedrich Hölderlin, Rainer Maria Rilke, or Ezra Pound, might confirm this phenomenon after all. However, literature aspires this transcendence and provides a narrative framework to work toward that goal, making visible and audible what otherwise would remain invisible and inaudible. This would then imply, as Sartre outlines, "to express the concrete universal to the concrete universal and that its end is to appeal to the freedom of men so that they may realize and maintain the reign of human freedom" (Sartre 1949, 160).

'Freedom' might be a too lofty purpose and goal of literature, since it sounds very political,

and much of world literature is not concerned with politics. Certainly, there are very political text, and some of the most powerful instruments in the struggle for freedom have been deeply literary, but we can easily imagine other goals as well. Bertolt Brecht's famous ballad "Legende von der Entstehung des Buches Taoteking auf dem Weg des Laotse in die Emigration" (Legendary Account About the Creation of the Book Taoteking on Laotse's Passage into Exile; better known as Laozi, in Chinese: 老子) from 1938 (for a text edition of the German original, along with a recorded reading, see online at: https://www.deutschelyrik.de/legende-von-der-entstehung-des-buches-taoteking-auf-dem-weg-des-laotse-in-die-emigration.html), which reflects on his own escape from the Nazis in Germany, deeply mirrors this very political dimension, but it is much more concerned with the sense of wisdom which Laozi had reached in his long life concerning the ultimate victory of soft water over the hard rock. Brecht references freedom, but his ballad goes far beyond this specific goal because the philosopher disappears in the mountains once he has written down his ideas, leaving an inheritance for us today, both in East and West.

Literature is, of course, very political as the philosopher dealt with by Brecht had understood the true power of ideals over matter, although he himself had to leave his country, driven away by evilness, or bad politics. However, the defeat of the hard rock happens only after thousands of years and after an infinite number of drops of water caving into the hard material in microscopic fashion. More important proves to be the insight that goodness will triumph over evilness in the end, and that truth rests in the poetic word which barely needs any physical support.

It would not need to be mentioned particularly, countless philosophers, from Plato and Aristotle down to Boethius, Thomas Aquinas, Nicholas of Cusa, Thomas More, or Immanuel Kant have discussed the very same issue, and the struggle to come to terms with good versus evil continues until today in moral, theological, ethical, and intellectual frameworks. Brecht's ballad simply states that the philosopher cannot stay in the world of evil and is thus forced to go into exile, but he leaves behind his thoughts and lessons finally recorded in writing, and insofar as the tollkeeper holds Laotzi back with the request to preserve his learning for posterity, poetry, as composed by this famous German thinker, addresses a fundamental need in human life. We need literature to sustain oneself in a dictatorial system, to preserve one's own ethics within an evil society, and to act like eternal water beating on the hard rock. The ideal would thus be equivalent to the drops of water, and hard reality would be equivalent with the rock the drops are deconstructing microscopic bit by microscopic bit, just as the poetic word shapes and models the human individuals within a hostile universe.

As the poet reveals, the philosopher had to leave his country because evilness had taken over and threatened goodness, so exile was in order. However, the toll keeper, realizing the importance of the philosopher's insights, asked him to stay for a while and to record his wisdom, which then also happens, which all transforms this ballad, like many other texts, into a literary medium of transfer of wisdom to posterity. At the same time, as Laotzi also realizes, power structure, military conflicts, victory and defeat are the stuff which interests all people, so grudgingly he agrees to write down his wisdom perhaps as a remedy against such violent strategies determining almost all people's lives, but more likely as an epistemological

instrument to come to terms with our harsh reality (Thomson and Sacks, ed., 2006; Bogosavljević, ed., 2009).

This is literature in its finest because the poet tells a story but infuses it with much philosophical reflections, and since there is no clear conclusion, with Laotzi simply departing from the toll-keeper's abode after having completed his book days later, we are left with the one critical message about water and the rock and must think about the entire political process, about our role as individuals in the endless flow of time, about the hope we might have in face of the super-rich and powerful, and, above all, about the minimal relevance of material goods which might grant temporary pleasures in an evil world and the infinite relevance of the poetic word to blaze the path toward a new existence, the utopia.

If we take into view numerous other aspects addressed here, we realize that the political issue is only one of many. Laotzi transports with him not much, only some white bread, his pipe to smoke with, and a favorite but little book. Much more important proves to be that he carries the deepest insights with him, and thus proves to be the richest person because of his wisdom. Of course, at the end Brecht also injects a self-reference, gives praise to the tollkeeper, i.e., to himself as a poet, because without the ordinary person asking the philosopher to explain in simple language what he has really learned and what it all means in the wider context of life, that wisdom could get lost. True literature thus can be identified as philosophy, religion, ethics, and aesthetics in verbal manifestations. As a narrative, it tells our live stories.

Poetry thus emerges as a carrier of ideas, values, and principles, as has always been the case throughout time. Obviously, I can only make some very subjective selections to illustrate the argument to be made, and each one could be easily complemented with parallel texts from anywhere else in the world. As Brecht's ballad powerfully illustrates, wisdom needs very little material goods and can survive even the worst external conditions. Granted, Laotzi teaches a very global message which might come true only thousands of years later, and yet, as Brecht's ballad illustrates so meaningfully, his words convey hope for freedom and justice, and this also for the downtrodden and poor people throughout the world. The conflict between the mighty and the subjugated has been ongoing throughout time, but both Laotzi and Brecht agree on the same point that might does not make right, and that might will not last forever, as the poetic word demonstrates.

Fable as Literature

We can gain further insight into the universal value of literature if we consider also the genre of the fable which has attracted writers throughout time in many different languages. While western literature was mostly determined by Aesop's fables (between ca. 620 and 564 B.C.E.), which were copied, translated, adapted, modified, and rewritten throughout the centuries until the very present, eastern literature witnessed the same phenomenon, with its tradition going back to the ancient Persian, if not Indian source of *Kalila and Dimna* (originally the *Panchatantra*).

Although animals populate those tales, those always stand in for human characters with all their foibles, shortcomings, and failures which we so urgently need to expose, analyze, and

improve if possible at all. Despite some differences in both traditions, the fable as a genre confirms the global need to have literary expressions of underlying concerns, ideals, values, and norms or rather their loss, transgression, and destruction. Human life is not easy, and each individual here on earth has to go through the same long-term process of learning all that what makes us to worthy members of our society.

We as people are not genetically endowed with honor and shame, we do not automatically feel a motor spring into action when our morals and ethics are at stake; instead, we must acquire the pilot light that will help us to steer the ship through the dark night. Without ethics and morality, however, there is no valid life, at least not by traditional human standards, and so we have to learn them all over and over again from infancy to adulthood and beyond.

Fables tell simple but striking stories, stories of universal value, and make a solid case about people's foolishness and ignorance, evil character and viciousness. They tell story that explain complex issues in simple fashion and thus are accessible to many different readers/listeners of all age groups, race, and gender. They are neither philosophical statements nor sermons, they do not instruct directly and yet they teach fundamental lessons, which everyone can easily comprehend. Thus, the fable represents one of the most interesting cases of literature because they cross many epistemological barriers and are accessible to everyone willing to listen to (Classen, intro. and trans. of Bonerius 2020).

We recognize thus in the fable a literary narrative which addresses critical issues in human existence, but makes it digestible through the narrative, as the Spanish poet Don Juan Manuel explained it, once again, in the prologue to his collection of didactic tales, *El libro del Conde Lucanor* (1335). Since many people seem to dislike reading instructional books, they easily turn away from pragmatic manuals or treatises and thus deprive themselves of the learning and understanding. Hence, a poet is needed who can cast the message in a sweet and pleasing framework. As the author explains it:

> I did this following the methods used by physicians: when they wish to prepare a medicine which will heal the liver, since the liver naturally likes sweet things, they mix sugar or honey or something sweet with the medicine designed to heal it; and because the liver likes anything sweet, it seeks to take it in and thus draws with it the medicine designed to do it good (Manuel, England, ed. and trans., 1987, 33).

All the stories contained in the *Libro del Conde Lucanor* follow the same pattern, just like the narratives in *Kalila and Dimna*, and we could easily expand on these and include many similar collections of fables which contain universal messages of great significance. Since Patronio always promises a good story which illuminates the critical issues which his master, Conde Lucanor, faces, the critical discussion becomes attractive even for those who are not intellectual because the fictional set-up smooths the way into the ethical, moral, and political conflicts and outlines guidelines how to cope with the problems in an efficient, satisfactory, and constructive fashion.

Literary entertainment thus proves to be, if realized on a high level, an hermeneutic

instrument of teaching of many different aspects. Little wonder that the Middle Ages knew much more and deeply appreciated didactic literature because it proved to be a most valuable instrument for learning the fundamental categories ad principles of courtly life (Ruys, ed., 2008).

A literary text operates on many different levels and conveys insights all depending on the use of metaphors, allegories, and symbols. Insofar as our lives are highly complex and very difficult to understand, even for the wisest person, we would probably do best to keep an open mind and accept that we are more than just material beings and consist also of a spiritual dimension. To live fully, we hence need to accept this inner depth of our being, as countless literary works have clearly demonstrated. Don Juan Manuel also intended to uncover this complexity through his storytelling, such as in no 49 where Patronio tells his lord about a custom in a kingdom to allow the king to rule absolutely for a year, but then to throw him out, completely naked and without any friends.

One day, there is a smart king who understands his future destiny, and while he still hangs on to power, he has secretly built a palace unknown to his people, well stocked with everything he might need. Indeed, at the end of the year, he is stripped of his power and cast out alone on an island all by himself, certainly trying to subjugate him under certain death. However, because of his foresight, that king has available for himself all of his life's needs, and he has set up also a circle of friends he can ask for certain things which he might have forgotten.

Patronio then explains this situation and reveals its allegorical meaning, applying it directly to his lord: "you know for certain that when you leave it [the world] as you must, you will depart from it naked, taking with you from the world only the works that you have done; make sure that the works you do are such that when you leave this world, you have built a home for yourself in the next, so that when you are cast out of this world naked, you will have a fine home for the whole of your life" (295).

True Life Needs True Literature

We must live deeply, as I indicated above, but what does that mean and how can we approach this meaningfully, since not everyone is a trained psychologist or therapist? A medieval example might illustrate this powerfully, once again a literary text which has talked to each for centuries.

In Hartmann von Aue's verse narrative, or novella, "Der arme Heinrich" (Hartmann von Aue, 2001; trans. as Poor Henry), a mighty prince turns into a leper and can only await his imminent death. Surprisingly, a medical doctor in Salerno (near Naples) has told him that he could get healed with the help of the blood of a young nubile willing to die for him, and he actually discovers such a person, the daughter of the farmer who is hosting Heinrich. After intensive rhetorical struggles with her parents, she is allowed to sacrifice herself, and both then travel to Salerno where she is going to die for her 'secret' beloved.

However, when Heinrich gazes through a hole in the wall and perceives her absolute and perfect beauty, he realizes how ugly he himself is and that he cannot accept this sacrifice. Although the young woman protests vehemently against the change of plans, Heinrich

remains adamant, and, as the narrator then comments, because God has recognized his change of heart, He allows him to get well again as a divine grace, and he subsequently marries the virgin, having identified her as the most worthy individual whom he loves as well.

There are many different possible approaches to this novella, which scholarship has recognized as one of the true masterpieces of medieval German literature (Hartmann von Aue, trans. Tobin, Vivian, and Lawson 2001). I myself have proposed some years ago that a truly meaningful interpretation would be to regard the young woman as the protagonist's own soul which has removed itself from the body and is prepared to die (Classen, "Herz und Seele," 2003). Heinrich gazes into the dark room and observes that the person lying on the operation table represents the most beautiful being in the world, whereas he himself, on the outside, in the light, is the ugliest. The protagonist thus quickly humbles himself, acknowledges his mortality, and accepts that his body will die soon. He wants to protect the soul and recognizes that its sacrifice is not worth his sick body.

The very moment, however, when Heinrich changes his heart and signals that he does not want the interior to be killed so that the exterior can live, God the speculator, as the narrator calls Him, observes that the protagonist has finally embraced his destiny and can thus be rewarded with his new life. The real sickness thus proves to be the separation of body and soul, and health is consequently achieved once again when both have reunified and accepted each other (Classen 2012). Of course, this might not be the only avenue to grasp the inner meaning of this verse narrative, and the openness of the metaphors employed here underscores the very nature of the literary dimension, inviting us to look more deeply, to explore the very meaning of human existence, and to become sensitive to the inner heart (Classen, "Herz und Seele," 2003).

We can experiment, probe, discuss, argue about, and question what the poet might have wanted to say, while we know for certain that the overarching theme pertains to the issue of health, both physical and spiritual. By means of the literary discourse, we are invited to examine the ambivalence, potentiality, endangerment, hope, and dreams associated with human existence. Insofar as the protagonist in this story undergoes such fundamental challenges and regains his health at the end because he has learned to look into the dark of his own self, does he gain his enlightenment.

The historical dimension of this text does not matter so much in our context, whereas we are invited to ponder on the centrally critical issues contained in the novella which appears to be highly relevant for us today as well. We can thus reach a critical insight into the ultimate relevance of literature because it turns into a medium of profound hermeneutics by which we can achieve enlightenment, whether in religious, philosophical, social, or ethical terms.

Global Literature – We are all in it together

Although it might be difficult at first sight for readers in the East to gain a reliable understanding of a text from the West, or vice versa, or from the South and North, ultimately, all literary texts from throughout time have constituted fundamental messages and tasks

which the individual listener and reader can and must receive and engage with. This is not to harmonize and to level everything; each culture, each language, each religion, and each period has its own literary expression, but on a more basic level, there is always the effort by a poet to address human issues and to express universal concerns, such as death, God, love, hope, anxiety, the search for the self and identity.

For that reason, it makes good sense to develop the notion of world literature, or global literature, even if the individual voices are immensely far apart, at least superficially (Seigneurie, ed.; Classen 2020, "The Global World"). What ancient Greek or Roman poets had to say about human suffering and happiness, what medieval courtly poets formulated so brilliantly with regards to love, the divine, and the meaning of death, what Renaissance and Baroque poets expressed so uniquely and yet universally about the vanity of all material existence and the genius of the human mind (Andreas Gryphius, Angelus Silesius, Catharina Regina von Greiffenberg; cf. Gryphius 1964; Mannack 1986; Browning 1971; Greiffenberg 1967), what modern poets such as Emily Dickinson (1830–1886) and Robert Frost (1874–1963) had to say about the individual within the natural context, all that continues to resonate with us deeply, and we realize fundamentally the true meaning of literature which proves to be timeless, after all, constantly resonating with us in the process of engaging with the text as a hermeneutic catalyst that makes life possible and meaningful in the first place.

The differences in language and even culture are technical difficulties, but not real barriers between people across the world. Even though translations are only the second best, they still represent major keys to open doors connecting many doors which have temporarily separated people across the globe. The concept of love might be different in rituals, ceremonies, and social approval, but the feeling itself can certainly be counted among the most fundamental ones in all of human existence, as the Japanese *Tale of Genji* by Murasaki Shikib (early eleventh century) illustrates so powerfully.

The greatest poets from throughout time, whether Ovid, Gottfried von Straßburg, William Shakespeare, Johann Wolfgang Goethe, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Pablo Neruda, William Butler Yeats, Jorge Luis Borges, Anne Bradstreet, Dr. Martin Luther King, Sylvia Plath, or Maya Angelou have offered to the world some of the most moving words which continue to plant themselves into our heart and make it grow. Our existence would be grey and irrelevant if we could not enjoy the spice of love which brings us together and transforms the individual into a new being conjoined with another person. However, we are deeply aware that it proves to be ineffable to come to terms with love, a highly evanescent concept or experience. People throughout time and space have enjoyed it, and life without love would be hardly worth it, or could not be called 'human life.' Hence, the literary discourse serves as the critical platform to explore its complex, often even paradox meaning, and provides narrative concepts to come to terms with one of the most powerful and yet inexplicable phenomena in all human existence.

Stunningly, one of the oldest love poems in Middle High German literature, a short anonymous stanza, composed maybe around 1170, truly says it all, whether the poet was male or female:

Du bist mîn, ich bin dîn,	You are mine, I am yours,
des solt du gewis sîn,	be assured of that,
du bist beslozzen	you are locked
in mînem herzen,	into my heart,
verlorn ist das sluzzelîn,	the key is lost,
du muost ouch immer darinne sin.	you will always have to stay in there

(https://lyricstranslate.com/en/du-bist-min-ich-bin-din-you-are-mine-i-am-yours.html; for the critical edition, see Moser and Tervooren, ed., 1988).

What a simple stanza this proves to be, and what power there is behind those few verses, expressing the highest degree of intimacy, love, and community, providing a moving image of the bonding between the two persons in love! There is no question that people need love, have always felt love throughout time, have puzzled about this strange phenomenon, and have written poems and songs about love. We are grasping thus one of the key components of all literature insofar as here the very essence of humanity comes to the fore and gains its most authentic expression. The poetic word in its musical aesthetics and philosophical dimension reveals itself as an epistemological instrument to uncover the world and ourselves and to recognize our spiritual being within an infinitude of existences (Back 2019).

We are not alone here in this world, but we know so little about it, about the other people, other cultures, other races, other concepts. Literature, however, reveals the infinite channels and pathways between us in our material existence and the divine, whatever this might entail in specific. We are only wanderers here on earth, and the more we can recognize the trails ahead of us, and also those we have trodden before, the more we are entitled to transform ourselves into what our potentiality has always implied.

Both Dante and Petrarch, both Chaucer and Marguerite de Navarre, both Sebastian Brant and Angelus Silesius, both Goethe and Emmerson, both Marguerite de Porète and Emily Dickinson had recognized that process of trailing through life and so implemented their poetic words for this search toward the human goal of us being to the fullest extent possible ourselves, if not something better (Classen, “Happiness,” 2021). Poetry, or literature at large, proves to be simply a phenomenon parallel to music, the visual arts, and to some extent also to architecture. But since we as humans possess the power of language, fictional texts powerfully function as the keys for our self-exploration, the examination of our natural and social environment, and for the search of the divine, which justifies our existence in the first place.

Final Thoughts

Since I composed this essay while teaching in the German Summer School at Middlebury College, Vermont, 2021, it seems appropriate to conclude with a few insights culled from the famous poet Robert Frost (1874–1963) who was associated with this college insofar as from

1921 to 1962 he regularly spent his summers and falls teaching at the Bread Loaf School of English of Middlebury College, at its mountain campus at Ripton, Vermont. For him, the poem could be defined as follows: "It begins in delight, it inclines to the impulse, it assumes direction with the first line laid down, it runs a course of lucky events, and ends in a clarification of life . . . in a monumentary stay against confusion. It has denouement" (Frost 1986, 2). It would be impossible to do justice to Frost's poetry at large, but we gain a little glimpse into his deepest thinking when we consider his poem "The Road Not Taken" (131), in which he expressed the same idea as Dante did on his way through the Underworld and up again. I cite here the first and the last stanza as my finale, so to speak:

> Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
>
> And sorry I could not travel both
>
> And be one traveler, long I stood
>
> And looked down one as far as I could
>
> To where it bent in the undergrowth.
>
> .....
>
> I shall be telling this with a sigh
>
> Somewhere ages and ages hence:
>
> Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –
>
> I took the one less traveled by,
>
> And that has made all the difference.

Indeed, we make decisions all the time, we face challenges and must select our paths. The rational mind can accomplish this task fairly easily, but then it pursues only a pragmatic, mechanically driven intention. There is, however, as Frost indicates, always an alternative, and we must choose at the crossroad where to go, whether to go, and how to go. There are many thoughts and emotions involved, and the poem serves exceedingly well to illustrate the internal struggle, the learning process, and the enlightenment occurring in that process.

To do more justice to non-Western literature would require the immersion into fictional worlds I am not really familiar with. I had to draw from what I am best familiar with. Nevertheless, we can assume that we are now on the right track, and we can thus hopefully apply our insights drawn from much of pre-modern Western literature to Eastern or Southern literature. We are all human, irrespective of our race, gender, or age, and we are all in need of human expression for our emotions, needs, desires, hopes, anxieties, and so forth. As evanescent poetry seems to be, as far-removed classical and medieval literature appears to be, it continues to address us directly today and across all borders.

The future of our existence relies deeply on the past and elevates those pre-modern poems or plays into fictional catalysts for our own epistemological quest. Little wonder that we are still

deeply inspired by Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* (ca. 1205), Gottfried von Straßburg's *Tristan* (ca. 1210), Johannes von Tepl's *The Plowman* (ca. 1400), and the verse narratives by Heinrich Kaufringer (ca. 1400). The *lais* by Marie de France (ca. 1170–1180) or her *fables* (ca. 1190–1200) are as valuable to us as the anonymous Middle English alliterative romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (ca. 1370) or the allegorical works by the Pearl Poet. Old Norse saga literature appeals to us just as much as eighteenth-century enlightenment plays or nineteenth-century realistic novels.

While this reads like a canonical list of medieval and early modern literature, we can be certain that in our quest we can and must consult other texts from the European landscape. And from there we are invited to extend our perspectives toward the East, and hopefully encounter the same curious gaze directed toward the West. There is only one human race, and despite our many material differences, we are, after all, just one family, as the literature from all time periods indicates. As long as there is poetry, as long there is hope for the survival of the human spirit because the literary word is the mouthpiece of our soul, and that of our natural environment. As Robert Frost emphasized in a satirical fashion: "Don't donkey's ears suggest we shake our own?" (160).

I would like to conclude with two of his stanzas which might say it all in the most concise manner, his "Fragmentary Blue":

> Why make so much of fragmentary blue
>
> In here and there a bird, or butterfly,'
>
> Or flower, or wearing-stone, or open eye,
>
> When heaven presents in sheets the solid hue?
>
> Since earth is earth, perhaps, not heaven (as yet) –
>
> Though some savants make earth include the sky;
>
> And blue so far above us comes so high,
>
> It only gives our wish for blue a whet. (267)

Literature has always been with us and will stay with us because it is not an entity all by itself in a hermeneutic fashion. Instead, it comes into being because of us and it exists as the result of our need to express ourselves, to discover who we are in depth, and what true concerns exist in our world, both material and spiritual. There are many dark and light aspects in our being, which come to the surface from time to time, whether fear, hope, anger, delight, or simply faith in a divine being, if they dominate us constantly. Those emotions and sentiments, those ideals and values require critical engagement, and that's what poetry is best prepared to serve. We could also say that literature elevates us out of our mundane existence and allows us to perceive what is valuable and dangerous simultaneously.

Dante's *Divina Commedia* might be the best formulation of this dialectics of our existence,

Inferno and *Paradiso*, and we find ourselves on the path either down to the bottom or up to the top. Life is a labyrinth, and we can only hope that poetic guidance provides us with a pilot light in the obscurity of our wandering from birth to death. Death is not to be feared, since it is our companion, and sometimes we are invited to laugh about and with it, and sometimes we find ourselves deeply immersed into it, as the collection of novellas by Werner Bergengruen (1892–1964), *Death from Reval* (1939; here trans. 2021), humorously relates.

Laughter and crying are closely connected, and so are vice and virtue, belief and disbelief, critical thinking and emotions. The literary platform makes it possible to probe the infinitude of the human existence in all of its paradoxical, contradictory, often foolish, playful, bitter, hateful, and also loving manifestations; it opens many new dimensions, and it allows us to listen to the music of all the worlds in one harmony, if we so desire and/or are sensitized to (Classen, "Music," 2021). Poetry, to put it simply, constitutes the deep voice, the sound of the spirit, and serves thus as a sounding board of all of our lives. Of course, literature often seems highly fragile, fluid, evanescent, if not transient, but it is, really, the essence of what makes us human. For a recent collection of haiku composed primarily during the Covid-19 pandemic, I used the title, *Deep Poetic Gazes into the World* (Classen 2021), and I believe that this phrase proves to be both timeless and most meaningful.

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