

Article

## The Challenges of the Humanities, Past, Present, and Future: Why the Middle Ages Mean So Much for Us Today and Tomorrow

Albrecht Classen

Department of German Studies, The University of Arizona, 301 LSB, Tucson, AZ 85721, USA;  
E-Mail: aclassen@email.arizona.edu; Tel.: +1-520-621-1395; Fax: +1-520-626-8268

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**Abstract:** Every generation faces the same challenge, to engage with the past and to cope with the present, while building its future. However, the questions and problems inherent in human life remain the same. It is a given that our society can only progress if we work toward handling ever newly rising demands in appropriate ways based on what we know and understand in practical and theoretical terms; but the drumming toward the future cannot be a one-way street. Instead, we have to operate with a Janus-faced strategy, with one eye kept toward tomorrow, and the other eye toward yesterday. Culture is, however we want to define it, always a composite of many different elements. Here I argue that if one takes out the past as the foundation of culture, one endangers the further development of culture at large and becomes victim of an overarching and controlling master narrative. This article does not insist on the past being the absolute *conditio sine qua non* in all our activities, but it suggests that the metaphorical ship of our cultural existence will not operate successfully without an anchor, the past. I will illustrate this claim with reference to some examples from medieval literature, philosophy, and religion as they potentially impact our present in multiple fashions.

**Keywords:** medieval literature; relevance of the past for the future; Jesuits; Boethius; Hildebrandslied; Gautier de Coinci; Marie de France; Christine de Pizan; Hartmann von Aue; Meister Eckhart

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One of the critical questions which medievalists face above all pertains to the foundation of their own discipline and its relevance in the modern world. By the same token, of course, many other

cultural historians, to cast the net as widely as possible, find themselves in the same boat because as time moves on, each new generation turns away from the past in order to find its own path toward the future. When I studied history in the late 1970s and 1980s, I met many peers for whom 1789, or the French Revolution, was the absolutely earliest starting point of anything having any relevance for us today. I am afraid that this time limit has moved by now up to 1945, or to the end of the Second World War. And we will have to wait only a few years until the next generation might use 1989, the fall of the Berlin Wall, or the Iraq War since 2003 (until 2011) as the exclusively relevant marker for their own historical time frame. In other words, the issue is highly relative and fluent, yet the basic concern never changes and needs to be addressed constantly again because the importance of past ideas for the present does not go away, except that the attention and interest by the present generation is fading. Literature departments at North American universities tend not to shy away from cutting positions located in the premodern world, and replacing them with new ones dealing with film, minority literature, immigration issues, or business and marketing strategies. The situation, unfortunately, might be even worse in the U.K., in the southern European countries, and probably also in the northern countries. I cannot address the case of Asian, African, South-American, or Australian countries.

It is, however, fully understandable and logical in a certain sense that the past, a very broad and nebulous term by itself, does not necessarily carry relevance for the future generations at first sight. There must be some direct connections, some intercultural significance, otherwise we might compare apples with oranges and throw in anything smacking of history without explaining why we need to learn about previous periods, literature, philosophy, or art works in order to cope with our lives in a well-informed, efficient, and comprehensive manner.

Granted, any history can be of interest, and the more exotic it is, the better for some people who pursue it as a hobby, but not as an epistemological instrument to understand oneself or the society we live in. Yet then we run into the typically postmodern problem that we increasingly will be at a loss how to justify the teaching of history at a time of shrinking resources, and soon enough history as a school subject, at least a history extending prior to 1989 or 1945, might no longer be offered, becoming another victim of the ever-growing corporatization of our education system that seems to prefer future customers as its 'end-products' instead of cultured and informed individuals. With history here I mean to include all aspects of historical culture, such as literature, religion, art history, philosophy, and the like.

Moreover, history in itself is a vast and complex field, and the more one enters into details, the more the study of a specific period grows and expands, almost to an infinitude. For example, Europeans still tend to mock at the short time span of the U.S. history of a little more than two hundred years by now, considering that they themselves can look back to at least two thousand years and more. However, the U.S. history has been vital for the entire western world, and it has been highly complex, so there is no shortage of valuable, relevant, and significant aspects pertaining to that subject matter which continues to have a deep impact on our daily lives, as we discuss, for instance, the proper interpretation of the Constitution or the Bill of Rights. U.S. students might have to study U.S. history just as long as they would need, for instance, with respect to the entire European Middle Ages (*ca.* 500 to *ca.* 1500), depending on the approach pursued.

Actually, the North American culture must be divided into a pre- and a post-colonial period, which immediately takes us back to 1492. In other words, both the European and the American continent are

directly linked in historical terms, insofar as the fundamental changes of the European economy and the political system from the sixteenth century onward strongly depended on the impact of the Americas, and the arrival of the European settlers changed the political landscape of the New World for good.

One could even argue, and this with good justification, that the U.S. history is actually deeply grounded in the enormously rich history of the native people of North America, extending as far back as at least four thousand years [1] and [2]. Considering the Southwest (Arizona, New Mexico, and Southern California), for example, we would have to include first the history of the missionary activities by the Jesuits [3], then the truly medieval history of the ancient people in that region who have left numerous ruins behind, especially all over Arizona and New Mexico, and finally the history of their predecessors, especially the Cochise, Hohokam, Anasazi, Sinaguas, and Mogollon, some of whom had built, as we have learned only recently, huge irrigation channels and had developed an elaborate culture a very long time before the first white settlers appeared in that region [4] and [5].

All those aspects might seem far-fetched and irrelevant for European readers today, but they demonstrate that the latter cannot simply pride themselves of being heirs of the most important culture in the world, an observation which no longer needs to be commented on since postmodernity. Moreover, the Jesuits, above all, maintained since the late seventeenth century an intensive communication network between both continents and delivered extensive information about the so-called Pimería Alta to their superiors, friends, and families. We know, for instance, of the Swiss Jesuit missionary Philipp Segesser (1689–1762), who left behind an extensive correspondence, and also shipped a considerable quantity of objects he had collected in the New World back home [6]. The founding father of the Jesuit mission was, of course, Padre Eusebio Kino (1645–1711), but I do not want to trace the entire history of Jesuit missionary activities in the Sonoran Desert here. All these remarks only serve to stress how much our approach to history can be relativized, and that the importance of specific aspects of this or that history can be debated from many different perspectives, depending on the vested interests by the targeted audience and the scholars involved. In other words, (post)modernity is not necessarily the only criteria when we want to investigate human culture.

All this boils down to the fundamental concern, once again, how much the past matters for the present and our future. Only a historical perspective can appropriately alert us to the presence of a master narrative that might dominate, or manipulate, our thinking and mentality until today, not allowing minority voices and alternative ideas come to the fore [7]. Of course, for many scholars in the Humanities this would be tantamount to carrying coals to Newcastle since we have been struggling with this concern for a long time, but this does not exempt us from studying as carefully as possible the implications and corollaries of past cultures for us today once again. History matters, and without an awareness of the past the foundation upon which we will build the future might be rather shaky. I will exemplify my approach to this question below with examples selected from medieval literature, philosophy, and religion.

It is very possible, of course, that the public would not simply accept our claims and refer us quickly to the huge problems which our world faces today: the need for more or renewable energy, sufficient food supply for an ever growing world population, the dangers of global climate change, gender equality, or rather, the lack thereof, immigration issues, medical health care issues, world

conflicts among the Muslim populations and the war between Eastern terrorist groups and the Western world, *etc.* The study of the past has apparently not much to do with those huge concerns.

Or does it, after all? We live today by what our predecessors created for us, and the value system of the past continues to shape our thinking and frame of mind. The battle cries of the medieval crusades are, tragically, not forgotten in certain quarters, and hatred and revenge for past injustices and violence continue to incite radicals all over the world. Fortunately, the most fundamental question that immediately arises does not have to be addressed here since otherwise we would re-invent the wheel at a time when we might be close to abandon the metaphorical vehicle altogether and discover futuristic modes of transportation without wheels. This pertains to the role and function of the Humanities at large, which do not, of course, answer any of those questions and do not work toward the goal, for instance, of discovering new ways how to produce more and better food [8]. Yet, our world would not be what it is without literature, history, religion, art history, philosophy, *etc.* Undoubtedly, we cannot live without food, but an existence perhaps protected in material terms but void of ideas would not be worth the term we call it by [9]. Oddly, Robert G. Bednarik polemically argues that the humanities “have no utility; they exist purely for their own sake” ([10], p. 70). He suggests that the humanities should learn from the science and submit under the refutability concept, but he seems to dream of a return of nineteenth-century positivism, and this at a time of postmodernity when even the foundations of sciences have become unstable. After all, the Humanities do not necessarily deal with so-called ‘facts,’ but with human issues which can be conditioned by facts, or interact with facts, but really address non-material aspects. There are facts, of course, in the history of literature, arts, religion, and philosophy, but the critical issues in the Humanities pertain to the discourse about ideas, concepts, and, above all, values. These are established not through inheritance or logical deductions, but through the engagement with the past and the present in a constructive conversation.

A sleuth of excellent studies has taken up the question recently what the Humanities really mean and how they fit into our society, because it addresses also the very core of the school and university system all over the world. In brief, Humanities scholars (perhaps, of course, because they might have vested interests) have argued, virtually in unison, that human society consists of more than material possessions and requires the Humanities as an academic discipline to deal with everything else in human life beyond the physical dimension [11–15].

Already Tacitus had emphasized that the ultimate purpose of history is to learn about virtuous individuals, and hence about virtues, that is, as we would call it today, ethics and morality, two aspects that we can never inherit from our parents and must learn anew in each individual’s life [16]. Even though Friedrich Nietzsche had warned us of too much history, that is, of an excessive absolutization of past events and people to the detriment of our understanding of the present and the future, he also reached the insight, in Georg Simmel’s terms, of life being both past and future. Martin Heidegger developed this further and claimed that human life is really part of an ever forward marching temporality at one and the same time [17,18]. In other words, we live in a time-space continuum that thrives because of its double perspectives, looking backward and forward at the same time, and in order to maintain the harmonious balance, we just cannot afford to neglect the historical dimension which could be compared, so to speak, with the genetic code of all living existence. Life then represents the evolution of that genetic material, even if that does not happen necessarily in a progressive fashion.

One of the more critical areas in the Humanities that are under attack today, at least within the universities, though not so much in the public, proves to be the study of the Middle Ages, whereas the Classics seem to continue enjoying, even politically, a high degree of respect, perhaps because all the founding fathers of the U.S., among many others, were thoroughly trained in that field. In fact, with regard to the Middle Ages we observe a curious divergence because the interest in things medieval, as manifested in medieval fairs, medieval movies, medieval tournaments (see the Society for Creative Anachronism or Medieval Fairs), medieval castles, medieval weapons, and so forth, is growing in leaps and bounds, and this already for several decades now. In many ways American popular culture, for instance, is deeply grounded in the glorification and idealization of the mythical King Arthur, the famous Round Table, the sword Excalibur, and many other aspects and objects pertaining to courtly society [19,20]. In many ways, the Middle Ages appear as a world in which aura and charisma, but then also the ideal of honor were still more or less intact, thus providing material for modern dreams about true human values lost in the capitalistic humdrum of modern life [21].

By contrast, the interest in studying the Middle Ages in a serious, scholarly fashion, which would imply acquiring the necessary linguistic competence (Latin, medieval vernaculars), learning the historical and religious background, then also studying the philosophical treatises and scientific tracts, or exploring the history of medieval art, is shrinking quite rapidly, and the laments by medieval scholars about this decline all over the world are loud and clear [22–24]. But such problems are challenges to be tackled in a constructive way, and the subsequent part of this paper will outline some strategies and concepts allowing us to confirm, once again, how much the critical study of the past in general terms can only buttress the analysis of the present, and hence lay the foundation for the future. As a side note, students of Classics have to work hard as well to acquire the necessary tools, but within the academia this field seems to enjoy a higher respect than the Middle Ages, which might seem to be more like a play thing for the decision makers than a serious subject matter.

Curiously, despite huge difficulties everywhere, perhaps mostly coming from the administrative side where enrollment figures matter the most, medieval research is booming, and the output of new critical studies on the Middle Ages is truly astounding. Scholars flock to the major medieval conferences, and journals focused on the medieval past are thriving [25]. Increasingly scholars have energetically argued that many aspects determining the Middle Ages can easily prove to be model cases for the exploration of our present and future, such as the concept of the nation, or rather, the absence thereof, the engagement with representatives of foreign cultures and religions, the approach to nature (ecocriticism) [26], and the understanding of Europe in the past as a model for the Europe of the future, without real borders and grounded in a shared Latinate or oral-vernacular culture [27].

When medievalists discuss the phenomena of identity formation, difference as cultural practice, transgressing of borders as a creative process, and of cosmopolitanism, they draw from medieval situations, but really probe universal issues pertaining to all people, thus bring together past and present in a most productive manner [28,29]. Multilingualism and the exchange of cultures are not exclusively modern aspects, but were already intensively negotiated throughout the entire premodern world. The current discourse on immigration, amazingly perhaps for modernists, proves to be nothing but the continuation of a long tradition, even if some of the social and religious parameters have changed requiring a modulation and adaptation of the instruments dealing with those issues [30,31].

This is not to deny the strong alterity of the Middle Ages, but every stage of our past falls into that category, including the Classics. In the Western world, for instance, there is a very strong trend to concentrate on medieval Europe, instead of medieval Japan or China, simply because of direct lines connecting that world with us. We certainly need to demonstrate, as Marcus Bull has called it, “respect for the extraordinary diversity of human experience” ([32], p. 5), and the Middle Ages represent, simply put, one of many significant facets of human life in the past. We need many of those facets to understand who we really are today and where we have come from. After all, to follow Bull to the very end of his argument, alterity is an essential component of all human cultures, both past and present, and to study the Middle Ages alerts us to the very nature of ourselves, but seen through a historical lens ([32], p. 141).

Although the Greek philosopher Heraclit had formulated that no one can ever step into the same river twice since everything keeps flowing and nothing stays the same, neither the river itself with its riverbed and water nor the person trying to cross the river. This applies to us as well, being the avatars of the past. Considering how much scholars are examining and studying the history of everyday life, of gender relationships, the history of generational conflicts, of racism and homophobia, for instance, and taking into account such critical issues such as the relationship between orality and literacy, the exploration of the senses and desires, we can fathom how much the past altogether, at least the European Middle Ages, has become much closer to us than ever before. We still notice clearly marked differences in social, economic, religious, and philosophical terms (e.g., feudalism versus democracy, a manuscript culture versus a print and a computerized culture), but we recognize, as the result of ongoing research, more strongly than perhaps ever before how much we as modern people have been shaped and influenced by our medieval past, and hence have evolved on the basis of our predecessors, sometimes hundreds of years or almost a millennium ago [33].

Simon Gikandi recently made the excellent observation that some, if not many, of the most important literary and social critics of the twentieth century had been exiles, and that their exile had, perhaps not so unexpectedly, provided them with an important platform from which they were much more empowered to view their world back home than those who had stayed without being completely integrated into their new country or culture. “It is in the works of the exiles of the twentieth century that one can discover literary criticism functioning as a project of the human subject outside nation, outside the imperium of humanism, in the place of the other, in the language of the other. Confronted with the abyss presented by slavery, genocide, or the violence of empire, writers and critics would seek refuge in the house of criticism” ([34], p. 522).

In a curious but far-reaching analogy, we can identify the past also as an exile, even if a temporary and voluntary one only for the scholar and reader turned critic. By studying literary and historical texts from the Middle Ages, for instance, we transplant ourselves for a short time into a different mind-set, a different culture, language, religion, and social context and thus gain an outside perspective from the past to the present. However, just as in the case of a modern exile, the observable difference is not so huge as to destroy all bridges to the own self and the home culture. As much as the exiles wrote about their own identity and the culture of the world left behind (see already Ovid, or the medieval heroic figure of Dietrich) [35], as much the cultural historian can transpose him/herself into the past and thus gain a new vantage point through which the modern world can be viewed in a new light.

Referring to the South African writer and author Es'kia Mphahlele, Gikandi insightfully notes, which certainly applies to our current reflections in a metaphorical sense: “exile, which would appear to many people to be the name and logic of homelessness, was the instrument of one’s self-alienation. And this self-alienation was connected to a powerful ideal of freedom” ([34], p. 525). Turning to Medieval Studies, we would certainly not need to search for political freedom, but it proves to be refreshing and illuminating to build a distance to the paradigm of our modern world in order to grasp truly what is going on today, now seen through the lens of the past. Or, in Gikandi’s words, the historical ‘exile’ facilitates criticism as “a conduit outside systems of domination” ([34], p. 526). Critics of the modern world are best qualified if they have a thorough understanding of the past and can pinpoint the roots of specific phenomena determining the present world.

Of course, we in the West live in democracies, but the emergence of this type of government happened not too long ago and there are still many countries in the world where democracy either does not exist or is even adamantly opposed. Moreover, there is no absolute guarantee that we can maintain the democratic system in the future; hence it remains absolutely mandatory to remember how the entire process and intellectual discourse was set in motion in the past to reach us today. Intriguingly, the entire issue of the power relationship between a king/ruler and the people was already of central concern for such medieval thinkers as John of Salisbury (*ca.* 1120–1180), William of Ockham (*ca.* 1285–1347), or Marsiglio da Padua (*ca.* 1275–*ca.* 1342) ([36,37]; [38], pp. 296–308). We would not necessarily have to rely on their insights to gain an understanding of the theoretical implications of a ruler assuming too much power to the detriment of the people, but if we want to comprehend the historical discourse about the proper relationship between God and a ruler, and then the people, which takes us directly to our own western-style democracies, the voices of these two medieval philosophers certainly deserve to be listened to, and this still in 2013 and well beyond [39].

Both in practical and theoretical terms I have over the years investigated how to innovate Medieval Studies for the modern student generation and how to bring medieval texts to life again [40,41]. To meet my own needs, I have recently created a new textbook, which is now available already in its second revised edition [42]. Beginning with Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy* (*ca.* 525), this book provides a large selection of relevant texts which all hail from the Middle Ages and invite critical readings and epistemological challenges insofar as they contain, as I would contend, profound, timeless messages about human problems, concerns, ideals, fears, aggressions, and other notions and hence prove to be of greatest significance for the modern discourse about those very same issues.

Following, I will briefly touch on some of the most fascinating texts and outline in shortest terms possible what kind of message can be found contained in them in order to illustrate how texts from the late antiquity through the entire Middle Ages, for instance, can serve to provide important material for our discourse on universal concerns and problems. Boethius, for instance, probes the question what constitutes mis/fortune and surprisingly reaches the insight that there is no real misfortune because humans do not own anything really, not even their own bodies and health. Everything is on a loan, so to speak, from fortune, which can take that health away any time. True happiness rests much more deeply in the natural instinct toward the good, which explains why so-called evil people in reality are not fully evil, but rather blind and weak and cannot even move on their own toward the natural goal of merging with Goodness or the Godhead; hence the more evil things they commit, the more they eliminate themselves and actually deserve pity and commiseration.

In the Old High German “Song of Hildebrand” (ca. 820), we encounter a warrior father in direct confrontation with his son who assumes that Hildebrand died already a long time ago. Lack of communication and a bitter adherence to traditional feudal values ultimately terminate their feeble attempts at establishing a communication; finally weapons replace their words, and although this short epic poem ends in a fragment, we can safely assume that tragedy strikes both men, either the father killing his son, or the other way around, or both murdering the other. Here, as in so many other cases, we can recognize how much literary texts prove to be platforms for the exploration of communication, a fundamental concern for people of all times [43].

In Gautier de Coinci’s “Our Lady’s Tumbler” (ca. 1220–1230) a very simple man, who had been allowed to join a monastery, desperately tries to find his own way of worshiping God. Being illiterate and unlearned, he cannot participate in any of the monks’ rituals and ceremonies, but he eventually discovers the quiet crypt where he can resort to his own skills, tumbling, and thus he establishes an intensive though highly idiosyncratic service in honor of the Virgin Mary who graces him, in a vision which only the abbot and another monk secretly observe, with her appearance. Leaving the strongly Catholic aspect aside, what matters for us the most here is the realization that the humble tumbler, deeply filled with his idealism and belief, does not allow the other monks, in their learnedness and cultivation, to sidetrack him, although he is very afraid of their criticism. Although he does not know how to venerate the Virgin Mary according to the monastic norms and conventions, he proves to be more devout than the entire community, obviously being more passionate and pious than them, clearly demonstrated by the vision, even though he himself is not aware of it. As Gautier clearly signals, transcending all cultural barriers, true idealism and passion cannot be stifled or suppressed, while learning and cultural rituals carry the danger of turning into rote and empty ceremonies.

The timeless value and importance of the *Lais* by Marie de France (ca. 1170–ca. 1200) and of the theoretical writings by Christine de Pizan (ca. 1364–ca. 1429), especially about her struggle to defend women and to argue for their independence, are so well known by now that we do not need to discuss these two authors. However, it is still worth pointing out how much both created texts that deeply appeal to modern-day readers for a variety of reasons. As Sharon Kinoshita and Peggy McCracken emphasize in the conclusion of their monograph on Marie, “in our time she is remembered as one of the most important authors of the Middle Ages” ([44], p. 218). As to Christine de Pizan, Nadia Margolis concludes how much this amazing and highly prolific writer continues to appeal to a wide range of audience, especially today, serving now even as a “feminist-cultural icon” ([45], p. 156).

Even with regard to the question of possible toleration and tolerance medieval writers had much to contribute, as recent research has uncovered, although we might want to reserve the emergence of the latter notion more for the eighteenth century [46,47]. Famous theologians and philosophers, poets and historians could be mentioned here who all contributed, in one way or the other, to the development of this arduous and thorny path, such as Peter Abelard, Ramon Llull, Marsilio Ficino, or Giovanni Pico della Mirandola. Tolerance by itself proves to be a complex issue and represents the results of an ongoing discourse over the centuries, representing an ideal that we today in the West would like to uphold, though it is more than self-evident how fragile this ideal can be. Insofar as we are part of and contributors to that discourse, which deeply impacts us on a daily basis, it certainly behooves us, in order to further and accentuate that discourse, to listen to the past voices and pay attention to their concerns, troubles, and struggles in that regard.

As the current Dalai Lama has insightfully formulated, our world can only progress and reach a constructive future if we embrace compassion, tolerance, justice, inner values, *i.e.*, spirituality, and ethical and moral ideals [48]. All these elements identify a highly developed and civilized society, but they are very hard to achieve and then to maintain; so the struggle for them goes on. Understanding, however, how they at first emerged and then gradually developed throughout the Middle Ages and beyond, strongly contributes to continued promotion of such values. Humanity is covered by only a very thin veneer of positive ideals, aimed at collaboration, support, empathy, and love, so just a tiny spark can rip off that veneer and throw a whole society into the abyss of chaos and violence, whether we think of the conditions in Kosovo from 1998 to 1999 or in Egypt in 2013.

This also applies to the probably most important aspect of human existence, the experience of love. But love is not simply a passion, deeply driven by hormones and other chemicals; instead it reflects on the spiritual side of our lives and also needs to be informed by ethical values (love is commitment, communication, compromise, collaboration, compassion, and community). This finds an excellent expression in the courtly verse narrative “Der arme Heinrich” (Poor Henry) by the Middle High German poet Hartmann von Aue (fl. *ca.* 1170–*ca.* 1200) [49]. The protagonist contracts leprosy and faces certain death, since there was no medical treatment of this sickness. A medical doctor in Salerno (near Naples) tells him, however, that if he could find a young, nubile woman willing to die for him, her blood would help him to recover—clearly a narrative motif borrowed from miracle stories and fairy tales, hence completely unrealistic, as the protagonist realizes himself since he despairs when he has learned of that advice and retires to a farm to await his certain death.

Years pass, when he finally reveals to the farmer and his family what the doctor had told him. In the meantime, one of the daughters had obviously fallen in love with Heinrich, and now decides to sacrifice herself for him. Her arguments defending her determination to give her heart blood for the young nobleman prove to be so convincing that everyone believes that the Holy Spirit must have spoken through her. The sick prince and the girl travel to Salerno and the doctor then prepares the operation, when Heinrich hears the sound of the sharpening of the knife. Curious and concerned, he gazes through a hole in the wall and suddenly recognizes who that girl really is. He virtually faces an apparition within the operation room, recognizing the absolute beauty of the naked female body, while he realizes his own physical and spiritual ugliness. Thereupon Heinrich immediately changes his heart and suddenly accepts God’s will, now being ready to die and to spare the girl’s life.

Although the latter bitterly fights against the changing of the plans, since she had hoped to gain fast access to heaven and thence to avoid all the problems of adult life here on earth, the male protagonist remains firm and returns home with her. In that moment God acknowledges Heinrich’s transformation into a humble person and a good Christian and so lets him become well again. At the end the prince marries the farmer’s daughter, which makes a good happy end. We must, of course, apply an allegorical, if not anagogical, reading to this story to make sense of it, otherwise it would have to be regarded as a naive and sentimental religious tale of little relevance. If we understand the girl to represent Heinrich’s soul, and his leprosy as an expression of the turn away from his spiritual self, then the healing and ultimate marriage constitute the reunification of body and soul and the recovery of human life in spiritual terms [50].

Our reading, which solves a profound crux in Hartmann research, illustrates how much a literary text, from the past or the present, is empowered, to use Paul Ricoeur’s words, “to transcend its own

psycho-sociological conditions of production and thereby to open itself to an unlimited series of readings, themselves situated in socio-cultural contexts which are always different” ([51], p. 91). In other words, medieval texts might certainly carry more meaning for us today than modern literature, which is not to reject the latter as a centrally important medium of the cultural ideals and values of our own times. We can use Hartmann’s narrative exceedingly well to explore the body-mind relationship and to fathom strategies how to overcome the blindness which the physical existence tends to impose on us in epistemological terms.

After all, the protagonist resorts to gazing and discovers a way for him to look inside, an extraordinarily useful metaphor for our attempts to gain spirituality or to connect with our inner self, truly a significant epiphany [52]. Not surprisingly, Dante’s *Divina Commedia* has proven to be as meaningful today as the poems by Walther von der Vogelweide or the plays by William Shakespeare. They all represent powerful and meaningful voices about the soul’s quest, not the only ones to the exclusion of their modern counterparts, but strong voices in the same huge choir called Humanities.

The world would be different today if St. Francis of Assisi (*ca.* 1181–1226) had not stepped forward and had preached to his audiences, developing innovative ideas about true spirituality in practical terms. Undoubtedly, his messages of humbleness, peacefulness, and love transcend all cultures and periods until today, irrespective of his complete submission under the Catholic Church [53,54]. Most uniquely, he went so far as to advocated for a “species equality as opposed to speciesism; that is, the equality of all beings as part of God’s creation, instead of a strictly anthropomorphic and hierarchical worldview of inherent human superiority” ([55], p. 43). In a way, we might call him an ecocritic *avant la lettre*, pursuing a “theistic, ecocentric environmental ethic, or more commonly *creation spirituality*” ([55], p. 44). Even though Francis was not a biologist or environmentalist in the modern sense of the term, he certainly created the principles of spiritual ecology and biophilism, perceiving the natural world as the closest we can get to experience God [56]. His soft voice from the early thirteenth century powerfully resonates with us until today and promises to stay with us because of his profound messages that continue to serve us exceedingly well to transcend the material confinements of our existence.

I would like to conclude with some remarks on the profound and universally relevant sermons and treatises by the German philosopher and mystic (?) Meister Eckhart (*ca.* 1260–1327/1238), who has fascinated religious scholars, philosophers, and literary researchers ever since [57]. As Dermot Moran urges us to consider, “Eckhart has to be read as both belonging to and radically renewing the tradition of negative theological writers that runs from Proclus and Dionysius through Johannes Scottus Eriugena, Maimonides, Albertus Magnus, and subsequently goes on to Nicholas of Cusa. At the same time, as a Parisian academic and a Dominican theologian, Eckhart absorbed and in many ways reinterpreted the central tenets of the new Aristotelian philosophy of being promulgated by Thomas Aquinas and other neo-Aristotelians in the Paris Arts Faculty” ([58], pp. 675–76).

In fact, postmodern literary theory would not be completely understandable without recognizing the influence which Eckhart exerted, for instance, on Georges Batailles, Jacques Derrida, and others [59], and this particularly because of his teachings on apophaticism, the human inability to speak about God ([60], pp. 35, 38–39, 116).

There are many debates as to whether Meister Eckhart was a mystic [61], or simply a theologian and philosopher ([62], pp. 465–84). For our context it only matters that his thoughts excited both his

contemporaries and his posterity until today, here disregarding his vehement critics. In his *Talks of Instruction* (ca. 1300), for instance, we come across a host of amazing thoughts and ideas that naturally provoked the traditional Church and ultimately caused the Pope John XXII to condemn this teacher as a heretic on March 27, 1329 [63].

Considering how much Eckhart insists on pursuing a free mind, but this in a religious sense, we can easily recognize why representatives of Eastern religions have recognized a kindred spirit in him. He defines the free mind as “one which is untroubled and unfettered by anything, which has not bound its best part to any particular manner of being or devotion and which does not seek its own interest in anything but is always immersed in God’s most precious will” ([64], p. 5). The individual ought to strive toward the unification with the Godhead by way of abandoning the self as much as possible. Relying on the own self-will removes the hope for peace, hence the only possible first step to achieve illumination would consist of taking leave of oneself and also of the material existence; this then would pave the way toward the encounter with God ([63], p. 6).

Most critically, the individual must detach from him/herself ([63], p. 8) in order to allow God to enter the soul. Quite similarly to St. Francis, Eckhart also emphasizes that God is to be found in all things since He consists of the entire material existence as His external manifestation ([63], p. 9). The true believer needs to turn inside and neglect the outside wherever s/he goes because God is to be found “in the heart, in an inner motion of the spirit towards him and striving for him, and not just in thinking about him always and in the same way” ([63], p. 10). Looking for external solitude would not help unless the individual has found inner solitude: “We must learn to break through things and to grasp God in them, allowing him to take form in us powerfully and essentially” ([63], p. 11).

With a good will, virtually everything can be achieved, and those things one wants are closer to the individual than objects that might be lying in the lap but are not wanted ([63], p. 15). That will, however, must not have selfhood and must have gone out of itself. Nevertheless, even the greatest ecstasy and experience of the Godhead in one self would be only secondary compared to a demonstration of true love toward another person, poor and suffering ([63], p. 17). After all, as Eckhart emphasizes, “whenever we give up what we desire for God’s sake, be it something physical or spiritual, we will find it again in God just as if we had actually possessed it and had given it up for God” ([63], p. 18; [64]). In a way, Heinrich in Hartmann’s narrative had already demonstrated the meaning of Eckhart’s teachings because only when he had given up on his own will, that is, his desire to get well, and submitted himself completely under God, did he get well. In Eckhart’s words: “nothing makes us true so much as the giving up of our will” ([63], p. 19). Selfhood blinds the individual and makes it impossible for the Godhead to enter the soul ([63], p. 21). He admonishes his audience not to try to imitate Christ in concrete terms, but spirituality a. because it would be impossible for him to do so, and b. because God wants our love more than our works ([63], p. 30). We might recognize here a kind of anticipation of Martin Luther’s teachings, but then we could also perceive in Eckhart’s teachings universal insights deeply shared by Hinduists and Buddhists [65,66].

Virtue emerges as one of the central principles which the devout individual ought to strive for “ceaselessly until we attain the essence and ground of virtue” ([63], p. 41). In practice this means: “We must train ourselves in self-abandonment until we retain nothing of our own. All turbulence and unrest comes from self-will, whether we realize it or not. We should establish ourselves, together with all that is ours and all that we might wish or desire in all things, in the best and most precious will of

God through pure ceasing-to-be of our will and desire” ([63], p. 42). Surprisingly, we can discover strong similarities in the comments even by modern representatives of Buddhism, so when the current Dalai Lama remarks: “the inner motivational dimension is the most important aspect of ethics. For when our motivation is pure, genuinely directed toward the benefit of others, our actions will naturally tend to be ethically sound” ([48], p. 71). What ultimately matters, as he underscores, is that we have a shared value system and deeply care about the world altogether, not just about the own self, community, or country ([48], pp. 84–85).

This paper, however, is not just about Meister Eckhart, Christine de Pizan, or the Dalai Lama, so it must suffice what we have plucked from the major treatise by this Franciscan teacher in order to reach our conclusion as to the meaning and relevance of the past for the present and future. It would be hard, if not impossible, to contradict the messages provided by any one of them, after all, since they addressed the human condition in a most intriguing and far-reaching manner that matters for us as well. For instance, Boethius’s teachings about misfortune and goodness carry as much meaning and relevance as those by Gautier de Coinci and Marie de France, each in his/her own terms and respects.

Human existence in the Middle Ages already faced all the fundamental concerns and problems as we do, but the framework was different, especially with a much stronger belief system and trust in spirituality. Insofar as we can detect toleration, but not quite tolerance, some acceptance of foreigners or representatives of other religions, but not integration, we can recognize significant connection between them and us.

The warnings about the disastrous consequences of interminable blood feud and revenge, as formulated in the anonymous *Nibelungenlied* (ca. 1200), might have a direct bearing on the conflict between the various Islamic groups in the Middle East, between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland, and Muslims and Hindus in Pakistan and India respectively, although I honestly question whether any of those involved in the terrible bloodshed in the name of his or her God might have heard of this heroic epic or would even care about its messages. However, the distance should not concern us here, and the lack of interest by the moderns in the past should not frustrate us, because human existence is subject to a continuous flow from the past to the present and beyond, and the task of the Humanities is to work toward the goal to keep the voices from the past present and alive, irrespective of all the senseless killings all over the world.

The most painful analogy would be the eternal flame burning at Hiroshima as a reminder of the nuclear attack on August 6, 1945. Tragically, the nuclear arm race fully developed only afterwards, and the hope for a dismantling of these nuclear bombs seems rather dim even now; yet, the flame keeps burning, and there has not been any other nuclear attack ever since. We might even say that the Humanities are all about hope, which is anchored in the past and reaches out to the future. As human beings we are entitled to succeed and to suffer, as Sir Gawain does in the alliterative romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (ca. 1350–1380), but we cannot give up hope and must rather go through a period of despair and frustration than to abandon our goal, as many medieval poets were able to teach us ([67], pp. 144–46).

This flow of history—and I deliberately do not use the term ‘progress’—is deeply determined by past individual voices that raised their concerns and offered ideas, probing the relationship between body and mind, spirit and God, self and nature, and the individual versus society. The Humanities are not looking for truths in material terms, as Bednarik assumes, and their purpose cannot, in fact, should

not, be the search for truth as the sciences probably do correctly because they do not deal with the same kind of facts but with values, ideals, dreams, hopes, anxieties, desires, and imagination ([10], p. 71). Those who call for making the Humanities more credible according to the criteria determining the sciences [10] pursue a utilitarian approach, which would certainly be acceptable for the sciences, but completely misses the essential task of the Humanities.

In the Humanities, by contrast, we are on a quest, probing what the many different voices from past and present have to say and how they resonate with our own ideals and needs. Of course, there is never a simple formula to translate medieval observations, for instance, into concrete recommendations or recipes for our lives today. Instead, we encounter a world of metaphors, allegories, symbols, images, and allusions that invite us to go on our own quest, but now armed and strengthened with the insights by those before us who have already learned how to handle situations, how to think about conditions, or how to draw from experiences in order to cope successfully in spiritual, ethical, moral, and religious terms. Moreover, the failures of the past are equally important lessons, and literary texts, for instance, regularly reflect on disasters, miscommunication, aggression, and hostility. We need those as sample cases how to work through such difficulties and to recover our spiritual and social self.

The present could be compared with a children's choir, while the past resonates with us like an adults' choir (with no values attached to those terms). As we know from practical experiences, if both choirs join forces, the musical sensation proves to be phenomenal. Past voices are not simply passé, they just sound differently. In this regard Meister Eckhart's comments only need to be rendered into a language that we can understand today better in order to become highly meaningful and relevant for us to reach the future. Dante's deep concern at the beginning of his *Divina Commedia* about where to go in this life and his sense of being at a loss in the middle of a metaphorical forest lends a voice to our own need to forge our path through the wilderness, which is a profoundly epistemological task of which literature reports systematically [68].

We also might want to use the metaphor of the past as a distant land with many treasures. We can no longer live there, but just like exiles, we must travel there from time to time to regain our objectivity, to rebuild the own self, to learn anew about ourselves, God, and the world. We cannot stay in the past, of course, as the Romantics liked to do or as fantasy/history novel writers prefer, but drawing from past insights proves to be tantamount to having the essential key to the storehouse of the collective human experiences predicated on values and ideals. We need those altogether for the establishment and maintenance of our existence, today and tomorrow, otherwise we undermine our traditional claim on being members of the human community which is determined by the Janus-face, as mentioned above.

Presentism is a short-sightedness both toward the past and the future, but fortunately the current situation at schools and universities globally still affirms that we are not yet trapped in such an epistemological prison, although we can notice worrisome trends as a result of constantly reduced budgets and intellectual battles aimed against the study of the past [69]. Some years ago Louise Cowan made the very valid claim regarding "The Necessity of the Classics," postulating most passionately: "What is needed is to recapture their spirit of high nobility and magnanimity, of order and excellence, but to recapture that spirit in a framework of democracy engendered by a Biblical culture of radical openness. The things worth preserving, the things we ought to be passing down, far transcend any single heritage: they partake of the fundamental structures of being itself" ([70], p. 11).

By analogy, we can claim the same for the Middle Ages as a time in which heroic values and ideals, religious spirituality, the experience of physical love, and the quest for the Arthurian dream were intensively pursued and experimented with. That quest, significantly, has not ended yet, and actually constitutes part of what makes us human, both then and today (and we do not have to limit ourselves at all to the world of King Arthur and the courts). As primitive and simple-minded the tumbler in Gautier de Coinci's Marian miracle tale appears to be at first sight, he truly demonstrates what it means to pursue one's deepest dreams and to throw the weight of one's whole existence behind it in order to realize what at first seems impossible.

Today, when virtually everything can be bought, everything has a price tag, and no profound struggles await the modern individual, as it still was in the case of Beowulf, Siegfried (*Nibelungenlied*) or El Cid, banality and triviality set in, and the mundane dominates everything, and this although there is no shortage of tremendous tasks, heroic deeds, and model behavior [71].

The past is going to stay with us, but it is up to us to decide how to approach and utilize it in the best way possible. We can, for example, simply dismiss it as irrelevant and unimportant in face of all the tasks and problems facing the modern world. But we can also accept it as a dimension of the universal human experience from which we never should divorce ourselves; otherwise we would cut off one of our own legs, that is, our intellectual, spiritual, philosophical, literary, and artistic home. The whispering from Boethius to Sebastian Brant (1494, *The Ship of Fools*), from the Merovingian Queen Dhuoda to fifteenth-century Christine de Pizan continues to reverberate in our ears and minds and help us to figure out the labyrinthine passage through this life: Lucky an individual or a society that can draw from the past as the storehouse of everything that came before us and created the framework in which our present existence evolves and aims for the future. Cutting ourselves off from the past, however delimited, would constitute an act of intellectual suicide.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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