



The Poetic Word as a Medium for Human Self-Discovery and Identity

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At the risk of carrying the proverbial owls to Athens, let us raise the same old question once again concerning the nature, purpose, and value of literature for our society. There are certainly good reasons to address the issue particularly today considering the fact that our world in the twenty-first century faces huge problems and is in the midst of major crises. Not only did we just go through the global pandemic of COVID-19, and not only has the completely unprovoked war by the Russians against Ukraine since February 24, 2022, created a huge paradigm shift, creating a new gulf between the entire West and Putin's empire; the really dangerous challenge consists of global warming and the subsequent threat to humanity at large. We are running out of resources, temperatures are climbing everywhere, drinking water is becoming scarce, and famine affecting entire continents has returned as a terrifying danger to humanity. Pragmatists would thus find much approval who insist that we turn all of our attention and energy to the problems at hand so that we can hopefully survive in the future as well. Hence, we need hydrologists, climatologists, geologists, engineers, medical scholars, and many others who are qualified to address those issues effectively. We can no longer afford, some might say, such 'useless' academic disciplines as the various fields within the Humanities and the Fine Arts. But what would this epithet really imply since every research has implications, carries consequences for society outside of academia, and moves us forward in many different ways. Sociology of literature, for instance, strongly influenced and promoted by such intellectual giants as Georg Lukács, Lucien Goldmann, Walter Benjamin, Leo Löwenthal, Theodore W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Jürgen Habermas has provided us with a variety of venues to examine the function of literature as a mirror of society at large, as a source of profound influence on social movements and developments, or as the result of long-term processes of aesthetic production and reception.

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Nevertheless, calls for a reorientation of all of our universities have been voiced already many times, coming from a variety of political perspectives and bureaucratic concerns. Medievalists, above all, suffer from heavy attacks by politicians who want to transform the academy into a training school for the twenty-first century because society needs to learn quickly how to handle urgent, if not burning environmental, economic, medical, and other issues. Literature or the fine arts are, thus, virtually irrelevant and not worth pursuing any further, especially within an academic context.

The study of medieval literature or history, for instance, would hence represent a luxury we can no longer afford. I have, like many other scholars, already responded to those attacks in a number of studies, but it has proven to be harder than we might wish for to achieve a breakthrough and a change in the mindset of authority figures who hold the purse strings of university budgets. All we can hope for at the current stage is to develop at least a convincing narrative for those in the trenches explaining what we can learn from medieval literature for the current discourse on universal human concerns and issues because the best defense of literature will always come from those who are engaged with it actively, either as students or as creative writers.

Maybe paradoxically, while the Russian war of genocide and destruction in Ukraine might be the most pressing concern we face in political, military, and economic terms and present (June 2022), it also invites us to revisit the fundamental concerns of all of human existence. The massive violence committed by the Russian military makes us question basically what we are living for, and how we can handle the incomprehensible. Every human being has to face death, at least individually, but now, in light of what has transpired in Busha, Mariupol, and other Ukrainian cities, meaningless, horrible, and purely vicious death is staring into our face more directly than for a very long time. Of course, 'meaningless' only in the eyes of the victims, of the Ukrainians, and of the western world at large, while the Russians might explain it in their own terms. How can we even dare to live under those circumstances? What makes it possible for the survivors to overcome the pain and sorrow when they find their loved ones having been tortured and murdered on the street of an ordinary little town where peaceful life had been in place before that terrible moment?

If I then respond that a poem might be the best response, I might encounter cynical remarks about my naiveté and idealism. But what other means might we as civilians have available to come to terms with the pain, when the results of the Russian onslaught appear to be so incomprehensible, meaningless, and purely arbitrary, that is, just vicious? Many people might argue that the Russian soldiers who committed those crimes simply catapulted themselves out of the category of 'human,' not even to talk about 'civil society.' However, what would I do if I had been in the situation of an ordinary soldier? What are we to think of the Nazi guards or Wehrmacht soldiers who committed genocidal crimes during WWII? And in the United States, how many individuals, maybe mentally sick, have resorted to mass shootings out of racism, hatred, personal frustration, or fanaticism? The examples could be easily extended, and virtually no human society has been exempted from suffering horrible infractions and transgressions, whether we think of individual murders, rape, theft, etc. Where and how would literature then enter the picture? Weapons or money cannot compensate for the pain and sorrow, while those have a huge impact on people.

Throughout time, memorializing the deceased has been a central task of the survivors. What would life be worth if we did not feel love, and this beyond death? How could we live without honor and dignity, without aspiring for higher goals to make our short existence here on earth worthwhile? As morbid as the cemetery seems to be, it proves to be the central location of memory, the site where the community finds its assembly point, where past, present, and future merge by means of tombstones, epitaphs, words, and images. Of course, social and religious conflicts have also been carried out in and about cemeteries, a contested space of memory, pitting, for instance, various religious groups against each other. Nevertheless, every cemetery reminds us of the crucial importance of human culture, of the critical importance of memory, and hence also literature.

Undoubtedly, death is ineffable and challenges us every time anew when it occurs. Granted, wars and mass shootings as they occur so often in the twenty-first century tend to desensitize us to death, but the individual victims, here the survivors, and the witnesses, always face the dramatic need to come to terms with the incomprehensible. Since death takes away life, it is the most destructive force, and yet poets throughout time have been able to supersede it and express the fundamental values that make up human existence. Certainly, not every poet succeeds in formulating the keywords or finding the necessary expressions, but every effort to resort to words, images, sounds, or forms, in order to transcend our physical limitations proves to be most critical for us to answer the final questions.

The Japanese *haiku*, for instance, serves exceedingly well to combine images of one of the four seasons with the transformation of human life, and hence to reveal the interconnectedness of our existence with the physical environment. The Baroque sonnet (Andreas Gryphius) continues to appeal to us because of its direct engagement with the problem of destruction and death and human responses to the horrors of war. Dawn songs from all over the world and from throughout time have consistently given words to the archetypal feelings of lovers who have to separate early in the morning not to be discovered by the family or society. Famous Grail romances from Chrétien de Troyes (ca. 1170) and Wolfram von Eschenbach (ca. 1205), and Dante Alighieri's *Divina Commedia* (ca. 1320), Goethe's *Faust* (1806) have indicated most movingly how much we as human beings are constantly on a quest for the ultimate meaning, whether in religious or in philosophical terms.

The worst experiences in human history, such as the Holocaust, have facilitated the creation of some of the moving poems addressing the incredible suffering of millions of people, such as Paul Celan's "Todesfuge" (Death Fugue, 1948). The list of examples from many different cultural periods and languages could be easily extended, but it is well established that the ultimate questions underlying all of society have been regularly addressed by poets, writers, then also musical composers, artists, or architects. Life would be drab and horrible if we could no longer enjoy time, either all by ourselves or in the company with our friends and family members. Michael Ende's world-famous book for young readers, *Momo* (1973), has already addressed the central issue from a more fanciful and imaginative perspective, but ultimately rather understandably and convincingly. There, time thieves try to convince people to save their own time and to operate more rationally, but they steal thereby all their joy and happiness, which makes no sense on a personal level. As Ende indicates, individuality and identity must not be subject to time pressure and socio-economic concepts; instead, each person has to fend for him/herself to establish meaning and relevance, which then helps to come to terms with death. We all live undoubtedly within specific time frames, but time would be, as the author indicates, one of the most precious 'commodities' to pursue one's own goals in our brief existence.

Although my selection of examples is, by my default, western-based, the study of world literature has clearly demonstrated the universal concerns pursued by poets throughout time. As long as we can translate their text, and as long as we keep reading them, there is hope for the survival of humankind, which is constantly under threat of being alienated from itself. Culture is exceedingly central for all life, irrespective of what cultural system we have in mind. When we embrace Boccaccio's *Decameron* (ca. 1350) and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (ca. 1400) both as entertainment and as instructive literature, if not as ethical and moral investigations, we empower ourselves to accept the challenges of life in countless situations and conditions. The quest for happiness concerns us deeply, and it could be identified as the ultimate goal for all of us, as the *lais* by Marie de France (ca. 1190) and the verse narrative "Der arme Heinrich" (ca. 1200) by Hartmann von Aue intriguingly indicate.

But at the same time, as Sebastian Brant had taught us already through his *Narrenschiff* (1494; Ship of Fools), and as the facetious tales of *TillEulenspiegel* (1510) confirm, human existence has always been rather quixotic and should be viewed through a satirical lens to make sense of it all (cf. Cervantes,

Don Quixote, 1605 and 1615), unless we accept, along with Gabriel García Márquez (*Cien años de soledad*, 1967), the magical and impenetrable nature of all existence.

My focus here has been mostly on western, and especially pre-modern literature, but the universal messages relevant to us all can be discovered just as much in Indian, Persian, Chinese, Peruvian, or Congolese literature. The study of world literature past and present makes sense if we acknowledge the universal value and relevance of the poetic word, wherever and whenever writers and poets have picked up their quill/pen – today, of course, the laptop – and tackled human existence in its myriads of manifestations. Sociological approaches to literature clearly underscore one possible way of recognizing, embracing, and utilizing literature for one's self-development, for the exploration of the relationship between the individual and society, or between people and the natural environment.

Of course, we need physics, medicine, sociology, anthropology, or astronomy, all of them being critical keys in our endeavor to come to terms with life by itself. But there is always a physical limitation, the large bafflement, which at times might turn into desperation, fatalism, and despair. The human word, however, the musicality of our language, the philosophy of our thoughts expressed in poetry, they all promise to alleviate our concerns and to provide us with direction, meaning, goals, and perspectives in many different terms. For me, Covid-19 was not a devastation of my own existence; instead, I intensified my research, increased my scholarly writings, and then it stimulated me to turn to writing haikus almost on a daily basis. Poetry is always there for us, and invites the individual to reflect as deeply as possible about the ultimate sense of life. Every child can confirm this observation, considering the universal popularity of all kinds of nursery rhymes, simple songs, fantasy narratives, and stories. I would call literature the human laboratory; a world built on words, spoken or written, which reflect on alternative worlds, whether utopias or dystopias, whether fairy tales or monster lore. Of course, there are countless languages and dialects in the world, but their formal differences only hide the universally shared secret of the *logos*, an alternative phrase for God, or the higher spirit in life, whatever religion or philosophy one might adhere to.

In this sense, the first lines of the Gospel of St. John, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God," say it all, and nothing has changed since then. Ironically, as tragic as it might be, the Russian attack against Ukraine has brought all this right back into our minds; we do not live to kill, but we live to love and to create. Of course, we need to eat, we need shelter and clothing, and we need physical health, but we also critically need love, hope, dreams, and thoughts, hence the poetic expression of our inner self. I hope that I have 'preached to the converted,' but I still think that we can deeply profit from every new attempt to come to terms with this unusual and yet universal phenomenon of the poetic creation. Literature is us, we might say, both in sociological and philosophical terms.

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