

**The Role of the Humanities Past and Present:  
Future Perspectives Based on Ancient Ideas. Reflections  
by a Medievalist**

**El papel de las Humanidades en el pasado y en el presente:  
perspectivas futuras fundadas sobre ideas antiguas. Reflexiones de un medievalista**

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Fecha de recepción: 3 de septiembre de 2012

Fecha de aceptación: 10 de octubre de 2012

**Abstract:** This study outlines how we might be able to explain and defend the supremely important role of the humanities, perhaps surprisingly, by resorting to medieval literature. While there are many good reasons even today, if not especially in the present, to promote the teaching of the humanities, many critics tend to undermine all cultural and historical investigations of the premodern world and subscribe to presentism. However, as medievalist perspectives can tell us, the very opposite is the case since both poets and philosophers from the past have preserved for us fundamental ideals and values, ethical concepts, and religious and cultural concepts about the interrelationship between self and the world, between the material and the metaphysical dimension.

**Key words:** Humanities. Education. School system. Happiness. Spirituality. Meaning. Critical thinking. Henry Newman. Medieval Studies. Gautier de Coinci. Johannes von Tepl. Hartmann von Aue.

**Resumen:** Este estudio pone de relieve que debemos ser capaces de explicar y defender el enorme papel que desempeñan las humanidades, quizás incluso de un modo sorprendente al recurrir a la literatura medieval. A pesar de que en la actualidad siguen habiendo muchas buenas razones para promover la enseñanza de las humanidades, muchos críticos tienden a menospreciar las investigaciones culturales e históricas del mundo premoderno y se aferran al presentismo. No obstante, como las perspectivas medievalistas nos señalan, realmente se trata de todo lo contrario, ya que tanto poetas como filósofos del pasado nos han preservado ideales y valores fundamentales, conceptos éticos, e ideas religiosas y culturales acerca de la interrelación entre el ser y el mundo, así como entre lo material y lo metafísico.

**Palabras clave:** Humanidades. Educación. Sistema educativo. Espiritualidad. Significado. Pensamiento crítico. Henry Newman. Estudios Medievales. Gautier de Coinci. Johannes von Tepl. Hartmann von Aue.

### **1. Theoretical reflections: the Humanities at large**

The problem the University in the West is facing today is just too well known and has already been discussed from a many different perspectives, especially since advanced education is in danger, as many critics say, of falling into the hands of corporate, i.e., capitalistic thinking that functionalizes all knowledge and evaluates it only in terms of its monetary value. As Stefan Collini now puts it, “universities need to justify getting more money and the way to do this is by showing that they help to make more money.”<sup>1</sup> Of course, as he hastens to add, no one involved with a university or dealing with the philosophical reasoning in support of such an institute of higher education, can or should ignore the fact that universities are huge and costly investments, mostly supported by the government, at least in the Western world, and increasingly also by private funding, apart from the tuition itself raised from the students.

One of the essential tasks for all scholars in the Humanities consists of questioning their own existence, and the present paper intends to engage with that very challenge, first by reflecting on the central issues from a general perspective, then, by turning to a selection of texts from the Middle Ages that have constantly proven to be of timeless value and promise to quiet the critics of the University because here we discover messages of universal import that contribute in a powerful and meaningful manner to the improvement of human life as we know it also today.

While most natural scientists, engineers, economists, jurists, medical researchers, and the like face relatively few challenges as to their existence in a university setting because they mostly work, as the general consensus implies, on pragmatic aspects and topics that are directly related to the material world we live in, the situation for the Humanities proves to be rather different and difficult. However, that is not a new issue, and both the various attacks against the Humanities and their defense contribute in their own way to the constantly changing identity of that subject matter. The discourse itself, public and private, constitutes part of what the Humanities are all about, so scholars in the Humanities should not only lament the threats which they face on a daily basis and often increasing in intensity particularly in times of economic crises, but might also want to welcome those as fundamental challenges that need to be raised quite regularly. One of the answers to the broadly conceived criticism of the Humanities hence rests, ironically, as I would like to argue, peculiarly and particularly in that very criticism itself insofar as the Humanities are really all about raising questions concerning the human existence in past and present.

Oddly, however, one central conflict of ideas is commonly not even considered in public discourse, although its critical reflection would certainly open the door for a much more tolerant and communicative approach to the issue at hand. Anyone questioning the relevance of the Humanities, of the university at large, also indirectly questions, logically, the relevance of education in the first place. Yet,

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<sup>1</sup> Stefan Collini, *What Are Universities For?* (London: Penguin, 2012), x.

there is obviously not any serious point in discussing that aspect at length since there would be simply an overwhelming agreement that all children and teenagers, and then probably also young adults need some form of education. The debate only concerns the questions of how much, how intensive, and how long education should be provided, and whether free of charge. What justifies, for instance, providing free education to high school students (or students at a secondary school, or a *Gymnasium*)?. Why is the age of eighteen normally considered to be the terminal point for that free education? Can we really equate that age when people are considered adults with the appropriate cut-off age for publicly funded schools?

Some countries or cultures experiment with those limits and try either to extend the school time to thirteen years or to reduce it to twelve, if not even eleven, years for economic and political reasons. But could we not agree with the idea that education is an ongoing process, and that all adults simply need to continue with their education as well? Do not most people who enter any kind of job face the constant task of learning new things, ideas, methods, and practices? And does not the human mind have the enormous capacity of expanding continually? Could we not even formulate the hypothesis that life is defined also by learning itself, and that the more an individual learns and keeps up that process, the longer and better s/he lives? Retirement age, for instance, proves to be the ideal time to begin with self-education once again, whether turning to a foreign language or to art history, to music or to architecture. In fact, as much recent research has demonstrated, physical health in old age can be well preserved if the individual returns to a more or less intensive study plan to maintain the intellectual capacities.<sup>2</sup>

To carry the proverbial coals to Newcastle, every person in this world would prefer to have the most educated and skilled medical doctor treating one's wounds and sicknesses; and as to repairing any object, whether a car or a house, we always want to have the best qualified individual doing that job for us. That qualification, however, comes with a high price, and here is the crux of the matter which underlies many of the issues at stake with the University in general and the Humanities in particular. Quality, hence education, is costly, but all evidence points toward the fact that the investment in education proves to be a great advantage for society at large, irrespective of the special field of investigation, including the Humanities. In fact, we could certainly formulate the thesis that the level of cultural and intellectual development of any society can be measured by the advancement of its educational system.

Unfortunately, the choice of those financial terms reveals also the degree to which mercantilism has increasingly permeated all public and private thinking about the universities and the Humanities. These are often regarded, at least nowadays from some rather conservative perspectives, as elitist and arrogant institutions of

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<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Margaret Cruikshank, *Learning to be Old: Gender, Culture, and Aging* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003); Orla Patricia Hornung, "Learning and Memory in Old age and the Function of REM Sleep," Ph. D. Hamburg 2006; *Working and Learning at Old Age: Theory and Evidence in an Emerging European Field of Research*, ed. Sandra Bohlinger (Göttingen: Cuvillier, 2010).

higher learning which really exist in an ivory tower, hence should lose their public funding. At the same time, as Collini notes, there is a “growing distrust of reasoned argument, now often seen as either a cloak for special interests or a form of elitist arrogance, and the substitution in its place of any kind of indicator that can plausibly be reduced to numerical terms” (17).

However, today we no longer live in a rural society and must rely on a vast spectrum of experts in many different fields, be they mechanical, medical, logistical, technical, artistic, literary, theological, or philosophical. Nevertheless, already in the premodern world, whether prior to 1800 or prior to 1600, people already knew very well of this distinction between the intellectual and the pragmatical, which justified, from very early on (whether the sixth or the ninth century) the establishment of schools, first in monasteries, then in cathedrals, and finally in universities. The great advancement of the Carolingian empire could not be imagined without the strong support system through the new schools set up by Alcuin of York on behalf of Charlemagne.<sup>3</sup> The same applies to the famous Renaissance of the Twelfth Century, the rise of Humanism in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and to the development of industrial society in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Of course, there have often been specialized schools focusing on technical aspects, both in the past and in the present, but all advanced societies in East and West, universally speaking, have acknowledged the need of advanced studies, both in theology and philosophy, in the sciences and in neighboring disciplines.<sup>4</sup> Why the Humanities, however, an elusive and murky subject matter that is regularly praised for its great relevance and yet always seems to be the first on the chopping block when a university budget has to be cut, are in danger, can only be explained through reference to the financial conditions. The Humanities are expensive, indeed (but very cheap compared to the Natural Sciences), but aren't they absolutely critical and existential? A world without the arts, literature, music, philosophy,

<sup>3</sup> Rosamond McKitterick, *The Frankish Church and the Carolingian Reform, 789-895*. Royal Historical Society Studies in History, 2 (London: Royal Historical Society, 1977); Alcuin, *de York à Tours: écriture, pouvoir et réseaux dans l'Europe du haut Moyen Age*, ed. Philippe Depreux and Bruno Judic. Annales de Bretagne et des pays de l'ouest, 11.3 (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2004); Albrecht Classen, “Alcuin und Hrabanus Maurus: Zwei Gelehrte der Karolingischen Renaissance,” *Künstler, Dichter, Gelehrte*, ed. Ulrich Müller and Werner Wunderlich. Mittelalter-Mythen, 4 (St. Gallen: UVK, 2005), 805-24.

<sup>4</sup>The relevant studies on the history of universities and other schools of higher education are legion; see, for instance, George Elder Davie, *The Democratic Intellect: Scotland and Her Universities in the Nineteenth Century* (Edinburgh: University Press, 1961); S. J. Curtis, and M. E. a. Boulwood, *A Short History of Educational Ideas* (1953; London: University Tutorial Press, 1966); A. B. Cobban, *The Medieval Universities: Their Development and Organization* (London: Methuen, 1975). The debate has incessantly continued since then, but it also could look back to numerous previous opinions, such as those voiced by Thorstein Veblen, *The Higher Learning in America: A Memorandum on the Conduct of Universities by Businessmen* (New York: Huebsch, 1918). Now see also Martha Nussbau, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010). For an economic approach to the question at stake, see the contributions to *Past, Present and Future: The Public Value of Humanities and Social Sciences* (London: British Academy, 2010).

history, and languages would not be worth living in. Of course, this is an appeal to the converted, and no one in his/her sound mind today, at least in the Western world, would reject the Humanities altogether. By the same token, however, there are many who would like to reduce its funding and control the content of the topics covered in Humanities classes and research.

But the question is much more fundamental: Do the Humanities represent a decorative, ornamental field, secondary, if not tertiary, to science or medicine, or are they essential and critical, perhaps even parallel to astronomy, cancer research, and the like? If the latter, then the question changes as to the financing of that field, and not to its existence in the first place. Our discussion, to be sure, does not focus on one specific sub-field within the Humanities, which would be impossible to determine at any rate since everything depends on the cultural framework and conditions. We could opt for French or Greek poetry, for Finnish architecture or Thai building styles; we could examine Japanese religious ceremonies or Russian folklore; we could examine the history of the Mayans or of the Germanic tribes in the age of migration. The options and possibilities for combinations are a myriad, while the essential decision for the Humanities in the first place constitutes a *conditio sine qua non* for a civilized society!

Let us refer to some self-evident aspects that we all know of and regularly talk about but which we forget in the heat of the debate over the ever shrinking dollar (Euro, etc.) amount available to us as teachers, scholars, and administrators. There is no absolutely intrinsic value to the knowledge of ancient Greek mythology, Old English or Middle High German heroic epics, or Petrarchan sonnets (the same applies to ancient, medieval, Renaissance, or Baroque art and music, etc.). We all know that the preference for teaching and researching of one area over the other opens and closes holes in our knowledge and general understanding of the past world with its endless number of ideas, concepts, and perspectives. Our students or readers will not be terribly impoverished if, for example, the period of the late fourteenth century receives less attention than, say, the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. We do not face disaster and doom in our education system if we neglect the seventeenth century or leave holes in the study of the nineteenth century. There is simply too much information and data, there are just too many texts, art works, and musical compositions to cover them all. Encyclopedias and handbooks substitute for that purpose.

No teacher can ever hope to be exhaustive; instead we all operate with a selective system and establish a kind of canon which allows us, as subjective as it certainly might be, to create a kind of reference system and framework. All intellectual operations focus on specific aspects and not on the holistic whole, unless we study the universe or God in theological and philosophical terms. Nevertheless, humanity exists through its vast multiplicity, and each individual contributes in his or her own way and with his or her capability to the enhancement of human society and values. The critical operation making all that possible, however, rests on

reflection, i.e., critical thinking, leading to evaluation, judgment, assessment, and reasonable selection. While we can and must always accept gaps in our knowledge, blanks in our study areas, and holes in our syllabi, or in the range of academic disciplines and fields of investigation, the philosophical underpinnings of them all hold the Humanities together and defer the specific battles as to the preference for Chinese literature over African music, for instance, to the inside where specific criteria determine the relevant decisions.

As we learn from Stefan Collini, “in general the overall cogency of a substantial piece of work seems more closely bound up with the individual voice of its author. This is, interestingly, even true of those critiques which [sic] challenge the traditional centrality of the ‘human subject’: the persuasiveness of any such piece of writing will depend in part upon some highly individual characteristics of the critic’s cast of mind and literary skill” (75). In other words, dealing with literature brings us into the circle of discourse about human life, reflected in a myriad of different textual manifestations, fictional or factual, yet relevant for all wherever we turn.

The human mind is probably the most precious thing in this world, and it deserves to receive the highest development/education. Each individual decides, however, on what s/he will make with that intellect and how to apply the mind’s best skills to handle individual tasks, either inventing new things, creating new works, developing new ideas, or formulating new methods and approaches to a task. While the natural sciences are primarily concerned with a critical engagement with the material world and with penetrating the secrets that hold that world together, the Humanities turn their attention mostly to thoughts, ideas, works, philosophies, religious visions, and the like from previous periods. Both areas represent simply the corresponding other side of the same medal. “Better thinking in the Humanities often occurs as a result of a sufficiently thoughtful and responsive re-encounter with the ideas of figures long dead, including figures who did not belong to the same discipline, or indeed to any discipline,” as Collini observes (80), which significantly quickly leads to the realization that the Humanities not only work toward their own goals, but also lay the foundation for the Sciences. Perhaps for that reason, some of the strongest defenders of the Humanities actually prove to be scientists, and it behooves the Humanists to argue equally strongly for the Natural Sciences, even though that field hardly requires any justification today. I would, however, strongly warn against

Robert G. Bednarik’s suggestion that the Humanities should rely on the same process of verification and falsification (now: refutation) as the Sciences as their only means of being salvaged in the brutal battle for tax dollars given to higher education,<sup>5</sup> cannot be accepted as such because the intentions and goals of all

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<sup>5</sup> Robert G. Bednarik, “Rendering Humanities Sustainable,” *Humanities-Open Access Journal* Oct. 19 (2011), online at: <http://www.mdpi.com/2076-0787/1/1/64>.

humanistic investigations go far beyond mathematical figures, physical laws, and biological aspects.

As much as the present is currently heavily involved in coping with constant paradigm shifts, resulting from the invention of the computer and then the internet, the fundamental concerns of all human life do not go away and need to be revisited all the time. We could go so far as to define our basic existence in terms of that perpetual quest for happiness, spirituality, health, and, above all, meaning. One of the problems today, however, consists of the tendency to give credence and value to all and every opinion and to regard every statement simply as a valid position in a completely open-ended debate, which leads to a dangerous and already wide-spread relativism in which everything 'goes' and no one holds the key to truth. Previous ages and epochs faced an easier task in that regard, relying heavily, for instance, on the Bible, or the Koran as the source of the ultimately final authority. We could also add to this the American Constitution, or similar legal documents representing the judicial foundation for all western and other countries in this world. Nevertheless, the revolt of orthodox and fundamentalist groups both in the West and the East continues to challenge the principles of the canon, that is, a set of universal truths. While the sciences normally resort to experiments and logical proof to assert their positions, the Humanities find themselves in a much more problematic field, being predicated on the very notion of not dealing with facts as such, but with opinions, notions, attitudes, ideas, and values that, by their very nature, invite debate, criticism, opposition, and arguments.

The acceptance of a relativistic approach in humanistic studies, however, might be, at least to some extent, the logical consequence of the cultural and epistemological developments in the postmodern world since we have observed just too many times in the history of human knowledge and education radical paradigm shifts forcing us suddenly to accept completely different perspectives. Nevertheless, no critical discourse would ultimately make sense if all opinions simply count and neither verification nor falsification would matter. In this regard, the Humanities pursue just as stringent principles of logic as the natural sciences, even though the approaches in that field are often more flexible and inclusive.

There are certain facts that do not need to be discussed, and there are interpretations that constantly change in the course of time. Nevertheless, this does not mean that subsequently our research in and teaching of the Humanities is built on quicksand, since we preserve old ideas, retool the keys to old philosophies and insights, and thereby establish the venues for future critical examinations and reflections. As Stefan Collini formulates it: it is important to keep in mind "that a society does not educate the next generation in order for them to contribute to its economy. It educates them in order that they should extend and deepen their understanding of themselves and the world, acquiring, in the course of this form of growing up, kinds of knowledge and skill which will be useful in their eventual

employment, but which will no more be the sum of their education than that employment will be the sum of their lives” (91).

Irrespective of our fields in the Humanities, whether History or German Studies, whether Music or Philosophy, the central point has always been, and must be pursued in the future as well, to lay the foundation for critical thinking, to establish the basis upon which future research can be established, to provide the essential knowledge where new information can be gathered, evaluated, and summarized, to make available the fundamental reference work that allows the individual to judge critically and to analyze by him/herself the meaning of an idea, statement, or a work of art.<sup>6</sup> In this regard, Byzantine Studies can have the same value and relevance as Classical Studies, and Italian Studies can and must compete productively and constructively with Chinese or French Studies.

One more time, the question that I am raising here does not really concern the importance of Japanese over Spanish or the other way around, but the significance of the Humanities at large. In that respect we have to keep in mind the most amorphous but fundamental term, ‘culture,’ which is closely associated with ‘identity,’ but both require an extensive critical examination that cannot be pursued here to the full extent necessary. However we define ‘culture,’ it seems most likely that every human being would recognize and accept the need for and value of culture as such because we, as individuals, cannot survive in a purely material existence.

We can always easily go from standard fields, such as English, Spanish, and History, to those that seem to be more esoteric or ‘marginal,’ depending on the cultural setting, such as Iranian Studies, Classical Latin and Greek, Mesoamerican cultures, and the like (Spanish medieval literature, for that matter, would be highly esoteric at a Middle Eastern or African university). The esoteric and abstract is suddenly treated with great respect, when it comes to exhibitions in museums and galleries, yet with great disrespect when public funds are required for the education of the future experts in those languages and cultures.

By the same token, who is to say why we really need the most sophisticated aspects of Mathematics and Physics? Who can determine what kind of knowledge is truly useful, important, practical, and applicable? Wherever we turn, in this regard we only face open-ended questions, debates, and ultimately, unfortunately, political decisions.

To use an analogy from biology, as beautiful the thousands of atolls might be that dot the Pacific Ocean, and as bizarre and astonishing the countless forms of corals present themselves, when the question comes to who would be willing to pay for their preservation, study, and support, we suddenly observe a divide between those who do research on them or cherish them as miracles of nature, and those who

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<sup>6</sup> This is explored in greater detail, but also on a highly theoretical level, by Frederick Luis Aldama, *Why the Humanities Matter: A Commonsense Approach* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), esp. 18-19.

hold the purse strings, control taxes, and have to make decisions regarding public budgets. Unfortunately, money normally overrules any cultural criteria, and this to the detriment of society at large, although the status and respect which any society generally enjoys are very much determined by the level of cultural developments, as expressed by the educational system, the support of the arts, and the degree of sponsorship for schools and universities.

Curiously, at least in my experience, when we approach the public and address individuals outside of the University and the Humanities, trying to convince them about the absolute value of that field, we not only face hardly any opposition, but mostly great support. However, it seems that the very same people who welcome the Humanities scholars in their midst and eagerly listen to their lectures or attend their classes, might be the first to sign into law further tax cuts that directly hurt higher education, that is, especially the Humanities, since the public funding, research grants, and the like are very hard to come by in that field.

As much as Henry Newman's famous *The Idea of a University*, based on a series of lectures that he had given in 1852, today seems to be out of vogue, and as much as many of the basic tenets could be easily critiqued in light of modern problems and concerns, he already stated some of the critical points that deserve to be part of our debate over the very same issues. Newman was certainly an idealist, but he also knew from practical experiences what a university really meant and what challenges waited for anyone getting involved:

a University training is the great ordinary means to a great but ordinary end; it aims at raising the intellectual tone of society, at cultivating the public mind, at purifying the national taste, at supplying true principles to popular enthusiasm and fixed aims to popular aspiration, at giving enlargement and sobriety to the ideas of the age, at facilitating the exercise of political power, and refining the intercourse of private life. It is the education which gives a man a clear conscious view of his own opinions and judgments, a truth in developing them, an eloquence in expressing them, and a force in arguing them. It teaches him to see things as they are, to go right to the point, to disentangle a skein of thought, to detect what is sophistical, and to discard what is irrelevant. It prepares him to fill any post with credit, and to master any subject with facility.<sup>7</sup>

Extending his arguments, Newman (154-155) then concludes:

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<sup>7</sup> John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University: Defined and Illustrated*, ed. John Henry Newman. Ed. with intro. and notes by I. T. Ker (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1976), 154; see also Collini, 46, who offers an extensive critical reading of this passage, 46-53, while he does not provide a page reference for his quotes. For recent research on Newman, see *The Cambridge Companion to John Henry Newman*, ed. Ian Ker and Terrence Kerrigan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009)

It shows him how to accommodate himself to others, how to throw himself into their state of mind, how to bring before them his own, how to influence them, how to come to an understanding with them, how to bear with them. He is at home in any society, he has common ground with every class; he knows when to speak and when to be silent; he is able to converse, he is able to listen; he can ask a question pertinently, and gain a lesson seasonably, when he has nothing to impart himself; he is ever ready, yet never in the way... He has the repose of a mind which lives in itself, while it lives in the world, and which has resources for its happiness at home when it cannot go abroad. He has a gift which serves him in public, and supports him in retirement, without which good fortune is but vulgar, and with which failure and disappointment have a charm.

A common contradiction in public approaches to the Humanities emerges when we consider how much the public demands that the young generation learns to express itself properly in writing and orally, that they understand the basic values identifying our society, by way of reference to literature, the arts, music, architecture, philosophy, religion, and foreign languages. However, in terms of money, as soon as it dawns on the public how many years it truly takes to gain the basis of a full education in cultural terms, which does not conclude with a class in English or Spanish respectively in the last year of high school, *Gymnasium*, etc., the critics appear on the stage and demand a cut-back of the educational budget. Yet our founding fathers (in the USA) would have groaned at the idea of having a lawmaker or judge without a solid classical learning, whatever that might mean in specific terms, changing somewhat from country to country. In essence, that is still the same argument which Martha Nussbaum recently made with respect to the critical need of the Humanities for our democracy, that is, for the liberal arts at all level of education. Education is, after all, not a marketing tool in the hands of the corporations, as much as they would like it to be for the maximizing of their profits. Good education, at least according to Western principles, leads to good citizenship, as both the Greek democracy, Roman republicanism, and modern democracies have convincingly demonstrated. While profit serves the needs of individuals, satisfying their greed, education, including the sciences, medicine, engineering, architecture, and business, serves the good of society at large, laying the foundation of democracy worldwide.<sup>8</sup>

## 2. The Relevance of Medieval Studies in the Humanities

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<sup>8</sup> Nussbaum, *Not for profit*, esp. 117-18.

Whereas I might so far have preached mostly to the converted, let us now take the more difficult approach and investigate in more practical terms how to defend the teaching of special subject matters in the Humanities against public criticism against the uselessness and high costs of that field. My own area of research and teaching are the European Middle Ages, which certainly appeal to the masses today, as reflected by countless movies with medieval themes, medieval festivals, knightly tournaments, novels with medieval topics (Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, 1980), and the efforts by the Society for Creative Anachronism. Medieval music is as popular today as medieval food, clothing, weapons, and art work. Museums and galleries with medieval exhibits report strong numbers of visitors, and any medieval castle still in existence and well reconstructed, if not being an imitation of the ideal model of a castle, is frequented by countless tourists (Neuschwanstein, Germany; Warwick, UK).

Nevertheless, the study of Latin as the most important linguistic foundation for the critical approaches to the Middle Ages, or of Middle English, Middle High German, or Old Spanish, is in steady decline. The auxiliary sciences, such as paleography, numismatics, or sphragistics are in great danger of being eliminated. Students generally shy away from any courses or lectures on premodern literature and the arts, not to mention philosophy and religion, with history perhaps being still somewhat of an exception, if they might be required there to pursue a more philological methodology in the traditional sense and to put in some foundational work to prepare them for the documents to be studied. Yet, research in the Middle Ages experiences an exponential growth curve, and the same applies to conferences dedicated to that period.<sup>9</sup> In short, the public strongly embraces the study of the premodern world, and even university courses with a medieval theme, if well advertised and packaged, exert a considerable attraction on our students, as long as they are not required to work with the original sources and to acquire the basic skills necessary to embark on truly serious research of medieval culture and history.<sup>10</sup> In other words, even there where we observe success, problems immediately surface and reveal the deep problems within the Humanities, after all.

There is also no shortage of scholarly studies on the relevance of the Middle Ages for us today.<sup>11</sup> So there are supporters and critics, enthusiasts and opponents,

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<sup>9</sup> See the contributions to *Handbook of Medieval Studies*, ed. Albrecht Classen. 3 vols. (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 2010).

<sup>10</sup> My most popular course that I have ever taught, "Eroticism and Love in the Middle Ages," has attracted up to 1200 students in one class alone (University of Arizona, Fall 2010).

<sup>11</sup> See, for instance, the contributions to *Medieval German Voices in the 21st Century. The Paradigmatic Function of Medieval German Studies for German Studies. A Collection of Essays*, ed. A. Classen. Internationale Forschungen zur Allgemeinen und Vergleichenden Literaturwissenschaft, 46 (Amsterdam-Atlanta: Editions Rodopi, 2000); and to *In the Light of Medieval Spain: Islam, the West, and the Relevance of the Past*, ed. Simon R. Doubleday and David Coleman (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008). I have explored the meaning of medieval literature for us today in my article "Medieval Studies within German Studies: Present and Future Perspectives (*The Nibelungenlied* and

and the issue hence quickly rises how to convince potential students (and their parents, not to speak of administrators) of the meaningfulness of that subject matter in its historical dimension. In the subsequent section I will examine the overarching question regarding the relevance of the Humanities in light of Medieval Studies as a test case. But instead of examining, for instance, how medieval German literature still might fit into the canon of German literary studies, as I have done already several times in the past,<sup>12</sup> here I want to explore the same topic from a broader perspective, considering what the Middle Ages at large might have to say to us today.

If we can accept the notion that individual texts or works from the premodern world continue to carry meaning, then we would be in a strong position to explain the function of the Humanities at the university today, and this perhaps more than ever before. While Stefan Collini argued from a generalist point-of-view in defense of what we all do in our field, and while Martha Nussbaum operated with political and cultural concepts to support the university against its critics, my approach will focus on ethical, moral, philosophical, and spiritual aspects.

Literature or the arts are curious objects of investigation because they seem so unrealistic and yet can have a huge impact on human life. Medieval literature offers many opportunities to examine more closely and intimately than we ever might have imagined what some of the fundamental issues in our existence have always been and how we might respond to them today and in the future.<sup>13</sup> Human life is simply difficult and wrought with immense problems, whether we think of the quest for identity, of love, sickness, death, the search for God, justice, or the need to know about our place here on Earth and beyond. Normally, as we would think, philosophers, or theologians, are asked to come to our rescue, but the approaches to all those fundamental concerns have also always been those addressed by poets, writers, artists, and composers, who at times, if not often, could offer more illustrative approaches and examples and operate, at any rate, in a medium which

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Hartmann von Aue's *Der arme Heinrich*," to appear in *Looking Back, Looking Forward: German Studies in the United States. A Festschrift for Helene Zimmer-Loew*, ed. Rachel Halverston and Carol Anne Costabile Heming.

<sup>12</sup> Albrecht Classen, "Modernität des Mittelalters? Zu Walther von der Vogelweide, Gottfried von Straßburg und Freidank," Part I, in: *Germanic Notes and Reviews* 29, 1 (1998), pp. 1-17; Part II: 29, 2 (1998): 1-11; id., *Medieval German Voices in the 21st Century*; id., "The Quest for Knowledge Within Medieval Literary Discourse: The Metaphysical and Philosophical Meaning of Love," *Words of Love and Love of Words in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, ed. Albrecht Classen. *Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies*, 347 (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2008), 1-51.

<sup>13</sup> For a convenient text selection which I am commonly using in some of my classes, *Medieval Answers to Modern Problems*, ed. Albrecht Classen (San Diego: Cognella, University Readers, 2011; 2nd ed. 2012), will allow me here to engage with some of the crucial texts supporting my claim. This is a textbook, hence the excerpts have been borrowed from a variety of sources that often do no longer meet modern scholarly standards. Nevertheless, they are still trustworthy and reliable and meet the pedagogical goals.

proves to be more accessible for the average person than an abstract philosophical tract or a religious sermon.

The Humanities, in other words, constitutes the central field of research and inquiry into the foundation of human life, without having hard facts in hand, and yet being faced by factual problems and concerns. After all, our existence is not only determined by material conditions, to be sure, but also, if not much more, by spirituality, the intellect, ethics, morality, and ideals.

Leaving these generalities aside, which do not really require further discussions or any kind of defense, let us look at some examples of medieval literature, philosophy, and religion where timeless and hence profound messages, though not necessarily answers, come through and invite further discussions. After all, that is the basic purpose of all literature, or the arts, to present us with a mirror of ourselves, to provide us with a model case for the discourse to begin, and to offer us with examples of basic human dilemmas, problems, dialectics, and challenges. To be blunt, life requires from us all the time to make decisions, to evaluate, and to judge, and this often in very difficult cases. Growing up and leading a constructive and fulfilling life presents many challenges for which there are no easy answers for anyone. Psychology, Sociology, Theology, or Family Studies might be helpful and can provide trenchant analytical tools, statistics, and methods for further studies, but individual situations always require individual responses and actions because we are dealing with emotions, sentiments, attitudes, ideas, and feelings—all essential in human existence. The Humanities stand ready to engage with those areas, perhaps more than any other field of critical inquiry within the University.

Good literature, for instance, introduces the reader to conflictual conditions and illustrates solutions or illustrates specific consequences, without sugar-coating or dealing with problems in a mechanical fashion. Good films, to be open and fair, accomplish a similar goal, while music or the visual arts fall into different, even though not distant, categories. Literature, generally speaking, offers a medium for human explorations that promise to go to the heart of the matter without necessarily presenting easily packaged solutions. As I formulated it recently in the editorial to the new journal *Humanities – Open Access*, “The humanities, however, are primarily qualified to establish those links between individuals and communities, and to create the essential means to overcome conflicts and wars. By the same token, the study of literary works or art works has never prevented the outbreak of hostilities, but neither have physical or economic research.”<sup>14</sup>

Medieval literature often presents fundamental conflicts and trouble in human life that at the end find answers in a typically medieval manner. It might certainly be doubtful whether those can be easily, if at all, applied to our modern lives, but they represent, as is always the case with literature, alternatives that deserve to be

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<sup>14</sup>Albrecht Classen, “Humanities — To Be Or Not To Be, That Is The Question,” Editorial for the journal *Humanities—Open Access Journal* (<http://www.mdpi.com/journal/humanities>; <http://www.mdpi.com/2076-0787/1/1/54/> (Section 6), Sept. 16, 2011.

considered especially because they are so different, perhaps even surprising and hence refreshing.

In the thirteenth century the French poet Gautier de Coinci (1177–1236) created a series of legendary tales dedicated to the Virgin Mary, *Les Miracles de Notre-Dame* (known in English as *The Miracles of Notre Dame* or *The Miracles of Our Lady*), one of which, above all, allows us to grasp most profoundly what a literary text can do and achieve, transforming the reader/listener in his/her quest for deeper understanding regarding the basic meaning of life and one's individual role within society.<sup>15</sup>

The narrative “Our Lady’s Tumbler” tells the story of a tumbler, i.e., a street acrobat who one day decides to join a Cistercian monastery, particularly the famous one of Clairvaux. However, although he is accepted, he quickly realizes that he does not really fit into that community because he is lacking all basic education, cannot properly participate in any of the regular rituals and ceremonies, does not know Latin, is not familiar with the common prayers and hymns, so feels very much out of it altogether. Nevertheless, he is deeply inspired by religious devotion and would very much like to get closer to God. The tumbler is particularly concerned with his own, apparently meaningless life in this community, only profiting from the food and shelter that it provides, without being able to give back anything to his brethren. He is increasingly worried that soon the authorities will notice his uselessness and lack of service, and so might throw him out again, causing him great misery because he really wants to serve God.

The tumbler’s deepest concern is not material safety, but his desire to lead a religious life. While he observes that everyone, from the lowliest novice up to the abbot all fulfill a function and lead a meaningful life, he himself seems to be completely forlorn and disoriented, not receiving any instructions or guidance. We might wonder, of course, why that is the case, i.e., why the tumbler is so badly neglected and ignored, but the narrator takes a different direction, not concerned with pragmatic aspects. His religious tale serves the purpose to illustrate how an individual can discover a practical path toward spirituality and make sense of his/her life.

As is clear from the beginning, the normal route toward religious perfection, as pursued by the monks, proves to be blocked for the tumbler because of his simple mind and lack of education. Wherever he looks, he finds himself out of place and useless, and increasingly grows desperate, frustrated, and depressed. If we did not

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<sup>15</sup> Anna Drzewicka, “Gautier de Coincy et la povre fame,” *Convergences médiévales: épopée, lyrique, roman: Mélanges offerts à Madeleine Tyssens*, ed. Nadine Henrard, Paola Moreno, Martine Thiry-Stassin (Paris: DeBoeck Université, 2000), 149-60; Elida Maria Szarota, *Studien zu Gautier de Coincy* (Limburg: Limburger Vereinsdruckerei, 1934). Surprisingly, recent research has paid very little attention to this narrative. See, at least, the contributions to *Gautier de Coinci: Miracles, Music and Manuscripts*, ed. Kathy M. Krause and Alison Stones. *Medieval Texts and Cultures of Northern Europe*, 13 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006).

know of the historical setting, we could easily imagine the tumbler to be a person from our own day and age in great need of a psychotherapist or psychologist.

When he hears the bells ring, he is about to despair, but suddenly decides to do worship of the Virgin Mary in his own way, the only one that he knows, that is, tumbling. From that day on the tumbler engages in a constant ritual, performing his own service in the crypt, exercising to the utmost, exhausting himself completely in order to carry out his own ceremony in honor of the Virgin Mary. But the tumbler continues to be embarrassed and keeps his activities hidden because he is fully aware how much a discovery of his private method of worship would arouse the other monks' anger and irritation.

Unfortunately, his regular absence from all communal prayer and the mass is finally noticed by one monk who then secretly follows the tumbler down the crypt and observes the most unusual spectacle. He reflects on the situation full of anger because he feels as if the tumbler's dances and somersaults represent an insult to the entire monastery. While they all pray and perform the required church services, the tumbler only makes fun of them and enjoys his time with his private entertainment, as the monk thinks with some bitterness and contempt. But he does not immediately cause a scandal, and instead informs the abbot, who subsequently accompanies him to the crypt to watch with his own eyes what the tumbler might be doing.

To their utter astonishment, however, they do not only witness the poor man's tumbling, but also the miracle of the Virgin Mary herself and the host of angels floating down from the altar to comfort the exhausted and sweating tumbler, without him noticing it. The abbot thereby realizes that a miracle has happened, but not only because the Holy Mother Herself had appeared to succor her admirer. The true miracle proves to be the fact that the tumbler has gained a higher level of sanctity than all of the monks and the abbot combined. While they perform their religious rituals and ceremonies in a more or less mechanical manner, the tumbler had found a method to express his true devotion in the purest form possible, resorting to those skills that he commanded. As little as he really knew of sophisticated worship and church service, as much did he truly understand, from the bottom of his heart, how to express his piety and commitment to the Virgin Mary. As the abbot learns, the formal, ritual approach to religious worship might be good enough for the ordinary monk, but the tumbler actually shamed them all by demonstrating what true devotion meant. When he later calls him to his office, he admits openly that the tumbler has proven to be a holy man, so the abbot himself asks him to pray for him. Moreover, he commands him to continue with his tumbling, but now in the open, which the lowly man does, until he dies a holy death, when the holy host welcomes his soul and rescues it from the devils.

This little narrative certainly appealed to the intense religious culture of the thirteenth century with its strong cult of the Virgin Mary.<sup>16</sup> For modern readers it might be rather problematic to deal with this account at first because of its intense religious sentimentality. But it represents considerably more than a pious Catholic story of a Marian miracle. With just a slight translation of the story's content, we can easily gain profound insight into human psychology and utilize this report of the plain tumbler for a universal lesson. The constellation in the monastery might be easily recognizable by many readers because the tumbler simply does not fit into the community and remains an outsider because he lacks the relevant skills and abilities, as much as he would like to be a good monk and participate in all the ceremonies and rituals. In other words, it is a universal story of an individual's desire to belong and yet of being excluded. The tumbler, however, demonstrates that he also can achieve the highest graces by pursuing his own path by the simple means available to him. Insofar as he believes in his own abilities, he successfully reaches out to the Mother of God. Of course, he remains deeply fearful the whole time until the abbot has revealed to him the true miracle, but then he can die a peaceful death, knowing that his soul will be saved.

We can read "The Tumbler" from a religious perspective, as it was originally intended. But we also can read it as a literary metaphor of man's trials and tribulations here in this life, of the struggles we have to go through, and of the strength of the human will overcoming even some of the greatest hindrances. As the tumbler illustrates through his own form of devotion, salvation is possible in many different ways, and those who represent the official ceremony and carry out the 'correct' rituals are not necessarily the only ones who live a truly blissful life. What matters is the human spirit, the inner will to do the good, and finally the realization that everyone can achieve the highest goal if one sets one's mind to it.

Of course, the tumbler never rises to the level of a fully-fledged monk, and the position of an abbot would certainly always be out of his reach, since he is completely lacking in education. At the same time, there is no explicit criticism of the learned members of the monastery, although none of them is ever graced with such a miraculous appearance of the Virgin Mary. As Gautier conveys to us, those humble in mind and modest in behavior, devout in their attitude and pious in their behavior can also achieve the highest triumphs, since worldly power and even clerical values do not necessarily accomplish the goal as desired or expected. This would not mean, of course, that we all should follow the model provided by the tumbler. But our critical reading of this late-medieval narrative clearly signals that high rank, strong positions, public influence, and esteem do not guarantee a blissful and happy life. Joy, happiness, and spirituality can also rest in the shadow, at the bottom of society, and in the private spheres of a simple but deeply dedicated mind.

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<sup>16</sup> This is richly documented, but see, for instance, Teresa P. Reed, *Shadows of Mary: Reading the Virgin Mary in Medieval Texts*. Religion and Culture in the Middle Ages (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003).

Let us choose another example, this one from the late Middle Ages, dealing with the issues of death and life, marriage and personal happiness. In Johannes von Tepl's *Ackermann* (The Ploughman) from ca. 1400 we encounter Everyman debating with Death about the meaning of life since the latter has taken away his wife. As we know today this narrative was a rhetorical exercise and constitutes an early example of German Renaissance literature.<sup>17</sup> The Ackermann bitterly complains to Death about his injustice and cruelty, having robbed him of his most beloved friend and wife, the mother of their children. Death, however, responds in a highly detached and reserved manner, mocking his opponent and ridiculing him regularly. In the course of the debate the author has his two figures express fundamental positions as to life, death, love, and marriage, and as much as emotions on the part of the Ackermann (Everyman) seem to dominate, he begins to calm down, inquires about the nature of death, and explores the beauty and value of marriage. The two figures also discuss rather heatedly the injustices in life, with the Ackermann insisting that Death is unfair and acts unevenly even when he kills people, while the latter argues convincingly that everyone has to die indistinguishably.

Nevertheless, at one point Death takes the radical step of rejecting life altogether and dismissing human existence as not worthwhile, which represents, in many ways, the fundamental approach to that issue in the Middle Ages, when, theologically speaking, the soul's salvation was all that really mattered, while the body represented nothing but an ugly and negligible vessel. Thereupon, however, the Ackermann finally goes on the attack and launches a most impressive defense of human existence, defending its dignity and identifying the human body as the crown of divine creation. He points out the miracle of the sensory organs and refers Death to the absolute rule of God who is the maker of all life, concluding chapter twenty-five with the final comment: "Only man is in possession of reason, the noble treasure. He alone is the delightful form, whose like none but God is able to shape, and in which all skilled works, all art and mastery, are woven with wisdom. Let go, Sir Death! you are the enemy of man: that is why you speak him ill."

Finding himself suddenly in an indefensible position, Death resorts to the radical rejection of all sciences, including necromancy, expressing utter contempt of his opponent since all life, indeed, unavoidably concludes with death. At the end, God appears as the arbiter in this debate and grants Death the victory. However, at the same time he expresses great respect for man's valiant efforts: "However, the quarrel is not entirely unfounded. You have both contested well: the one is forced by

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<sup>17</sup> The scholarship on this text is very rich, but see Albrecht Classen, "Der *Ackermann aus Böhmen* - ein literarisches Zeugnis aus einer Schwellenzeit: Mittelalterliches Streitgespräch oder Dokument des neuzeitlichen Bewußtseins?," *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie* 110.3 (1991): 348-73; Christian Kiening, *Schwierige Modernität : der "Ackermann" des Johannes von Tepl und die Ambiguität historischen Wandels*. Münchener Texte und Untersuchungen zur deutschen Literatur des Mittelalters, 113 (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1998).

his sorrow to lament, the other by the plaintiff's attack to tell the truth. So plaintiff, yours is the honour!"

Here rests the ultimate response to all human struggles, and Johannes of Tepl truly offers an answer to the one and critical quest as to the meaning of life itself. Instead of leading one's life only with the afterlife in mind, for him, already deeply influenced by early Renaissance thinking, our existence has a purpose in itself because it reflects God here on earth and hence is worth living, irrespective of all suffering and pain, and the final outcome, death. Insofar as Death desperately tries, in the last section, to undermine all sciences and intellectual endeavors, while at first he had so strongly advocated logic and rationality in contrast to the Ackermann's lamentations and outburst of emotions, he reveals his own realization that he has basically lost the debate although at the end God grants him victory. Life, within its divine framework, hence proves to be the absolute, spiritual winner, and the Ackermann's paean on his deceased wife adds the beautiful perspective that marriage is one of the worthiest forms of cohabitation, defying even the worst threats by death.

We could examine many other texts from the Middle Ages with regard to their meaningfulness for readers/listeners of all times. They are not necessarily better or worse than those from antiquity or the modern world. However, by themselves they cannot be dismissed and deserve their own position within the gamut of the Humanities insofar as here we discover, as is always the case in good literature, fundamental efforts to respond to basic human needs, questions, concerns, and problems. Medieval poets do not hold a panacea for all issues vexing our existence, but they were likewise not obtuse to them and tried hard, in their own way, to respond to them constructively, spiritually, and philosophically, couched in endless literary forms.

Supporting literature as an epistemological vehicle, as I have tried to demonstrate here, directly implies supporting the Humanities, and hence also the universities. To quote Collini one more time, those "have become an important medium – perhaps the single most important institutional medium – for conserving, understanding, extending, and handing on to subsequent generations the intellectual, scientific, and artistic heritage of mankind" (198). As a medievalist, I can only plead to keep some of the lessons, or only questions, in mind that were explored by medieval poets, philosophers, and theologians. The huge area of love, marriage, and sexuality that has continually impacted our individual happiness both yesterday, today, and tomorrow, has almost always been discussed in literature. Medieval poets such as Marie de France, Chrétien de Troyes, Hartmann von Aue, Andreas Capellanus, Gottfried von Straßburg, Juan Ruiz, or Giovanni Boccaccio deserve greatest attention in this regard because they have proven to be masters in the

discourse of love.<sup>18</sup> But then we also come across such fundamental questions as pertaining to revenge, hatred, war, betrayal, and, surprisingly, friendship and loyalty, which all find powerful, though deeply somber reflections in such heroic epics as the *Nibelungenlied* or *El Poema de Mio Cid*. Moreover, critical issues regarding religious tolerance were also raised, even if primarily within a Christian context, already in the Middle Ages, if we think of Peter Abelard, the founder of dialectic thinking, Marsilius of Padua, and Nicholas of Cues.<sup>19</sup>

If we want to understand how medieval writers described how to bridge the gulf between the material body in all its frailty and weakness and the inner spirit, the soul, we only would have to read Hartmann von Aue's brilliant verse novella, *Der arme Heinrich* (*Lord Henry*), ca. 1200. If we search for literary examples illustrating the age-old conflict between father and son, the Old High German heroic epic *Hildebrandslied* would offer itself exceedingly well for that task, while the complex relationship between mother and daughter finds extraordinary expression in the *Nibelungenlied* and in *Kudrun*. John of Salisbury was a very early proponent of a just king and a properly-balanced government, subject to God and obligated to look out for the well-being of the people, while the Middle High German poet Walther von der Vogelweide already explored how to cope with the tensions between Church and State and the former's infringement on the worldly affairs of people. At the same time he formulated timeless comments on the tension between monetary wealth, honor, and love of God, which could only be hoped to be brought together if peace and justice were in place. Finally, medieval feminism, as argued for by Christine de Pizan, has already appealed to generations of modern students who can recognize in her work a true harbinger of political things to come in the postmedieval world.

Some of these fundamental aspects and concerns can and perhaps must be studied already at the secondary school (high school, etc.), but the university is one of the best places for such activities because there the essential task consists of employing a critical, scholarly approach to the questions at hand, engaging in the relevant research-based discourse, and learning of how to make contributions to it by ourselves.

In sum, in light of the many different messages contained in medieval literature, philosophy, etc., we can easily recognize the great value of the Humanities being taught at the universities. Of course, none of those answers developed by these medieval writers might be a perfect fit for us postmodern people. Nevertheless, solutions to all problems rest in the discursive approach, which in itself requires a large repertoire of ideas, models, concepts, and suggestions, and propositions, most of which were already explored and developed, in one way or the other, in the Middle Ages.

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<sup>18</sup>. See, for instance, the contributions to *Words of Love and Love of Words in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, ed. Albrecht Classen. Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 347 (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2008).

<sup>19</sup>. Cary J. Nederman, *Worlds of Difference: European Discourses of Tolerance, c. 1100-c.1550* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University, 2000)

Medieval literature can certainly not be the ultimate or only answer to all questions concerning the universe and hence also of the university as an institution, but this extreme case studied here demonstrates that we as the human race are deeply grounded, or anchored, in our own past, both in material and in spiritual, intellectual terms, constantly growing (or declining) in our efforts to make sense out of the present and the past in order to prepare ourselves for the future. More specifically, in order to preserve our inheritance and to carry it on, but then refined, remodeled, reinterpreted, to the next generation, we will have to accomplish the essential task we are faced with all the time when we try to make sense of being here on earth. When Beowulf in the eponymous Old English heroic epic overcomes the two monsters, first Grendel and then his mother, he accomplishes much more than killing cannibalistic, sinister creatures. *Beowulf* only reveals its deeper meaning if we understand its metaphorical dimension, the timeless struggle between good and evil.

Similarly Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* and Dante Alighieri's *Divina Commedia* continue to speak to us, just as Shakespeare's plays or Cervantes's *Don Quijote* because here we encounter literary examples of the basic human condition. The Humanities pursue the ambitious goal of confronting each individual with that critical aspect, and only those willing to accept those challenges, as presented by some of the best literary examples, will be empowered to discover the true path toward the future, living a life in which all our potentials as human beings are called upon and, perhaps, even realized in our self. This is both a religious and a philosophical answer to the public question as to the meaning and relevance of the Humanities, and hence of the University, both today and in the future. But it is an answer resulting from the study of literature.

When we engage with medieval texts, we do not necessarily have the perfect instrument in hand to begin with the final epistemological inquiry, but it is also not the worst, quite on the contrary, since here we constantly encounter narrative models for the quest of the self.<sup>20</sup> Gottfried von Straßburg's *Tristan*, for instance, challenged both his contemporaries and still us today in our basic understanding of love. For many readers/listeners *Tristan* was simply scandalous, but true life consists of those profound provocations and confrontations.

The promise of the Humanities consists of developing the necessary tools to handle those challenges properly by educating our students to perceive, analyze, and solve problems and issues in a literary context, where everything still is possible, like in a laboratory. Fictionality is an important element, but there are many texts within our annals of literature that are either partially or wholly factual, such as travelogues. Even here, where the discourse is laid bare most prominently, at the critical juncture of self and world, of mind and matter, the epistemological probing can start and truly offer us hope to gain new insights of an essential kind. Ethics, morality, faith, and philosophy, for instance, are the critical nodes in our existence

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<sup>20</sup> Aldama, *Why the Humanities Matter*, 2008, 1-19.

that profit deeply from an engagement with literature, which subsequently lays the foundation of our whole being.<sup>21</sup>

Many medieval historians have already pondered deeply on how to justify the study of the Middle Ages for today, if we think, for example, of the work by Simon Doubleday or Maria Menocal.<sup>22</sup> Scholars focusing on moral and ethical history as paradigms for modern-day approaches rightly emphasize that those virtues and ideals can only be taught and cannot be handed on genetically,<sup>23</sup> hence constantly require historical models available to each new generation to learn from. Here I have worked with another set of texts, but believe to have reached the same, if not more productive, conclusion, that is, that the study of the Middle Ages can assist us today to make sense of our lives.<sup>24</sup>

Altogether, at the risk of preaching to the converted, both the Humanities and the University at large continue to constitute a school of and for life, most critical for the survival of the human race in its struggle to maintain the traditional levels of culture and the same degree of ethics and morality, if not to expand and improve on them as part of our ongoing growth. We owe this idealism to our young generation, and we must not simply give up on ourselves or on them.<sup>25</sup>

Of course, we can no longer naively subscribe to the idealistic concept of the University as developed by Wilhelm von Humboldt in the early nineteenth century,<sup>26</sup> who argued for a new kind of scholarship planted in the student's soul where it then would form the base of the desired character formation. Nevertheless, turning to medieval literature and culture, for instance, as an essential area of teaching and research at the University in the particular area of the Humanities

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<sup>21</sup> Aldama, *Why the Humanities Matter*, 2008, 234-64.

<sup>22</sup> See the Introduction to *Why the Middle Ages Matter: Medieval Light on Modern Injustice*, ed. Celia Chazelle, Simon Doubleday, Felice Lifshitz, and Amy G. Remensnyder (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), 1-14, with the relevant bibliography. See now the contributions to *In the Light of Medieval Spain: Islam, the West, and the Relevance of the Past*, ed. Samuel R. Doubleday and David Coleman. *New Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave, 2008); Maria R. Menocal, *The Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain* (Boston, MA: Little and Brown, 2002).

<sup>23</sup> Geoffrey Koziol, "Why We Have Mirrors for Princes But None for Presidents" *Why the Middle Ages Matter*, 183-98.

<sup>24</sup> Anthony T. Kronman, *Education's End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), 42-45. He particularly warns us from the current trend to give the career the absolute dominance. Careerism, blind acceptance of science and technology, and hence also political correctness, as he calls it, "put the idea of an art of living at risk and undermine the authority of humanities teachers to teach it... The secular humanism that once saved us from our doubts must now save us from our convictions" (258-59).

<sup>25</sup> This is, of course, neither the first nor the last study on this fundamental issue; see, for instance, the contributions to *Humanities Programs Today*, ed. Richard R. Adler (New York: Citation Press, 1970); Owen Chadwick, *The Predicament of Research in the Humanities Today* (Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 1985); Jacques Barzun, , Jaroslav Pelikan, and John Hope Franklin, *Scholarship Today: The Humanities and Social Sciences*. Occasional Papers of the Council of Scholars, 5 (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1987).

<sup>26</sup> Hedwig Kopetz, *Forschung und Lehre: Die Idee der Universität bei Humboldt, Jaspers, Schelsky und Mittelstraß*. Studien zu Politik und Verwaltung, 78 (Vienna, Cologne, and Graz: Böhlau Verlag, 2002), 35-51.

promises to answer many of our questions even today and indicates the timelessness of the human quest for knowledge and spirituality. Despite all differences between the medieval world and us today, there are many responses to existential problems to be found in medieval texts or art that could help us in our efforts to deal with our own lives constructively and productively.

Both the tumbler in Gautier's religious tale and Heinrich in Hartmann von Aue's verse narrative ("Der arme Heinrich") exemplify human struggle, a profound learning process, and some form of epiphany without which an individual's true transformation might not be possible. Marie de France and Walther von der Vogelweide have much to tell us about the happiness of love, while Christine de Pizan can be easily quoted as an energetic forerunner of modern feminism. And then there are the countless documents by medieval philosophers and mystics, preachers and poets, who all contributed, in their own way, to the ongoing epistemological quest. We do not have to give them absolute priority, but we should also not ignore them, since they had already important insights into human life in all its dialectics and problematics. Despite John Dewey's warning in 1915 about the steady decline of education in the age of the machine which can carry out most mechanical operations better than man, and despite his justified fear that "the main effect of education, the achieving of a life of rich significance, drops by the wayside,"<sup>27</sup> the Humanities hold steady, and the human spirit is still deeply anchored in the literary discourse, whether grounded in antiquity, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, or the modern world because hope for the betterment of our life represents the ultimate beacon of human existence.<sup>28</sup>

Certainly, the Humanities are not for sale, as Martha Nussbaum posited most cogently, and yet they continue to play an important role within the human market, so to speak, offering invaluable insights, experiences, models, and concepts of how to struggle through life effectively and affectively, realizing one's dreams or coping with the wounds that we all tend to receive at one point of the other. "Instruction in literature and the arts can cultivate sympathy in many ways, through engagement with many different works of literature, music, fine art, and dance."<sup>29</sup> Imagination is the instrument, and engagement with the messages contained therein unlocks the meaning, the spring for all life.

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<sup>27</sup> John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1916), here quoted from the motto used by Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit* (she confuses, however, the year of the original publication, giving it as 1915).

<sup>28</sup> Flo Keyes, *The Literature of Hope in the Middle Ages and Today: Connections in Medieval Romance, Modern Fantasy, and Science Fiction* (Jefferson, NC, and London: McFarland & Company, 2006), makes a good case of medieval literature being as powerful and future-oriented as modern science fiction. For the relevance of the King Arthur myth today, see Nicole Dentzien, *The Openness of Myth: The Arthurian Tradition in the Middle Ages and Today*. Kieler Beiträge zur Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Neue Folge, 18 (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2004).

<sup>29</sup> Nussbaum, *Not for Profit*, 106.