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The River as a Human Lifeline: The Case of Werner Bergengruen's "Der Strom." Medieval Literary Reflections and Modern Responses

*By Albrecht Classen**

By means of ecocritical perspectives, we can build meaningful and relevant connections between the STEM fields and the Humanities. Literary works, above all, whether from the Middle Ages or the modern world, read through that lens, can yield important new perspectives about the relationship between humans and nature. In this study, the focus rests on rivers as reflected in fictional works. After highlighting the symbolic significance of rivers in some of the major medieval German, Italian, and English poems, the article, leaping to the twentieth century, investigates the role of the river in two novellas by the Baltic-German author Werner Bergengruen (d. 1964) and identifies them as indirect but powerful contributions to the new movement of 'magic realism' that had not yet reached the German audiences at that time. While Bergengruen is mostly disregarded today for political and ideological reasons, the ecocritical message contained in his texts promises to uncover the true literary quality of his narratives and their relevance for ecocritical awareness regarding rivers as a protagonist's lifeline. In many ways, we can recognize in his work a direct reflection of medieval thought, yet he transcended those and cast them in his own concept and value system.

Introduction

The history of humankind is closely associated with water, specifically with rivers. Entire cultures emerged along major rivers, such as the Nile, the Rhine, the Danube, the Mississippi, the Saigon River, the Yellow River, the Congo River, the Niger River, or the Amazon River. Cities and economies grew up along rivers, nations were formed, myths were created, and culture emerged, all associated with water. In ancient times, the civilizations of Mesopotamia, Babylon, Assyria, and others arose in the lands through which the fabled rivers Euphrates and Tigris flow until today. Universally, the river inherently carries deep symbolism because it originates in a well, far away from its estuary. Most rivers form because a multitude of smaller rivers, creeks, streams, and rivulets flow into them. In the course of time, the river makes its way through vast landmasses and then reaches its delta, merging its water with that of the ocean. Thus, we face the intriguing situation of the river providing a powerful symbolism connected with birth, life, and death.

*University Distinguished Professor, University of Arizona, USA.

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Rivers in desert zones dry up many times, and then they overflow during the monsoon season, leading to destruction, death, and yet also rebirth because the sediments (sand, silt, and clay) left behind on the floodplains can provide crucial fertilization – especially in the case of the Nile (Egypt), the Yellow River (Sichuan, China), or the Zambezi River (from Angola to Mozambique).[1] This also entails that many rivers change their course over time, which has had a tremendous impact on human civilization. Entire cities or harbors had to be moved as a consequence of those developments, or all building stopped because a river valley had proved to be too dangerous, too unpredictable, and constantly subject to new floodings.[2] In short, rivers and human society have regularly interacted with each other quite closely, with people always trying their best to utilize the river to their advantage, whether this is then done with respect or not. Disregarding a river's power and naively settling in the river valley has had, even most recently, deadly consequences (see the flooding of the Ahr River in western Germany in July of 2021).[3] Not surprisingly, throughout times, both artists and poets, composers and philosophers have responded intimately with rivers which mirror, influence, or threaten human life. Studying rivers makes it possible to build meaningful bridges between the Humanities and the STEM fields.

With just a little effort, we can easily unearth relevant poems, images, or musical compositions responding to the profound significance of a river, such as in modern-day Vietnamese poetry.[4] Most famous would be the six-piece symphony *Má vlast* (My Fatherland) by Czech composer Bedřich Smetana from between 1874 and 1879, especially his *Vltava* (The Moldau) from late 1874.[5] Ecocriticism and ecopoetry have gained tremendously in significance, or rather, we have now realized that such ecocritical perspectives have been with us for a long time, though often undetected by modern scholars. The current global climate crisis has been a big wake-up call, both to scientists and also to scholars in the Humanities and the

1. For an informative survey, geared more for the general readership, see https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/flood-plain/ (last accessed on May 15, 2024).

2. Ekaterina V. Lebedeva, "Volcanic Regions: Geomorphologist's Point of View," *Updates in Volcanology – Linking Active Volcanism and the Geological Record*, ed. Károly Németh. IntechOpen, 2023, 10.5772/intechopen.108141 (last accessed on May 15, 2024).

3. Andy Neumann, *Es war doch nur Regen!?: Protokoll einer Katastrophe*. 9th ed. Meßkirch: Gmeiner, 2022; see also the contributions to *Spuren der Flut im Ahrtal 2021: Dokumentation - Analyse – Perspektiven*, ed. Wolfgang Büchs, Jürgen Haffke, Thomas Roggenkamp, Winfried Sander, Andreas Schmickler. 2nd expanded ed. Odenthal: Landschaft und Geschichte e.V., 2023.

4. See the powerful formulation by Huỳnh Sanh Thông for the title of his article. "Live by Water, Die for Water," In *Watermark: Vietnamese American Poetry and Prose*, edited by Barbara Tran, Monique T. D. Truong, and Luu Truong Khoi. New York: Asian American Writers' Workshop, 1998; originally in: *The Vietnam Review* 1.133 (1996): 121–53.

5. Linda Maria Koldau, *Die Moldau: Smetanas Zyklus "Mein Vaterland"*. Cologne, Weimar, and Vienna: Böhlau, 2007. See also the excellent survey article online at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/M%C3%A1_vlast (last accessed on May 15, 2024).

Arts. We are hence strongly invited to consider anew the close relationship between the natural environment and human culture, literature and our material conditions, and between the physical world and our spiritual identity.[6] Ecocritically, we can now turn to many texts previously disregarded or discussed only superficially and realize that they offer potent messages about the critical interaction between natural environment and human society.[7]

Whereas older scholarship tended to identify references to natural objects or creatures primarily as typological and actually far removed from natural reality,[8] a more sensitive reading of many different texts both from the Middle Ages and the modern time has shed significant new light on the writers', poets', artists', or composers' minds regarding nature.[9] Studying the relationship between a river and people, above all, allows us to comprehend deeply the enormous impact of that body of water on the cultural development and the formation of individuality and a collective sense of belonging to a landscape or region.[10] A river profoundly impacts and shapes human culture as it develops in its valley.

For obviously good reasons, people have always settled near a river, and they have mostly profited from some form of symbiosis with the river.[11] Beginning with

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6. Cheryll Glotfelty. "Introduction. Literary Studies in an Age of Environmental Crisis. In: *The Ecocriticism Reader. Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, ed. eadem and Harold Fromm. Athen, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1996, 15–36. Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism*. 3rd edition. New York: Routledge, 2023. See also the various contributors to *Ecocriticism: The Essential Reader*, edited by Ken Hiltner. New York: Routledge, 2015. Also consult *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism*, ed. Greg Garrard. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, which takes us from late antiquity and the Middle Ages to the present in practical and theoretical terms. None of the literary material to be discussed here is covered in this major reference work and others.

7. Ecocriticism was basically launched by Joseph Meeker who talked about "literary ecology" in his *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary* Ecology. *Studies in Literary Ecology*. New York: Scribner, 1972. See esp. the contributions to *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, ed. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (see note 6).

8. See, for instance, Derek Pearsall and Elizabeth Salter, *Landscapes and Seasons of the Medieval World*. London: Elek Books, 1973.

9. Albrecht Classen, *Water in Medieval Literature: An Ecocritical Reading*. Ecocritical Theory and Practice. Lanham, Boulder, et al.: Lexington Books, 2018.

10. *Rivers Lost, Rivers Regained: Rethinking City-River Relations*, ed. Martin Knoll, Uwe Lübken, and Dieter Schott. History of the Urban Environment. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017; for rivers in modern-day American history, see James F. Barnett, Jr., *Beyond Control: The Mississippi River's New Channel to the Gulf of Mexico*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2017; for the situation in South-East Asia, see Paul Hanasz, *Transboundary Water Governance and International Actors in South Asia: The Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna Basin*. Earthscan Studies in Water Resource Management. London: Taylor and Francis, 2017.

11. See, for instance, Gillian Mary Hanson, *Riverbank and Seashore in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century British Literature*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006; Shoshana Ronen, *Polin*

the *Gilgamesh* (ca. 1800 B.C.E.) and followed by the Old and New Testament, rivers and people have always interacted, as the history of literature at large confirms. The river might take individuals on a long series of adventures and can thus reflect both personal freedom and also the culture of an entire society (e.g., Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, 1885). Within our context, we might want to pay particular attention to the German gay author Hans Henny Jahn who is well known for his unfinished trilology, *Fluß ohne Ufer. Roman in drei Teilen* (1949–1961; Shoreless River or River Without Banks: Novel in Three Parts), which he conceived as a kind of narrative symphony.[12] From here, we could easily widen our perspective, since the river really appears in world literature and assumes one of the central motifs throughout time.[13]

Preliminary Reflections
Rivers in Medieval and Early Modern Literature

Rivers constitute mighty powers with the ability to create life and to kill all life. They are, as the title of this study indicates, the lifeline of a people, a culture, if not of the entire world. Already medieval poets demonstrated a strong sense of this phenomenon, especially because crossing a river could mean a decision over life and death. The anonymous poet of the Middle High German heroic epic *Nibelungenlied* (ca. 1200) illustrated this dramatically with the Burgundians crossing the Danube to visit the Hunnish King Attila and his Burgundian wife, Kriemhild. Hagen brutally tests the prophecy of water nixies and realizes that none of them would return home alive, so he destroys the ferryboat, which symbolizes that they are all marching toward their death.

– *A Land of Forests and Rivers: Images of Poland and Poles in Contemporary Hebrew Literature in Israel*. Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Uniw. Warszawskiego, 2007; T. S. McMillin, *The Meaning of Rivers: Flow and Reflection in American Literature*. Iowa City, IO: University of Iowa Press, 2011. For a very useful anthology of relevant texts, see *Panta rhei: der Fluß und seine Bilder, ein kulturgeschichtliches Lesebuch*, ed. Ute Seiderer. Leipzig: Philipp Reclam jun., 1999, or *Eine Donau-Anthologie der anderen Art*, ed. Edit Király. Salzburg and Vienna: Jung und Jung, 2018.

12. Birgit Schillinger, *Das kreative Chaos bei Thomas Mann und Hans Henny Jahnn: ein Vergleich von "Doktor Faustus" und "Fluss ohne Ufer"*. Mannheimer Studien zur Literatur- und Kulturwissenschaft, 1. St. Ingbert: Röhrig, 1993; see also the good introduction online at: https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hans_Henny_Jahnn#Literarisches_Werk (last accessed on May 15, 2024).

13. See, for instance, the list at: https://www.rowadventures.com/blog/essential-river-reads (last accessed on May 15, 2024). For individual studies, see Prudence J. Jones, *Reading Rivers in Roman Literature and Culture. Roman Studies*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2005; Carmen Escobeda de Tapia and Ángela Mena González, "The Poetics of the River in Indian Literature in English," *Journal of English Studies* 14 (2016): 111–24; Margaret Ziolkowski, *Rivers in Russian Literature.* Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 2020.

In Wolfram von Eschenbach's Grail romance *Parzival* (ca. 1205), the young protagonist does not dare, for a long time, to cross a creek that separates his childhood forest from his imminent adulthood in the outside world, and once he has found a passage, he quickly enters the world of King Arthur where violence and chaos rule, resulting in many deaths.[14] Similarly, at the end of the romance, Gawain has to cross a river and would have almost failed, but he ultimately succeeds and can thus create new harmony and order in his world.

Most importantly, Dante the pilgrim in the *Divina Commedia* (completed in ca. 1320), discovers that all souls condemned to Hell have to cross the river Styx, a direct borrowing from Greek mythology. In the anonymous Middle English *Pearl* poem (ca. 1390), the dreamer, who has lost his daughter, enters a paradise-like garden and then espies a delightful maiden, but a deep river separates them, which forces the two to exchange their dialogue across the water, which amounts to Christian teachings about the bliss of the afterlife that can only be comprehended through a vision. The parallels to Dante's experience with his beloved Beatrice in *Paradiso* are not to be overlooked. Certainly, the entire setting in nature and the body of running water provides yet another profound symbolism of the river standing in for the demarcation between life and death, and hence heaven.[15]

Moreover, a bit later, the narrative framework of Marguerite de Navarre's *Heptaméron* (1558/1559) is determined by enormous rainfall that makes all rivers flood so much that any crossing becomes impossible. A group of storytellers, however, finds refuge in a monastery and turns to a narrative entertainment, very much in the vein of Boccaccio's *Decameron* (ca. 1350), though there the Black Death has forced the young protagonists to flee the city and to pass their time telling each

14. For examples in the history of medieval German literature, see Eva Locher and Thomas Poser. "Fluss, Quelle, Brunnen." In *Literarische Orte in deutschsprachigen Erzählungen des Mittelalters: Ein Handbuch*, ed. Tilo Renz, Monika Hanauska, and Mathias Herweg. Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2018, 146–62.

15. *Pearl: An Edition with Verse* Translation, trans. William Vantuono. Notre Dame, IN, and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995. Critics have lamented the fairly free translation that does not render the original Middle English close enough. For a contrast, see now *Pearl: A Middle English Edition and Modern English Translation*, ed. and trans. Jane Beal. Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press, 2020. The verses 125–28 deserve to be quoted here, from Beal's translation: "Down by a stream that continually flows / I bowed in bliss, my brains brimful! / The farther I followed those stream-filled vales, / the more the strength of joy strained my heart." Cf. the contributions to *Becoming the Pearl-Poet: Perceptions, Connections, Receptions,* ed. Jane Beal. Lanham, MD, Boulder, CO, New York, NY, and London: Lexington Books, 2022. For the latest research on the poet and the dating of the four texts contained in the one manuscript, see now Andrew Breeze, *The Historical Arthur and the Gawain Poet: Studies on Arthurian and Other* Traditions. Studies in Medieval Literature. Lanham, Boulder, et al.: Lexington Books, 2023, 81–95.

other stories. We can easily widen this perspective and incorporate similar literary cases, for instance, in the Arabic tradition.[16]

We would not need to emphasize particularly the great relevance and value of rivers as pathways for communication and trade already during the pre-modern age,[17] or their continued significance until today for commerce, politics, military operations, and cultural developments – see, for instance, the famous Rhine-Main-Danube Canal connecting the North Sea and Atlantic with the Black Sea far in the east, completed in 1992.[18] But we do need to identify the river as a symbol of human and natural life, in its combination of transitoriness and continuity, ephemerality and stability, fluidity and constancy. This finds its most poignant expression in the work of a mostly forgotten but yet still powerful twentieth-century German author, Werner Bergengruen, the topic of this paper. Since he drew so much from medieval sources, and was deeply inspired by rivers, we face here a great opportunity in literary terms to catapult us from the fourteenth to the twentieth century and gain in that process profound insight into the catalytic significance of the river in human life. As has become clear so far, we could certainly claim that the river has commonly represented a major catalyst for the protagonist throughout world literature, and this alo in the modern and postmodern period.

Werner Bergengruen and the River

For quite some time, we have realized the economic and especially mythical dimension of rivers for many human societies.[19] They own an ominous agency and

16. Sheila Blair and Jonathan Bloom, "Introduction," *Rivers of Paradise: Water in Islamic Art and Culture*, ed. id. New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 2009.

17. *Flüsse als Kommunikations- und Handelswege: Marschenratskolloquium 2009; 5.–7. November 2009, Deutsches Schiffahrtsmuseum, Bremerhaven = Rivers as Communication and Trade Routes*, ed. Felix Bittermann, Hauke Jens, Peter Schmid, and Matthias D. Schön. Siedlungs- und Küstenforschung im südlichen Nordseegebiet, 34. Rahden, Westfalen: Leidorf, 2011; for the early Middle Ages, see now Ellen Fenzel Arnold. *Medieval Riverscapes: Environment and Memory in Northwest Europe, c. 300–1100*. Studies in Environment and History. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2024. See also the contributions to *Flusslandschaften: in Mittelalter und Moderne*, ed. Andrea von Hülsen-Esch. Düsseldorf: düsseldorf university press dup, 2023.

18. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rhine%E2%80%93Main%E2%80%93Danube_Canal (last accessed on May 15, 2025). For critical perspectives, see the contributions to *"Jahrhundertwerk" oder "dümmstes Bauwerk seit dem Turmbau zu Babel"?: die Großschifffahrtsstraße Rhein-Main-Donau*, ed. Dirk Götschmann. Regensburg: Verlag Friedrich Pustet, 2020.

19. Brigitte Englisch, "Weltflüsse," *Burgen, Länder, Orte*, ed. Ulrich Müller and Werner Wunderlich. Mittelalter Mythen 5. 981–96. Constance: UVK Verlagsgesellschaft, 2008; Albrecht Classen, "Der Mythos vom Rhein: Geschichte, Kultur, Literatur und Ideologie. Die Rolle eines europäischen Flusses vom Mittelalter bis zur Gegenwart," *Mittelalter-Mythen*, vol. V. Ed. Ulrich Müller and Werner Wunderlich. 711–25. Constance: UVK, 2008. See also

lend a character to the respective *hinterland* and its people, as many poets and artists have already demonstrated in their works.[20] For the purpose of this paper, the focus will move away from medieval literature and jump to a twentieth-century Baltic-German writer, Werner Bergengruen (1892–1964),[21] who enjoyed enormous popularity well into the 1970s but whose fame has dramatically faded since then, probably because of the changes in the political culture of his time. Bergengruen carefully and deliberately drew from numerous medieval sources and adapted them for his own purposes to investigate symbolism and magic, fortune and faith, which thus explains the combination of the previous medieval textual examples with the modern novellas by this Baltic-German writer. In many of his works, and so in one of the novellas to be discussed here, the author focuses deeply on his home country, today Latvia, but he transcends those limitations and offers mythical perspectives on rivers as human lifelines.

However, the new student generation since the 1970s tended to reject religion and mysticism, refused to listen to historical aspects undergirding their own culture, and demanded radical reforms in the entire education system to gain more freedom and democracy. Thus, rather quickly and unfairly, Bergengruen lost his status as a canonical author in advanced schools (*Gymnasium*) or at universities, especially because he was suddenly criticized *post factum* for his allegedly dubious stance during the Third Reich, having removed himself from the political sphere by way of an 'internal exile.'[22]

Peter Coates, A Story of Six Rivers: History, Culture and Ecology. London: Reaktion Books, 2013; Dorothy Zeisler-Vralsted, Rivers, *Memory, and Nation-Building: A History of the Volga and Mississippi Rivers*. Environment in History: International Perspectives, 4. New York: Berghahn Books, 2014.

20. Albrecht Classen, "Waterways as Landmarks, Challenges, and Barriers for Medieval Protagonists: Crossing Rivers as Epistemological Hurdles in Medieval Literature," *Amsterdamer Beiträge zur älteren Germanistik* 78 (2018): 441–67; id., "Rivers as Critical Boundaries in Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* and *Titurel*: Ecocritical Perspectives in Medieval German Literature," *Reading the Natural World in the Middle Ages and Renaissance: Perceptions of the Environment and Ecology*, ed. Thomas Willard. Arizona Studies in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, 46. Turnhout: Brepols, 2020, 21–34; see now the contributions to *Nature in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Times: Exploration of a Critical Relationship*, ed. Albrecht Classen. Fundamentals of Medieval and Early Modern Culture, 29. Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2024.

21. For his own reflections, see the anthology Werner Bergengruen, *Schriftstellerexistenz in der Diktatur. Aufzeichnungen und Reflexionen zu Politik, Geschichte und Kultur 1940 bis 1963*, ed. Luise Hackelsberger, Frank-Lothar Kroll, and Sylvia Taschka. Biographische Quellen zur Zeitgeschichte, 22. Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2005. For a recent biography, see Albrecht Classen, "Werner Bergengruen," *Literary Encyclopedia*, online, first published on Jan. 25, 2021; online at: https://www.litencyc.com/php/speople.php?rec=true&UID=14708.

22. *Schriftsteller und Widerstand: Facetten und Probleme der „Inneren Emigration"*, ed. Frank-Lothar Kroll. Göttingen: Wallstein-Verlag, 2012. See now also Miriam Kaluza, *Zwischen Geist*

"Der Strom"

His short story, "Der Strom" (The River), first published in 1955 in his collection of novellas, *Die Flamme im Säulenholz*, has virtually been ignored by the public and research alike in the last few decades, although it had experienced at first quite some popularity, as documented by the repeated reprints of this anthology (1956, 1959, 1960, 1961, 1965; 1968; 1986; 1987). I would argue, however, that in light of modern ecocriticism, it is high time to turn our attention to this extraordinary narrative once again in which the protagonist's life is intimately connected with a river, which at first seems to separate him from society. Most significantly, in the course of the story's development, the river turns into the crucial catalyst for him to grow up, to become a man, to establish his agency, and to enter adult life.[23] Only by embracing the river, by gaining the strength to cross it, and by expressing his love for this mighty waterway and its people, does new life emerge and can happiness be achieved.

As is often the case with Bergengruen's texts (novels, novellas, and short stories, at times also lyric poetry), we can trace some medieval sources hidden behind the modern version, but this cannot be the focus of the present study.[24] Instead, here the ecocritical concentration on the river as a determinant factor in the protagonist's life matters centrally, as much as this motif proves to be mythical, if not magical. This very element might have also doomed this story in the German book market during those revolutionary years, although magical realism, as

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und Macht: Orientierungssuche und Standortbestimmungen konservativ-bildungsbürgerlicher Autoren in Deutschland (1930–1950). Baden-Baden: Ergon Verlag, 2020.

23. I have translated the text into English, *Short Stories by Werner Bergengruen: A Selection of His Novellas*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2021; paperback 2023, 203–21. For a preliminary approach to this noteworthy novella, see Albrecht Classen, "Ein vergessenes literarisches Juwel: Werner Bergengruens 'Der Strom' als Schlüsselwerk eines zu Unrecht vernachlässigten Schriftstellers: Modern-metaphorisches Erzählen im mittelalterlichen Gewand," *Orbis Litterarum* 78.1 (July 11, 2022): 1–17; online at: https://doi.org/10.1111/oli.12362. The emphasis there rests on the medieval sources utilized by Bergengruen. Here I attempt to uncover more universal topics relevant in all human life associated with the river.

24. Albrecht Classen, "From the *Gesta Romanorum* to Werner Bergengruen: Literary *Mirrors for Princes* from the Late Middle Ages to the Twentieth Century," *Amsterdamer Beiträge zur älteren Germanistik* 81 (2021): 1–27; id., "Engagement with Death Through Literature: Johannes von Tepl's *Plowman* (ca. 1400) and Werner Bergengruen's *Death in Reval* (1941). Or: The Relevance of the Humanities, once again!," *Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Science* 5.1 (2021): 125–36. DOI: 10.26855/jhass; id., "Freedom, Love, Nobility: The *Falkenmotiv* in Medieval and Modern German Literature, with an Emphasis on Werner Bergengruen's 'Die drei Falken'," *International Journal of Culture and History* 8.2 (2021): 11–18; DOI: https://doi.org/10.5296/ijch.v8i2.18897; id. "Werner Bergengruen (d. 1964) in Conversation with the Middle Ages: Significant Contributions to Twentieth-Century Medievalism," *Humanities and Social Sciences Research (HSSR)* 4.3 (2021): 42–56; online at: https://j.ideasspread.org/index.php/hssr/issue/view/88; https://doi.org/10.30560/hssr.v4n3p42.

pursued by such famous Latin American authors as Gabriel García Márquez, Isabel Allende, Jorge Luis Borges, Juan Rulfo, Miguel Ángel Asturias, or Alejo Carpentier emerged concomitantly on the literary stage globally.[25] Bergengruen certainly flirted, even if only indirectly, with this magical realism, but he never received any acknowledgment for this innovative poetic strategy because he lived in post-war Germany and at the end of his life faced severe criticism for his 'flight' into medieval literature, mysticism, and magical realism during and even after the Nazi era (internal exile).

The protagonist of Bergengruen's story, the young man Christoph Hochgereuth, has inherited from his father a small but valuable library of medieval and early modern necromantic and magical texts which he himself cannot read because they are written in exotic languages. He suffers from impoverishment and isolation, living away from the Latvian city of Riga on the other side of the river Düna (today: Daugava), not really knowing what to do with his life.

These mysterious books attract the attention of a highly learned young woman, Christine, who appears one day and tries to purchase them all, but despite her repeated efforts at upping the price, without success. For Christoph, holding back and rejecting her offers, guarantees that she comes back to haggle with him. Finally, rallying all his courage, he makes a rather dubious counteroffer, suggesting that she could have possession of the entire library kept in a special box in return for her permission to let him sleep with her for three nights (208). To his great surprise, she actually agrees to this deal, but with the help of some magic she manages to make him fall asleep two times after he has come to her bedroom at night before she joins him under the sheets, thus preserving her virginity, which, in a way, constitutes the break of their contract. She never says 'no' to him and his sexual requests; instead, she simply deceives him with her magical charm.

Christoph is desperate and does not know how to help himself, facing the dour possibility that she would overcome his willpower also during the third night, after which he would have lost her altogether, and this along with his books. In that case, his entire life would come to an end, not being loved by anyone and being alone, on the other side of the river, clearly excluded from the Riga society. It seems difficult to determine whether he truly loves her, whether he has simply sexual desires for her, or whether he enjoys his suddenly acquired little power over her. At that point, however, his entire being is driven by his passion to gain her love and hence her hand in marriage, especially because she seems to be the first person who actually wants something from him.

Morosely, if not despondently, on the third day he walks along the river, uncertain what to do, when he observes a group of *Strusen* Russians, who tend to arrive in Riga once a year to sell their goods and then even their boats that look

25. See, for instance, Maggie A. Bowers, *Magic(al) Realism*. New York: Routledge, 2004; *Magical Realism and Literature*, ed. Christopher Warnes and Kim Anderson Sasser. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020.

more like rafts. Additionally, he notices the sculpture of Saint Christopher who traditionally helps and protects travelers and especially voyagers, that is, those who entrust their lives to a river – today he is no longer accepted as an officially recognized saint even by the Catholic Church, and this since 1970 since his account is now considered as apocryphal and hence not trustworthy.[26]

This saint assumes a central importance in this story because he is said to have carried the Christ child across a river, which symbolizes the transformation of the world from evil to good and thus the absolution of human sinfulness. He appears in countless medieval and early modern paintings, frescoes, and sculptures and can be identified as the saint of rivers.[27] Bergengruen never voices any criticism of this saint and casts his protagonist as a fervent admirer who even defends the sculpture against the representatives of the Church (218).

Christoph feels attracted to Christopher not only because of the similarities of their names, but especially because he senses that his life is stuck on the one side of the river and that he needs help to be carried across where another existence might be beckoning to him, that is, happiness and love: "And should not he who had carried God Himself across the river, so Christoph thought, be able to free his life, which was stuck like a boat stranded in sand?" (212).

The next scene proves to be pivotal because an old Strusen woman approaches the wooden sculpture and is about to donate some small coins to the saint. Christoph feels pity for her, believing that she is poor and does not have enough money to make this sacrifice. So, he pours all the money in his wallet onto her palm, which shocks her, but also alerts her to his suffering, obviously written into his face. Suddenly, the protagonist tells her his entire story, and she quickly decides to come to his rescue because she can read in a scoop of brackish water from a nearby pond what his problem is, a magical object hidden underneath the pillow that would make him fall asleep every night before he could have any time to enjoy his beloved maid.

The narrator indicates that she represents a mischievous, magical, or maybe prophetic person who is deeply associated with water: "'There is something

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26. See, for instance, Esther Meier, *Handbuch der Heiligen*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2010, 155–56; cf. also the useful online article at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Christopher (last accessed on May 14, 2024). For the latest research on this deeply venerated figure, especially in the southern Alps, see Michal Ozeri, "The Gigantic as the Late Medieval Sublime: St. Christopher in the Alps," in Assaf Pinkus, *Giants in the Medieval City*. Studies in the Visual Culture of the Middle Ages, 20. Turnhout: Brepols, 2023, 210–37. He emphasizes, especially, that Saint Christopher bridges heaven and earth, paganism and Christianity, that he represents liminality, and that he is equal in importance to the Virgin Mary as a medium for Christ (224).

27. Michael Schneider, *Die Christophorus-Legende in Ost und West. Das Leben aus dem Glauben und seine bildhafte Darstellung in der frühchristlichen und abendländischen Tradition. Koinonia-Oriens*. Cologne: Koinonia-Oriens e.V., 2005; Peter Dyckhoff, *Christophorus. Weg der Wandlung*. Kissleg: fe-medienverlag, 2023.

underneath the pillow that must be removed. It is located underneath the pillow or the bedsheet at the place where the head comes to rest. As soon as the light has been extinguished, grab there, say in your thoughts: 'In the power of St. Christopher' and throw what you will find as far away from you as you can'" (213–14). She herself would later provide him with a counter-magic. This Strusen Russian arrives by way of the river, and metaphorically she then helps Christoph to cross the river, the metaphorical barrier in his head and in his physical circumstances, gaining love and happiness in marriage.

Mysteriously, she does not demand any reward for her service, at least not at that moment, yet assures him that she will return sometime and then ask for her payment. Later, she brings a strange ball of cloth which he subsequently replaces with the magical bundle under the pillow. Indeed, now he does not fall asleep, and when Christine arrives and lies down next to him assuming that he has fallen asleep once again, he is awake and embraces her, insisting on making love with him (214). In a way, but not fully explainable, he rapes her: "She resisted; she began to beg in a whispering voice to be spared" (215). He knows, however, that his entire life is at stake, so he forces her to accept him in a sexual union. The author superficially explains this act of violence away by commenting: "in that one moment her heart was changed and inflamed with love with her" (215).

It is understandable that in light of the current gender debates, the Me-Too movement, and the fight over women's freedom and independence, this episode is hard to swallow. Bergengruen adapted this scene from his medieval source – the *Gesta Romanorum* – and developed it further because he needed an explanation for why and how these two young people can eventually get together and unite in marriage. The night scene in her bed is determined by his violence, but she had agreed to him sleeping with her entrusting herself to the magical recipe she had found in the book of charms, hence had offered a deceptive contract assuming that he would always fall asleep before he could try to make love with her. Both persons thus could be blamed for their shortcomings and wrongdoing, he for his sexual violence, and she for her pretense to agree 'truthfully' to the 'contract' between them.

The two then spend the night and the next two days in bed together and share all their secrets with each other. Christine admits that she had felt a strong dislike of men and had found the magical recipe to make him fall asleep while she had leafed through his books. He, in turn, reveals his experience with the Strusen Russian. Neither one can fully understand the secrets that kept them apart and then brought them together, but the outcome is satisfying. Both suddenly form a happy couple, subsequently marry, and spend decades together until their death. In that long first night, they "also talked about the fact that both their lives [had] been separated and that they now had merged through the natural river" (216).

The Magic of the River

The story then comes to a fairly quick closure, summarizing the shared existence of this couple. While she continues reading the necromantic texts, but with less interest than before, not having any need for magical help, he rises to the level of a councilman in charge of the river. In fact, he loves the river and its people; he welcomes the Russian raft men, spends time with them in the evenings, listens to their melancholy songs, and he takes good care of the sculpture of Saint Christopher. In other words, he knows how much he owes his entire life to the divine intervention, and of course to the old woman, a most mysterious figure.

After his wife's death, he soon also succumbs to mortal illness, when, in the last moment, the Strusen woman suddenly reappears. That would be the ultimate chance for Christoph to demonstrate his gratitude, but she does not want any material reward. At first, she explains her late return with a reference to a different time system she and her people live by (218). This and other circumstances (magic, prophetic reading, etc.) suggests that this old Russian woman belongs to a different world and operates in almost spiritual terms. For Christoph, it seemed "that she had meant something else, in the sense, for instance, she would come when the task was again to cross a river because that would be her usual habit, and only he had not known then how to understand it" (218–19).

Crossing the river thus emerges as the critical metaphor marking the entire narrative. The two young people had lived far apart from each other, each on the other side of the river. Both were encapsulated in their loneliness and isolation, but the necromantic books bring her to Christoph, and his desire to sleep with her takes him across to the city into her house and bedroom. The old woman had read in the water of the pond what the secret was with which Christine defended herself against the suitor, and she, so to speak as the spirit of the river, knew how to produce a counter magic that kept Christoph awake and made it possible for him to force her to stand by her promise and to let him sleep with her.

Her return to the protagonist just before the moment of his death represents the last puzzle which he cannot solve for a while. Even the reader faces a riddle when the Strusen woman explains her own existence: "'The carrier probably stands for what is being carried, and the servant stands in for the lord . . . . The lord will give us a sign when he wants us to approach him to kiss his sleeve, to listen to his words, or to talk to him personally'" (219). The dying man finds it surprising that the Strusen women still looks the same irrespective of the decades that have passed since their first encounter. More curious, he now finally fully understands her language, whereas before she had used a difficult mix of Russian, Polish, Latvian, and German. But really stunning proves to be that she confirms having received her reward already. In her words: "'Is not the gardener's reward the blooming of the plants? And do you always have to think about good deeds and rewards as the people in the market do? I had wanted to show you that here in this world there is yet another mercy than that one of which is taught amongst you . . .'" (219).

Her reward consisted, as she outlines in almost mystical language, of his thankfulness, his happiness in leading a good life, in creating children, in accepting bitterness and joy, in his ability to embrace all existence in its complexities and contradictions. In fact, she reminds him of what he had once said to his daughter, although he cannot remember it: "your life appears to you as black bread, containing no other spice but salt, simple, bitter, nourishing, and rich" (219–20). Upon his inquiry why he had not been granted this understanding of the meaning of life much earlier, she points out: "Is it not the case that a person can grasp the entirety of the world more intensively during the last moments than during the seven or eight decades before?" (220).

While reflecting upon her deep words, he realizes "that he no longer had to understand everything, and in this happy tiredness which had overcome him all the sweetness of growth squeezed out of his entire life seemed to be contained, the sweetness of bitterness, of pain, worries, and desperation, the sweetness of passion and excitement, of love, memories and present life" (220). After she has departed from his bedroom, Christoph dies happily and in harmony with the universe, so the story comes to an end. Symbolically speaking, we might claim that the protagonist finally sinks into the welcoming water of the river which had for a long time separated him from real life, hence love and happiness. By working closely with the Strusen woman, he had been finally able to overcome the magic and thus to gain his future wife's love. The river constitutes the challenge, but it is not a hostile enemy. Christoph obviously gained the necessary help from Saint Christopher, that is, from the mysterious Russian woman

Literary Success, Literary Failure, and New Ecocritical Meaning

With "Der Strom" Bergengruen composed a most intriguing novella certainly in the vein of South American magical realism. His contemporary German readers appreciated that at first, but subsequently withdrew their support for him altogether, obviously for ideological and political reasons, although it remains entirely unclear what the responses to "Der Strom" might have been specifically. In light of our ecocritical understanding, however, we face here a fascinating opportunity to study the treatment of a river as the mysterious lifeline of the protagonist. This body of water both separates and brings together future lovers. Christoph, above all, demonstrates a deep love for the river and its people, especially the Strusen Russians who travel from their homelands to present-day Latvia for trade.

The old woman only seemingly operates as an ordinary person, but she has prophetic abilities, understands and commands some magic, and demonstrates deep sympathy for the protagonist who faces the severe danger of losing his entire existence if he cannot establish the desired love relationship with Christine. In a way, we could identify this old woman as the river fairy – not a dangerous water nixie, for instance – who arrives in time of need and offers her help to the protagonist

especially because he has a good heart, demonstrates sympathies for her own people, and later takes good care of the river once he has been appointed as the city official in charge of the river. All she expects from Christoph is to live a good life, to accept the bitterness and the sweetness as they come, and to express his thankfulness. That's the essential mercy the river itself grants to him.

"The Emperor in Misery"

We encounter another fascinating example of a river that transforms the protagonist's life in the story "Der Kaiser im Elend" (The Emperor in Misery). First published in the collection *Die Sultansrose und andere Erzählungen* (118), it experienced numerous reprints and enjoyed a wide readership. Again, Bergengruen drew inspiration from the medieval *Gesta Romanorum*, and perhaps also from the collection of *El Conde Lucanor* by Don Juan Manuel.[28] Or, the latter simply used the same source, so Bergengruen can be identified as a modern respondent to this famous fourteenth-century collection of didactic tales in indirect conversation with his Spanish forerunner.

In this case, an emperor, Justinian, rides to a river to take a bath during the summer heat, but once he has come out of the water, everyone has disappeared, and no one recognizes him any longer. An angel has taken on his appearance, which forces the emperor to go through a long period of humiliation and suffering. Only once he has learned his lesson, does God allow him to regain his previous position, with the angel disappearing from their view.

The narrator offers detailed comments on Justinian enjoying the cool water, swimming back and forth. The loneliness and tranquility of the river setting allows him to reflect upon his life: "With a relaxed feeling of surprise, he thought about the fact that he had felt so much bitterness not having a son who could inherit the empire. Then he got up and slowly walked to the pointed end of the island which was directed against the river's current" (118–19). All the happiness of this quiet moment then is suddenly gone because everyone has left and subsequently no one recognizes him. After having dipped into the water of the river enjoying the soothing quality of the aquatic medium, the emperor has to accept that he has basically lost his identity and must then go through a long series of trials and tribulations to regain his previous self. For a long time, he does not understand what has happened to him, and only after he has accepted his painful destiny (124), that is, has learned his lessons regarding his obligations and responsibilities as emperor, does the angel allow him to regain his original function: "I have represented him while he was doing his penance" (126), and: "because he is the highest here on earth and the one most noble-minded, therefore God had selected him to do such a penance for which He regarded you all as too weak. And now he has completed

28. Bergengruen, trans. Classen, 118, n. 83.

his penance for the shortcomings of his empire. Obey him, and I will recommend you to God" (127).

Jovinian had felt bitter over the fact that he had no son to whom he could bequeath the empire. After his swim in the river, however, a deep transformation takes place, triggered by the water itself that embraces him and soothes his wounded soul. It is worth to quite the crucial passage at length:

> Here he waited for some time in the thicket at the shore, feeling the reddish sweetness of the light behind his closed eyelids and delighted in the two graceful experiences of creation, which made themselves felt in the flowing coolness of the water and in the resting host sun shining during the noon hour. With a relaxed feeling of surprise, he thought about the fact that he had felt so much bitterness nt having a son who could inherit the empire (118).

The river thus offers itself as a new medium that reminds him of the essence of life and encourages him to let go of the mundane concerns of politics and power. There are much larger issues to deal with, such as the entire populace, and their guilt, as the angel emphasizes at the end. Swimming in the river triggers the dissolution of the emperor's old self and eventually the emergence of a new self. Although the situation after the swim proves to be catastrophic for Jovinian, the soothing of the water and its healing quality stays with him for a while: "In all of that, he was without impatience and irritation because he still had the full sense of refreshment from his rest on the island and of his bathing by himself" (119).

In a way, the emperor has to undergo the same Passion as Christ did for humankind, as the angel explains in a mysterious way, but he would never have accepted this role himself if he had not been shriven of all of his exterior identity markers and had to suffer badly as penance for his people. He went to the river during the heat of the day, accompanied only by a servant. He had left behind all the courtiers behind because "he knew that their fear of the summer heat was stronger than their desire for refreshment in the river" (118).

Final Comments

In other words, Bergengruen identified the river, both in this and in the previous story, as a religious medium for the individual to transform, to shed the old self and to regain a new, a better one. Sadness, sorrow, and even bitterness dominate the respective individual at the beginning, happiness and love enter the protagonist at the end, that is, after the immersion into the river, both physically and metaphorically. Human life begins when the water bag breaks, and in the course of our lives we swim through many currents. Death finally occurs when the crossing of the river is completed.

If this reading can be sustained, we would have available two most remarkable literary reflections on the universal significance of the river as the cathartic medium for the human being. In other contexts, of course, we hear of baptism in a font, of the purification of the soul through the sprinkling of water, or the consumption of wine as the Eucharist.

In Bergengruen's stories, by contrast, it is the river as a tranquil but mighty agent that interacts with the desperate, forlorn individual and brings about a profound transformation, returning life to a near-dead protagonist and providing meaning for human existence. Long ignored, we can thus identify this Baltic-German author as a major spokesperson of ecocritical thinking, and this long before the emergence of the theoretical models determining contemporary ecopoetics, for instance. Bergengruen apparently experimented here also with literary elements characteristic of magical realism, which was about to gain significant popularity in western Europe as well, but his prose narratives were not appreciated in that light and so mostly disappeared from the public attention. Today, however, deeply influenced by the concepts of environmental humanities, we can finally give much more credit to Bergengruen's approach determined by the deep respect for the forces of nature that appear to be empowered by magical forces influencing human existence.

As a consequence of this ecocritical reading, we could take the next step to combine a scientific approach to rivers as natural entities by themselves with the literary-historical analysis. After all, rivers carry symbolism and meaning, they have a deep impact on the surrounding environment and human society. Focusing on rivers allows us to pursue interdisciplinary perspectives combining, for instance, hydrology, climate research, agriculture, religious studies, literary analysis, art history, and even music. As Bergengruen's narratives signal, a river has a character, it possesses agency, and it quietly but powerfully interacts with people living along its shores and in the *hinterland*. Disrespecting a river can have deadly consequences. Paying respect to a river promises to reveal ancient secrets and universal meanings.[29]

29. See, for instance, Abba A. Abba and Nkiru D. Onyemachi, "*Weeping in the Face of Fortune: Eco-Alienation in the Niger-Delta Ecopoetics*," *Humanities* 9.3.54 (2020); online at: https://doi.org/10.3390/h9030054; Ned Schaumberg, "The Grammar of an Engineered River: Brenda Hillman's Situational Ecopoetics," *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 29.4 (Winter 2022): 1076–96; online at: https://doi-org.ezproxy2.library.arizona. edu/10.1093/isle/isab095 (both last accessed on Sept. 6, 2024).

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