

Intertextuality, Ecocriticism, and Human Interaction with Nature in Wilhelm Schäfer's Novella "Anckemanns Tristan" (1936). How to Engage with Literature by a Nazi Sympathizer in the Twenty-First Century

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This essay makes an effort to rescue a completely forgotten novella from a German writer, Wilhelm Schäfer (d. 1952), who was, horribly dictu, a strong advocate for the Nazis at least until 1945. While fully acknowledging the highly problematic political background of the author, the analysis focuses on the intriguing and masterly intertextual operations in the text, the superior psychologizing of the emotional relationships, and the ecocritical aspects in the story which could be of considerable relevance today despite the author's explicitly formulated ideology in support of Adolf Hitler and his movement and actions.

Introduction

This paper re-introduces a highly popular German novella from the 1930s that scholarship has completely ignored but which promises to appeal to us again for numerous reasons once again. The problem with Wilhelm Schäfer's novella, "Anckemanns Tristan", consists of the author's close political affiliation with the Nazi regime. Although he continued to publish after the end of the Second World War, he does not seem to have changed his ideological outlook, so it does not surprise us at all that the modern generation of readers does not want anything to do with him or to acknowledge his literary qualities, if those can be determined and defined. In the wake of the Reception Theory, however, we have recognized the great value of source studies because the examination of literary *Quellen* (sources) sheds important light on a poet's educational background, intertextual perceptions, and the continuity of literary themes.

Because the issue to be addressed here proves to be highly complex, even within a political context, I will first reflect on the role of literature at large when created during the time of a dictatorial regime. The issue at stake consists of the question of what to include into our literary canon, as problematic as that term might be, and what to exclude. And we also need to reflect on the tension between a close reading (*immanent*) that disregards the author's biography and a social-political interpretation of texts determined by ideological value judgments.

In the case of "Anckemanns Tristan," first published in 1936 and republished many times thereafter, and this even most recently by a nationalist press in 2022, we face a huge intellectual and ethical challenge. Should we condemn this text outright because of the author's political orientation, or should we try to analyze and evaluate

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it first of all on its own ground in disregard of Schäfer's ideology of "Blut und Boden"? To what extent does a poet's or author's value system matter in our critical assessment of their narratives or poems? Can we associate musical compositions such as the *Carmina Burana* by Carl Orff (1937) with the Nazi regime or its ideology just because they were composed during that time period?

Even Günter Grass's admission that he had joined the "Waffen SS" as a young man (see his interview online on July 2, 2007, at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_U_Rz7BxdBY) has not changed our high estimation of this winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1999. Why has Schäfer hence suffered the complete condemnation and then ignorance by modern readers? This paper does not intend to reanimate the previous admiration for this Naturalist and probably Fascist writer, but it turns to just one of his short prose texts which stands out for its value as a story about the world of people living in the Rhinelands and whose existence is deeply determined by the Rhine. Surprisingly, this lends itself exceedingly well to a modern ecocritical reading and a much more reflective and considerate approach to literature produced within a dictatorial system. We can also recognize in this story a remarkable example of a complex intertextual strategy which makes this novella, despite its certainly problematic ideological background, to a valuable contribution to the history of German literature in the twentieth century.

The Oddity and Contradictory Nature of the Literary Canon

To gain a global understanding of the ups and downs of the literary canon, let us first consider what is regularly happening in the field of humanist scholarship. The literary process is marked by many turns and twists, much dependent on our current political or ideological stance and our willingness to look back and evaluate what has preceded us in an unbiased manner. Public and scholarly tastes and values have changed in the course of time, as is also reflected in the curricula at the school and college level. Research has discussed the issue of canonicity for a long time, and each generation of scholars and readers faces the same necessity to reorient themselves in an ever-widening field of literary documents from the past and present. Bestseller lists are very poor postmarks to help us to assess older or contemporary works since the public opinions easily change, vacillate, or move into new directions responding to constantly changing social, political, religious, ethical, or material conditions.

To help us out of this quagmire, literary historians have regularly produced vast outlines, *Literaturgeschichten* (literary histories), literary encyclopedia, lexica, and other reference works, but those have also proven to be subject to value judgments, ideals, and political, religious, or aesthetic concerns. One of the most recent efforts in this regard consists of the online reference work, *Literary Encyclopedia*. The editors have been highly open to anything we would critically identify as 'literary,' even if individual texts might not fall into the 'canon,' however defined (<https://www.litencyc.com/>; it is a reference work that requires readers to pay for access, but many libraries have a subscription).

Nevertheless, as research has demonstrated over a long period of time, we are not lost in a sea of randomness or arbitrariness and can identify a body of certain texts at least from the past that continue to be significant, relevant, and meaningful also for us today and tomorrow. To point out a smattering of relevant examples; we could think of Homer's Ancient Greek *Iliad*, the Old English *Beowulf*, the Middle High German (MHG) *Nibelungenlied*, Dante's medieval Italian *Divina Commedia*, Gottfried von Strassburg's *Tristan und Isolde* (MHG), the anonymous Middle English *Pearl* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, or Thomas Malory's *Mort d'Arthur*. The same applies to literatures from all over the world and throughout time. We only need to 'translate' them slightly for us to gain deep insight into universal human concerns, ideals, dreams, terrors, failures, or disasters. Even texts that might seem to be irrelevant for the modern audience because they are situated in different continents and remote times can thus suddenly gain great relevance for us today because of the insights proffered by the poets, if they are universally valid, as the entire school of ecocriticism, for instance, has convincingly demonstrated. Every attempt to address questions pertaining to love, death, God, the meaning of life, and our natural environment deserves our attention, so we face a very short but universal list of thematic categories that allow us to identify what literary works might be valid for us and what not.

At present time, however, the number of published literary texts has increased tremendously, and we often find ourselves lost in a quantitative quagmire regarding the proper selection of contemporary novels, plays, or poems and might hence have to wait several decades to determine retrospectively what works have passed the test of time. A simple gauge or litmus test, however, would be, which also applies to modern films, music, paintings, etc., whether readers or respondents find enough material or productive ideas in a narrative work to continue the discourse initiated by a poet, whether we agree with him/her or not (as to bestsellers, triviality, and the canon, Classen & Parra Membrives 2016, as to the canon within the context of world literature, Longxi 2024, cf. also the contributions to Bradford et al. 2024).

Fortunately, or misfortunately, we often do not know anything about the biographical background of medieval poets and must hence rely entirely on the textual evidence, which in a way frees us from ideological concepts prevalent in that period. But these constraints have come off fully since ca. 1500, which has opened the doors for many ideologically predetermined value judgments in modern times. We currently witness, for instance, a growing criticism of famous poets from the past who are now suddenly attacked and even rejected because of their presumed racism, imperialism, colonialism, misogyny, and other evil categories, such as famous Joseph Conrad with his *Heart of Darkness* (1899).¹

Books have been condemned and burned throughout the ages, whether by the Holy See, the Spanish Inquisition, the Nazis, or by conservative and religious groups in the United States at current time (2025/2026).² However, unreflectively

¹For one list of specific titles viewed now as highly problematic, see <https://libguides.cedarcrest.edu/c.php?g=1058230&p=7750687>; or <https://specificwriters.com/problematic-authors-can-we-separate-the-art-from-the-artist/>; see also the contributions to Derbew, Orrells, and Vasunia, eds., 2025; for pedagogical approaches, see the contributions to Macaluso and Macaluso, eds., (2019).

²See, e.g., <https://pen.org/banned-books-list-2025/>; chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcg

condemning any literary work for ideological or religious reasons always takes us to a slippery slope because it could blind us to the narrative's possibly intrinsic value and would make us subject to our own ideological bent. There is, for instance, a certain danger to discard many of our most valuable literary works from the past in the name of modern efforts to recenter the margin, to combat gender inequalities, and to fight against ideological enemies perceived as a threat to a true democracy. These efforts might satisfy our current political values but they would also threaten to deprive us of our most precious cultural heritage. In art history, for instance, we face the highly thorny issue whether we should be iconoclasts and remove the images or sculptures of those individuals we no longer identify with, or whether we should acknowledge the historical-cultural context and engage with that critically without simply destroying it or blinding ourselves to it (see the current operation in Ukraine to free the country from all Russian traces, or the most recent allegations against Cesar Chavez, March 2026).³

To reiterate the central issue, in contrast to the Middle Ages, the situation today proves to be particularly difficult and problematic because virtually every writer, poet, or playwright is identifiable as to his/her personal background, world view, or value system and can thus be associated with a certain ideology, a political concept, social, moral, and ethical attitudes, and religious orientations. This can easily lead to an interpretive process more concerned with the external or public framework than with the text's actual value, a neo-positivist approach; whereas the aesthetic, ethical, moral, or spiritual dimension of the narrative is then ignored or sidelined.

Dictatorial regimes or tyrannies have been around all over the world throughout time, so the question really looms large whether writers under their rule have enjoyed any freedom to express themselves according to their own principles or concepts, or whether they served in the interest of the one party and its leader (see, for instance, the contributions to Barbian & Sturge 2014). How would we view affirmative literature, for instance, that had been officially authorized and legitimized by a repressive government? Would we have to condemn novels or short stories today written by East German authors who supported their system between 1949 and 1990? What would we have to do in the case of white South African authors who fully embraced Apartheid, or in the case of Chilean poets who endorsed the dictator Pinochet? Undoubtedly, we must not ignore, if it is known, the author's or poet's intentions, political orientation, attitudes, or propagandistic purposes for a full interpretation of a certain text. But it seems rather questionable to give the biographical dimensions such complete priority over the intrinsic value of the actual text, artwork, or musical composition. A good example of the complexity of the matter proves to be Ernst Jünger's *In Stahlgewittern* from 1920 (revised and re-issued numerous times thereafter) which glorifies the masculine experience in the trenches during World War I on the Western Front. The Nazis greatly welcomed this work, a kind of a diary, but following World War II, it was harshly condemned, and yet it enjoys today once again a great reputation, at least outside of Germany (Schöning 2014), as the great number of translations into many different languages confirms (Volmert

lclefindmkaj/https://docs.house.gov/meetings/GO/GO02/20220407/114616/HHRG-117-GO02-20220407-SD018.pdf; both last accessed on Jan. 7, 2026).

³See, e.g., <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/03/21/us/cesar-chavez-statues-murals-removed.html>.

1985, Theweleit 1977, 1978, Hirschfeld 1997, Springer 2024, Schöttker 2025).

Nazi Ideology and Contemporary Literature

To illustrate and probe the complexity, challenges, and controversy surrounding the rather problematic reading of literature produced within a dictatorship further, this study next turns to a German author who was directly involved in the Nazi regime and enjoyed high esteem well before since the 1920 and then throughout the twelve horrible years from 1933 to 1945, and who continued to publish for a few years after the end of World War II until his death in 1952. Our interest is focused on an intriguing novella, “Anckemanns Tristan,” significant also for us once again, as this article will argue, a fairly short text by an author who fully and actively sympathized with the German government under Adolf Hitler and received the highest accolades.

Wilhelm Schäfer (1908–1952) belonged to a group of poets whom we associate today with a highly conservative and nationalist/racist attitude, commonly captured by the slogan of “Blut und Boden” (blood and soil; Corni & Gies 1994, Staudenmaier 2011). Its members strongly promoted the ideal of nature, the homeland, the people’s culture, and hence the fatherland at all costs, defending their own race against non-white people, above all. Since those poets naively believed that the Nazis embraced the same values as they did, they blindly followed that political course, if they did not promote it actively themselves (Düsterberg et al. 2022, though they do not consider Schäfer). We could also argue that those who embraced “Blut und Boden” ideologically prepared the ground upon which Nazism could sprout so effectively.

During the Nazi Reich, there were only three options available for the contemporary *literati*, either to go into exile, such as Finland, Switzerland, the UK, or the USA, or to attempt to hide from government control by going into an inner exile and only to pretend to be a supporter, or, finally, to align themselves with the Nazi party and endorse its ideology. Possibly, there was also a fourth option. Authors could keep writing in a non-political, non-ideological fashion, adapt naively to the current discourse, not stir up any controversies, and thus live out the time without taking any stance, that is, to remain non-political and simply ignore the outside challenges – of course, that denial of the political reality was highly political in its own terms.

Our Focus

The purpose of this paper, however, is not to examine once again the history of German exile literature, or German Nazi literature, to name the two extremes (Dardan 2025, Longerich 2025). We also cannot discuss the situation for German writers at large during the 1930s and 1940s, which has been examined already many times (Schnell 1978, Bock & Hahn 1978). Instead, the focus will rest on one novella published in 1936, already at the height of the Nazi regime’s effort to transform all of Germany and subordinate it under its extremely right-wing ideology, which had also a deep if not devastating impact on German-language culture in every respect

(Martin 2006). Was it even possible for German writers to produce quality work then which we might enjoy today simply for its aesthetic, ethical, or spiritual appeal? Or do we need to distance ourselves entirely from that period of German literature for political reasons, except those works produced by those living in exile, such as Thomas Mann, Bertolt Brecht, Anna Seghers, or Stefan Zweig? In other words, can we separate a literary text from its author to allow it to speak for itself, irrespective of the writer's political views and ideology? Following, this study will try to pursue just that path and bring to light a small but brilliant literary masterpiece that deserves our appreciation irrespective of the author's political worldview (Klein 1960, 501–03).

An Interlude, Literally: Great Music During the Nazi Regime: Carl Orff

As horrible as the Nazi regime was, this does not necessarily mean that anything written, composed, painted, or sculptured at that time (1933–1945) would have to be condemned today. One major example from the world of music allows us to recognize the high degree of ambivalence and the amorphous nature of the relationship between the Nazis and artists/writers. Carl Orff is famous until today for having produced his hugely successful *Carmina Burana*, a cantata composed between 1935 and 1936. It was based on twenty-four satirical and erotic poems from the medieval collection *Carmina Burana* (ca. 1220, maybe created in the Monastery of Neustift near Brixen, Southern Tyrol). Having been performed for the first time in 1937, Orff's work quickly gained popular appeal and became highly renowned throughout the world, and this until today. The Nazis deeply admired these compositions as well, and when we listen to them in the present time, no one would categorize them as Nazi-inspired or as supportive of the Nazi ideology and regime (Kater 2000, Babcock 2006). No one would question Orff's musical genius and his brilliant adaptation of the thirteenth-century songs for his own purposes, which in a way revolutionized twentieth-century music (Thomas 1990, Applegate & Potter 2002). But he indirectly supported the Nazi regime without having embraced its ideology publicly, whether he wanted to or not. Would that justify us today to condemn Orff's extraordinary music because it was highly praised by the public and the German government during the 1930s? The enormous popularity of the *Carmina Burana* as symphonic performances and in countless iterations, including commercials, fully contradicts this notion.

Wilhelm Schäfer

His contemporary, Wilhelm Schäfer, certainly a very successful author of his time, was not so lucky, and he has been harshly criticized and condemned outright for his active support of the Nazis and their cultural revolution. After 1945, scholarly attention completely turned away from him, and today he is practically unknown both among researchers and the general readers (for a noble exception, Klein 1960, 501–03; he identifies him as a non-Christian who was determined by his knightly values). However, his novel *Der Hauptmann von Köpenick* (1930, The Major from

Köpenick) contributed to some extent to the enormous popularity of this hilarious figure, who was also portrayed by Carl Zuckmayer in his actually even more popular novel from 1931, among others. Today best known might be the film version from 1956 with the famous actor Heinz Rühmann in the main role (https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hauptmann_von_K%C3%B6penick).

From 1900 to 1920, Schäfer published the magazine *Die Rheinlande* (The Rhinelands) which aimed at the idealization of the Rhine landscape in history, geography, and literature, reflecting deeply on the people populating that region. Moreover, throughout his life, he created many short stories and novels, which earned him much respect, at least until 1945, when everyone who had been associated with the Nazis was suddenly greatly suspected and became, so to speak, a *persona non grata*. From early on, with the publication of his *Dreizehn Bücher der deutschen Seele* (1922, Thirteen Books of the German Soul), Schäfer became the darling of strongly nationalist readers because here he idealized or idolized the German (Aryan) character, so he was a nationalist and soon fascist in essence.

The list of his published works is very long, and in light of their highly conservative character, it is not surprising that Adolf Hitler admired him deeply and granted him the highest accolades, although he was not an official member of the NSDAP. After 1945, Schäfer published five more novels, but he was rapidly forgotten or deliberately ignored because of his ideological orientation. But a primary school, that had been opened at his birthplace, Ottrau near Alsfeld (Hesse), in 1951, was still named after him in 1977. However, in 2020, the local school board finally realized the rather problematic nature of this name and so they removed this label abruptly to distance themselves publicly from this ‘Nazi’ author (Dohnke 1996).

There is very little critical literature on Schäfer, at least from after 1951, though he was later acknowledged for his literary reflections on the Rhine (Brenner 2001, Delseit 2005). His close association with the Nazis constitutes a toxic mantra literary scholars want to avoid at all costs. Hence, the stark void in modern literary-historical research concerning Schäfer whom no one reads anymore today most likely because he has been projected as an unacceptable outcast, a follower of the Nazis.

Returning our attention to this author, and this despite many political objections we might have today, finds its justification in a number of reasons, such as his undoubtedly high level of narrative skills and broad appeal to his audience during the 1930s and 40s, and, as this article will demonstrate below, his major contribution to ecocriticism, as we call it today. Moreover, as we can observe through a close reading, we can certainly appreciate his sophisticated reception of medieval, *Sturm und Stress*, and classical literature to explore the topics of complex love relationships and generational conflicts. However, there is no intention at all to reactivate and reevaluate his political and ideological views, and the author of this study actually explicitly distances himself from those.

The focus will only rest on his novella *Anckemanns Tristan* from 1936, in which the author operates in an impressively complex mode of intertextuality (Schäfer 1947, this was republished one more time in Stuttgart, 1954, and then again in Leipzig, 2022, both times by nationalist publishers). It is based on an anecdote told by the famous classical author Heinrich von Kleist (1811), but Schäfer was not content with the simplistic outcome presented there and hence developed it

considerably further, reaching in that process a remarkable literary plateau where he could effectively project sensitive and psychological character portraits and situate them deeply into their geographic framework.

The Medieval Context and Sources

The events take place primarily in Bingen, a noteworthy wine-producing town on the Rhine west of Mainz. Herr Anckemann is a robust and successful wine grower and especially a wealthy trader who takes on an orphaned boy out of a sense of moral duty because his father, who drowned in the Rhine, had worked for him as a loyal cooper. Ironically, he calls the boy 'Tristan' because he associates him with the famous medieval figure in the romance by Gottfried von Strassburg (ca. 1210) (Classen 1996). However, Anckemann has only a fragmentary memory of this medieval work and actually confuses Tristan with Parzival in Wolfram von Eschenbach's eponymous Grail romance (ca. 1205).

Parzival is initially identified as a "tümbe tor," i.e., a foolish person who at first does not understand much of the world and needs extensive learning from a variety of teachers before he grows up and gains maturity. His ignorance is due to his mother's decision to raise him in a sylvan solitude to protect him from the world of knighthood after her husband, Gahmuret, had died in a war campaign. Young Parzival is, unbeknownst to himself, predestined to take over the Grail where the king is suffering badly from a wound resulting from a sexual transgression. However, Parzival, the last heir of the Grail family, is ignorant of the specific expectations and follows traditional instructions by his knightly teacher, Gurnemanz, so he does not ask about the suffering of the Grail king, Anfortas, remains silent, and thus loses the opportunity to relieve the entire Grail. Only much later does he gain the opportunity to return and then he knows what to do, which quickly leads to a happy end for himself and the rest of the world. This 'dumbness,' however, is not meant to be real stupidity; instead, Parzival operates according to the standard norms of behavior characterizing the Arthurian court, but those are no longer sufficient at the Grail, a sacred kingdom. In short, Parzival fails to demonstrate his empathy verbally, so he is expelled and then has to roam the world for a long time until he has proven himself as a worthy successor after all and is hence called back to the Grail to ask the long-awaited question (Edwards 2004/2006). In Schäfer's novella, the young protagonist performs similarly, being extremely shy, withdrawn, reserved, and acting at times rather foolishly because of a lack of education which thus justifies, in a way, Anckemann's decision to call him 'Tristan,' although he had meant 'Parzival.'

Kleist and Goethe

Anckemann uses the name 'Tristan' for the boy, which might be the wrong one in literary-historical terms because the medieval Tristan is actually the very different type of person, energetic, strategic, artistic, and brilliant in almost every way, but in the course of time, it proves to be the correct name after all because the entire story by

Schäfer is predicated on a profound but problematic love story somewhat influenced by the medieval romance. But we can go much deeper than that in intertextual terms because Schäfer's source provided by Heinrich von Kleist (1777–1811) and published in the *Berliner Abendblätter* on January 1, 1811, actually drew to some extent from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Die Leiden des Jungen Werther* (1774), where the sorrowful protagonist cannot win the heart of his beloved lady, Lotte, so he commits suicide. Kleist was aware of this famous epistolary novel, but he changed it in a decisive way because the lover is a young aspiring tradesman, whereas the lady is married to an old man, his employer. The protagonist pines away but keeps a respectful distance, until one day, with him staying behind to supervise the business as instructed by his master, the couple goes on a trip. In the evening, the lover happens to enter her bedroom, and in a kind of trance, he lies down in her bed where he is surprised several hours later by the couple upon their sudden return. The young man wakes up, is deeply shocked and ashamed, leaves for his room, and then shoots himself. However, he does not die and recovers; whereas the old husband suffers such a shock over the sound of the shot from the pistol that he soon after dies from a heart attack. The shock from anecdote concludes with the young man finding himself in the arms of his beloved lady, whom he can marry a year later and with whom he has subsequently thirteen children.

Schäfer was much more ambitious than Kleist when he composed his *Anckemanns Tristan*, developing the background of the youthful protagonist extensively, but in that process, numerous intertextual references to medieval literature emerge as well, as it has been indicated above. Moreover, the author endeavors quite successfully to reflect intensively on the two conflicting love relationships as they develop throughout the novella. The young apprentice, Tristan, originally identified as Karl Heckenrot, works in Anckemann's business as a clerk and commands an almost calligraphic handwriting which qualifies him well to keep the ledger books. But at one point when his employer needs to go on a business trip and discovers that he has no clean shirts in his cupboard – his housekeeper who had secretly been in love with him had quit her job out of frustration over not achieving her goal of marrying Anckemann – he sends Tristan to a washing woman with his dirty laundry. The business owner, a morose and elderly lady, is helped by her young niece, Veronika Müller, whom Tristan finds immensely attractive and whom he soon falls in love with.

Tristan does not understand much of the reality around him and views the world in rather simplistic terms. Hence, people tend to laugh about him or mock him, and some even spread the rumor that he might have been responsible for the death of his foster mother because he did not report anything about her condition and was unaware of what had happened with her for a long time. For that reason, Anckemann brought him into his household and called him Tristan (meaning Parzival) to protect him from the crude people in town. Quite naturally, when he encounters the young woman, Veronika, he is entirely overwhelmed by her appearance, and he imagines unreasonably that she responds to his feelings in like fashion, though she does not say anything in that regard and only treats him kindly and jovially, apparently being much more mature than he is.

Allowing his fantasy to take charge of him, Tristan is determined to marry Veronika in the assumption that she is filled with the same emotions, which mirrors

his utter ignorance of reality. This is actually closely paralleled by Parzival who, on his first venture out into the world, following his mother's advice verbatim but foolishly, encounters a lady and violently takes her ring and kisses her, though he has no erotic interest in her. However, his actions throw this poor woman, Jeschute, into dire distress because her male partner (husband?) Orilus immediately accuses her of adultery based on the material evidence he observes upon his arrival once the stranger has left. It takes Parzival a long maturation process to encounter the couple again, to fight on her behalf, and to admit his own guilt to the other knight, who then takes back his lady and begs for her forgiveness.

One day, Tristan confronts Anckemann with his plans to marry, which greatly irritates his employer who correctly identifies this idea as a silly whim. But since Tristan is so determined, they set up a secret agreement that Anckemann would not oppose his plans if he accepts an assignment to work for a business partner in Cologne for a year without contacting Veronika. Ironically, at the same time, the latter had gotten into a bitter fight with her aunt who does not want to pay out her salary, and when Tristan visits her to say goodbye, he misreads her sorrow and downtrodden attitude as an expression of her sadness of not going to see him for such a long time.

Again, in terms of the Reception Theory, we recognize the full extent to which Schäfer had various medieval romances in mind and impressively merged and combined his sources with his own narrative, creating thereby a 'mise en abîme.' Eventually, as we will recognize, we can thus place this novella within the larger context of the reception history of the *Tristan* material from Eilhart of Oberg to Gottfried of Strassburg to Heinrich of Freiberg, and countless others throughout the centuries.

Mismatched Marriage

The very moment when the ship carrying off Tristan has departed, and this a bit early, Veronika appears and is shocked that she reached the harbor a little too late. Anckemann quickly realizes who she is and immediately finds her very attractive. So, he hires her as a replacement for his former housekeeper, a task which she handles impressively. Things soon develop as to be expected, old Anckemann decides to woo her and can eventually convince her to accept him as her husband. To some extent, she is responsible for this development herself because when he had asked her what kind of man she would be looking for as a husband, she had identified her dream man as a 'werewolf,' a beast that would take her with force and make sure to hold on to her for good. The old man believes to be that kind of person and fights for her with all his might, especially when they are all at a dance where Anckemann presents himself as a dandy dancer who occupies Veronika with all his energy. For him, this relationship helps him to demonstrate his masculinity because he can fend off younger suitors and take charge of the young woman.

The age difference between them is huge, but this does not stop him from pursuing his intention, and after their wedding, she soon gets pregnant. However, she experiences a premature birth and loses her daughter, which changes everything in her mind and attitude. Not surprisingly, her sadness and sorrow do not please her

husband at all, who feels disappointed and even cheated in this marriage arrangement because he had only seen in her a cheerful, witty, and charming individual, not a person by herself with feelings he could not control. In a way, Anckemann wanted to have this young woman as a 'plaything' to affirm his social position and sexual potency despite his older age, so he is rather disappointed when he has to realize that she has complex feelings and suffers deeply from the stillbirth of her child.

At that point, Tristan returns from Cologne, having matured considerably, and he is still in love with Veronika, although he now has to accept that her life has changed dramatically, which does not leave any room for him, which might well be a strong echo of the situation for Werther in Goethe's epistolary novella, which concludes with the young protagonist's suicide out of frustration not gaining Lotte's love, and this also by means of a pistol. More significantly, however, at this point, the anecdote by Kleist and the novella by Schäfer merge more specifically because the focus now rests on the internal tensions raging in Tristan who knows that he has lost any entitlement to Veronika's love, if he ever had any. To maintain himself emotionally, he observes strict formalities to distance himself from her, but this does not mean that his feelings for her would have diminished. This finds its expression in the following scene that is very parallel to the one already outlined by Kleist, but again, there is a unique psychological twist in Schäfer's version.

The young woman is homesick, especially since she has lost her child. Throughout her first year of marriage, she had repressed that longing completely, but Tristan, upon his return to Bingen, reminds her of the parents and the family. On his way from Cologne upstream (going south), he had passed through Godesberg near Bonn, where Veronika had originated from. Moreover, he had visited her family, apparently in the assumption that he ought to make their acquaintance since he wanted to marry their daughter.

Anckemann had consistently neglected to inform him during his time in Cologne about his own intentions with Veronika, which in reality amounts to a kind of betrayal of their mutual trust and their arrangement. The old man had not thought that Tristan would seriously pursue his marriage plans and naively assumed that spending time in the big city of Cologne would change Tristan's mind or make him fall in love with another woman there.

The Medieval Source and *Anckemanns Tristan*

In a way, we can recognize some interesting parallels with the medieval *Tristan* romance insofar as Gottfried's protagonist is also forced to leave his beloved behind and to roam the world after they both have been discovered by King Mark, Isolde's husband, *in flagrante*. Curiously, Tristan then encounters another woman with the same name, Isolde, and it might be that he is even forced, so to speak, to marry her despite the fact that his true feelings for the Irish princess remain the same. Gottfried then breaks off his account, whether by accident or intentionally, not exploring the subsequent development in marriage (Tomasek 2007, 225–27). However, in the continuations by other poets, such as Ulrich von Türheim and Heinrich von Freiberg, he marries the other Isolde indeed and subsequently gets mortally wounded in a war campaign. In his desperation, he calls for the Irish princess as the only one with sufficient medical skills to save him. The latter

actually arrives by ship, with a white sail, which indicates that she is truly coming because she loves him despite all the new circumstances. But Tristan's wife, out of jealousy, lies to him and pretends that the sail is black. The forlorn man thus loses all hope ever to regain his love and life and dies, and when the original Isolde arrives in his bedroom, she follows him in death (Schausten 1999).

Kleist and Schäfer

Schäfer indirectly picked up this motif in combination with the narrative account provided by Kleist. Because Tristan delivered some news from Veronika's family, she urges her husband to let them go on a visit to Godesberg. Grudgingly, he agrees and appoints Tristan as his proxy during their absence, which proves to be highly challenging for the young man because he has to assume Anckemann's role in the business, while the latter has already assumed Tristan's role as Veronika's husband. Feeling very forlorn, the young man, taking his responsibilities very seriously, happens to notice in the evening while walking through the garden that the window in Veronika's room is open, so he enters her private space and feels completely overwhelmed by all the objects there that speak of his beloved. Like in a trance, Tristan undresses and lies down in her bed to enjoy her love at least vicariously and falls asleep.

In the meantime, the couple experienced a series of mishaps with their coach and are eventually forced to return home, where they discover Tristan in Veronika's bed, which greatly embarrasses them all. For Tristan, this is the end, he can no longer live, especially not without her love and facing social disgrace, so he returns to his room in the attic where he shoots himself in an attempt to commit suicide. Just as in Kleist's account, however, the loud boom of the pistol shocks Anckemann so much that he has a heart attack and dies the same night. Tristan, by contrast, though badly wounded, survives, and under Veronika's care, he slowly recovers. In other words, contrary to the medieval narrative tradition, the love story does not end in a tragedy, and there are clear indications that he stands to have hope for her love, after all. Kleist had quickly rounded off his anecdote with a few remarks concerning the young man's survival, the widow's new love for her suitor, and their marriage after a year of waiting. As the narrator in the anecdote comments, the couple had at the time of reporting thirteen children.

Schäfer here proves to be a much more sensitive writer than Kleist because he develops the subsequent events in a highly subtle, psychologizing manner analyzing the protagonists' hidden feeling that prove him to be an excellent novelist. Veronika, like a modern-day Isolde, constantly attends to the recovering Tristan, and at one point, when he half awakens from his coma, he sees her face bent over him. This vision fills him deeply with a sense of happiness, as revealed by a short moment of boundless joy shining forth in his face. This moment proves to be like an epiphany for her because she suddenly realizes the true force and depth of his love for her, although nothing else happens for quite some time.

Once Tristan has recovered, he resumes his previous task of managing the business without Anckemann being around anymore, but he observes a respectful

distance from the widow in the clear awareness that he has no right whatsoever on her and so cannot develop at all emotionally. So, he decides one day to organize a business trip to Cologne to sell leftover wine there, but in reality he wants to use this opportunity to escape from her and hence from his burning passion for her. Ironically, she decides to do just the same and appears at the harbor in her old clothing and simple baggage to go home again. For Tristan, this constitutes a grave challenge, but as much as he tries to maintain the mask of a disengaged person, the two ultimately grow together and we can assume that they will eventually be able to live out their love, although the narrator does not cover the future events. Very much like Gottfried, this novella concludes as a fragment and invites us to reflect upon the possible developments involving those two people.

However, in contrast to the medieval romance, although the two people separate at the end, she returning to Bingen to wait for him, and he walking all the way to Cologne to arrive there before the ship and to carry out the wine sale for the Anckemann business, they both hold their hands in silent agreement, and she observes the same bright smile on his face as it had appeared when he had briefly woken up from his coma and had seen her bending over him like in an erotic promise. They are lovers now and just need to wait out the time until her mourning would be officially over so that he can marry her, as we also know from Kleist's novella.

Ecopoetry/Ecocriticism

Even though the entire movement of "Blut und Boden" was badly compromised by the Nazis or through its representatives themselves who promoted that political ideology and so brought about their own self-destruction, we might face here a unique opportunity to discover antecedents of ecocriticism we today are deeply interested in, and this already during the 1930s. Although Schäfer worked hard on glorifying the regime's values in many of his other works, this novella stands out for its own literary quality free from any political implications, highlighting the huge impact of a natural region, here the Rhineland, on the people who live next to the river.

We have already observed the intricate intertextual web of allusions and references extending from the novella all the way back to the Middle Ages. Then we realized that the author can certainly be credited with a creative adaptation and further development of the Werther-motif and the suicide story by Goethe and Kleist respectively. Finally, we recognize also a passionate effort to bring the world of the Rhineland into profile and to allow us to grasp deeply the culture of the people living along the Rhine, growing grapes and selling wine. Until today, the same conditions determine the entire region almost all the way down to Cologne.

In recent years, scholarship has turned its attention to ecopoetry/ecocriticism in world literature and in that context to the motif of the river as a decisive factor in the lives of the people habituating along its shore. Medievalists, above all, have already identified the significant role of such bodies of water in the narrative development, giving such rivers almost an agency on their own, such as in *Herzog Ernst*, Priest Lamprecht's *Alexander*, the *Nibelungenlied* or Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* (Classen 2018, Locher & Poser 2019).

In modern literature, rivers also matter deeply, such as in Manuel María Madiedo's novel *La maldición* (1859), in Mark Twaine's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), Robert Müller's *Tropen: Der Mythos der Reise. Urkunden eines deutschen Ingenieurs* (1915), Werner Bergengruen's novella "Der Strom" from 1953 (Bergengruen 1986), or Zhang Chengzhi's *Rivers in the North* (1984) (García 2024). Many poets throughout time have paid great respect to the river (Abba & Onyemachi 2020, Cespedes 2025, Xausa 2025), and so did Schäfer, whose novella, however, has not yet been studied in this context. Big rivers such as the Rhine have always attracted the literary imagination, and Schäfer actually enjoyed considerable respect for his narrative skills to combine the history and lives of people with the river, as *Anckemanns Tristan* illustrates so powerfully (Balmes 2021, Göttert 2021, Nitzke 2024).

Tristan's father had worked for Anckemann but drowned together with his wife in the river during a crossing after the couple had attended a wedding. Anckemann is a very experienced wine seller and has many connections up and down the Rhine. Tristan, by contrast, knows nothing but Bingen and the environs. Only once he has met Veronika and fallen in love with her, is he forced to leave his hometown and travel down to Cologne. She comes from Godesberg, also situated on the river, and once she has learned that Tristan had visited her parents, nothing can stop her from traveling there following her stillbirth, except that the various accidents force them to return home prematurely without having reached their goal.

The most important moment associated with the Rhine comes, however, not until the very end when Tristan arranges the shipment of wine to Cologne, as a ploy to leave Veronika clandestinely. The foggy weather, however, makes it impossible for the captain to embark on the journey, and this delay provides the crucial moment during which the two lovers confront each other and open their hearts, she confessing her feelings for him and he recognizing that she is also filled with love for him. Neither one then continues with the journey on the ship; she returns home to manage the house and business, while he walks on foot down the Rhine to reach Cologne by himself where he intends to carry out the sale himself. But they silently reach a deep understanding of each other's love, and in that moment the future is already beckoning toward them, and this on the embankment of the river.

All three figures are deeply shaped by the Rhine as their geo-cultural framework, and they live and love as members of the Rhineland. Tristan's parents drowned in the river, and Veronica has come from Godesberg near Bonn down to Bingen, and always longs for going home to see her parents again. The Rhine turns into their lifeline associating them intimately with life and death. We hear a little about Anckemann's brother and his wife, and yet practically nothing about Veronika's parents, but they also belong to the larger community of river people, as we could call them. Water matters all the time, first swallowing Tristan's parents, then in the workshop of Veronika's aunt, the river itself as the central mode of transportation of people and goods, and Tristan's interrupted flight away from Veronika, which ends up in both their admission of love for each other. Only because the ship with both of them on board cannot proceed due to the fog, the time then comes for their open conversation, and we can assume that there will be a happy end because both figures find themselves and can thus bridge the distance between their fantasies and

social reality, allowing true and deep love to flourish in their partnership (Klein 1960, 503).

Schäfer as a Nazi – What to do in this Case?

If we did not know anything about Schäfer's biography, as was commonly the case in medieval literature, we could easily appreciate his novella as a literary gem for all the reasons outlined above. We would hence be able to embrace *Anckemanns Tristan* as a valuable contribution to Rhineland literature, as an intriguing fictional account determined by extensive psychological depth, and as a mirror of timeless intergenerational conflicts. Normally, we hear of the topos of the young woman unhappily married to an old and miserly husband, which was already very popular in the Middle Ages. Schäfer adapted it, however, and instrumentalized the medieval Tristan-and-Isolde motif for his own purposes, although Anckemann had really thought only of Wolfram's *Parzival*. Not only does the old wine merchant marry a woman much below his age, he also 'steals' her from Tristan and thus creates a tragedy, the only victim, however, he himself then proves to be. Finally, the author impressively interweaves the river landscape with the destiny of his three protagonists, and in this way, he contributes to a very old discourse on the river as life-giver and life-taker in literature from antiquity until today.

Sadly, Schäfer was a strong follower of the Nazi ideology, which has prevented us until today to appreciate anything created by his pen. It will remain a personal choice to condemn him for his political views and hence to put all his literary works aside despite their huge impact during their time. Or, as we might want to consider it, we should acknowledge the author's very dark past on the one hand and characterize it as what it was, and then, on the other, turn our attention to this novella all by itself and appreciate its literary quality and its significant contribution to the discourse on ecocriticism.

Certainly, this would not be an easy decision, but we constantly confront the problematic situation all over the world with poets or writers who cannot help but adjust to the political regime if they want to continue publishing. The famous philosopher Martin Heidegger, a strong Nazi, enjoys highest respect today despite his political past, with modern readers focusing primarily on his deep philosophical insights, for instance, into the *Ding* and *Wesen*, which really gives us much pause (Sherratt 2013, O'Brien 2015, Wolin 2022). Those on the radical left or right will not easily agree with this moderate compromise, but this novella, like many other texts created under similar circumstances, certainly deserves our respect all by itself. This stance would not amount to any exculpation of Schäfer and his strong support for the Nazis, but it allows us at least to acknowledge the literary quality of this one story as an extraordinary narrative reflection of the culture and people living in the Rhineland. The most reasonable approach in this case seems to be to face the author's ideological orientation as a specific biographical fact, whereas we could appreciate the text all by itself, in which the Rhineland gains an impressive profile and in which the author intriguingly relied on a complex web of intertextuality to create his novella, drawing both from medieval and classical literature. To use

another example, we are today certainly willing to accept Heidegger's philosophy as offering some of the most leading concepts taking us forward in theoretical explorations of our world, irrespective of his political views during the 1930s and 1940s. Logically, then Schäfer certainly deserves, as an author, the same treatment, especially if this one novella, at least, warrants its renewed respect because of its literary quality. Klein (1960, 503) notes that Schäfer was probably the most popular author of novellas since Gottfried Keller, here disregarding Thomas Mann, but this does not mean that we could ignore the vast discrepancy between his nihilism on the one hand and his adulation of the Nazi ideology on the other.

Significantly, there are no noticeable echoes of Nazi ideology in this novella, as far as we can tell, which can stand on its own as a literary masterpiece intriguingly predicated on the concepts of ecocriticism and intertextuality, as we would call it today. Although the name of 'Tristan' appears to be an intellectual lapsus by Anckemann, in the long run, it turns out to be a very fitting choice because in a way we can recognize here a modern version of the *Tristan* motif, though strongly modified by Schäfer in direct response both to von Kleist's and Goethe's works.

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