

1 **The River as a Human Lifeline:**
2 **The Case of Werner Bergengruen’s “Der Strom.”**
3 **Medieval Literary Reflections and Modern Responses**
4

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

22
23 **Keywords:** *Rivers in literary texts; Nibelungenlied; Wolfram von Eschenbach;*
24 *Dante; The Pearl; Werner Bergengruen; symbolism of water; magic realism*
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26
27 **Introduction**
28

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

43 Rivers in desert zones dry up at times, and then they overflow during the
44 monsoon season, leading to destruction, death, and yet also rebirth because the
45 sediments (sand, silt, and clay) left behind on the floodplains can provide crucial
46 fertilization – especially in the case of the Nile (Egypt), the Yellow River

1 (Sichuan, China), or the Zambezi River (from Angola to Mozambique).¹ This also
 2 entails that many rivers change their course over time, which has had a
 3 tremendous impact on human civilization. Entire cities or harbors had to be moved
 4 as a consequence of those developments, or all building stopped because a river
 5 valley had proved to be too dangerous, too unpredictable, and constantly subject to
 6 new floodings.² In short, rivers and human society have regularly cooperated
 7 closely, with people always trying their best to utilize the river to their advantage,
 8 whether this is then done with respect or not. Consequently, throughout times,
 9 both artists and poets, composers and philosophers have responded intimately with
 10 rivers which mirror, influence, or threaten human life. Studying rivers makes it
 11 possible to build meaningful bridges between the Humanities and the STEM
 12 fields.

13 With just a little effort, we can easily unearth relevant poems, images, or
 14 musical compositions responding to the profound significance of a river, such as in
 15 modern-day Vietnamese poetry.³ Most famous would be the six-piece symphony
 16 *Má vlast* (My Fatherland) by Czech composer Bedřich Smetana from between
 17 1874 and 1879, especially his *Vltava* (The Moldau) from late 1874.⁴ Ecocriticism
 18 and eco-poetry have gained tremendously in significance, or rather, we have now
 19 realized that such ecocritical perspectives have been with us for a long time,
 20 though often undetected by modern scholars. The current global climate crisis has
 21 been a big wake-up call, both to scientists and also to scholars in the Humanities
 22 and the Arts. We are hence strongly invited to consider anew the close relationship
 23 between the natural environment and human culture, literature and our material
 24 conditions, and between the physical world and our spiritual identity.⁵

25 Whereas older scholarship tended to identify references to natural objects or
 26 creatures primarily as typological and actually far removed from natural reality,⁶ a
 27 more sensitive reading of many different texts both from the Middle Ages and the

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

²Ekaterina 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).

³See 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.

⁴Linda 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).

⁵Cheryll 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.

⁶See, for instance, Derek Pearsall and Elizabeth Salter, *Landscapes and Seasons of the Medieval World*. London: Elek Books, 1973.

1 modern time has shed significant new light on the writers', poets', artists', or
 2 composers' minds regarding nature.⁷ Studying the relationship between a river and
 3 people, above all, allows us to comprehend deeply the enormous impact of that
 4 body of water on the cultural development and the formation of individuality and a
 5 collective sense of belonging to a landscape or region.⁸

6 For obviously good reasons, people have always settled near a river, and they
 7 have mostly profited from some form of symbiosis with the river.⁹ Beginning with
 8 the *Gilgamesh* (ca. 1800 B.C.E.) and followed by the Old and New Testament,
 9 rivers and people have always interacted, as the history of literature at large
 10 confirms. The river might take individuals on a long series of adventures and can
 11 thus reflect both personal freedom and also the culture of an entire society (e.g.,
 12 Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, 1885). Within our context, we
 13 might want to pay particular attention to the German gay author Hans Henny Jahn
 14 is well known for his unfinished trilogy, *Fluß ohne Ufer. Roman in drei Teilen*
 15 (1949–1961; Shoreless River or River Without Banks: Novel in Three Parts),
 16 which he conceived of as a kind of narrative symphony.¹⁰ From here, we could
 17 easily widen our perspective since the river really appears in world literature and
 18 assumes one of the central motifs throughout time.¹¹
 19

⁷Albrecht Classen, *Water in Medieval Literature: An Ecocritical Reading*. Ecocritical Theory and Practice. Lanham, Boulder, et al.: Lexington Books, 2018.

⁸*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.

⁹See, for instance, Gillian Mary Hanson, *Riverbank and Seashore in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century British Literature*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006; Shoshana Ronen, *Polin – A Land of Forests and Rivers: Images of Poland and Poles in Contemporary Hebrew Literature in Israel*. Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Uniwersyteckiego, 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.

¹⁰Birgit Schillinger, *Das kreative Chaos bei Thomas Mann und Hans Henny Jahn: 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_Jahn#Literarisches_Werk (last accessed on May 15, 2024).

¹¹See, 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.

1 Preliminary Reflections

2 Rivers in Medieval and Early Modern Literature

3
4 Rivers constitute mighty powers with the ability to create life and to kill.
5 They are, as the title of this study indicates, the lifeline of a people, a culture, if not
6 of the entire world. Already medieval poets demonstrated a strong sense of this
7 phenomenon, especially because crossing a river could mean a decision over life
8 and death. The anonymous poet of the Middle High German heroic epic
9 *Nibelungenlied* (ca. 1200) illustrated that dramatically with the Burgundians
10 crossing the Danube to visit the Hunnish King Attila and his Burgundian wife,
11 Kriemhild. Hagen brutally tests the prophecy of water nixies and realizes that none
12 of them would return home alive, so he destroys the ferryboat, which symbolizes
13 that they are all marching toward their death.

14 Young Parzival in Wolfram's eponymous Grail romance (ca. 1205) does not
15 dare for a long time to cross a creek that separates his childhood forest from his
16 imminent adulthood in the outside world, and once he has found a passage, he
17 quickly enters the world of King Arthur where violence and chaos rule, resulting
18 in many deaths.¹² Similarly, at the end of the romance, Gawain has to cross a river
19 and would have almost failed, but he ultimately succeeds and can thus create new
20 harmony and order in his world.

21 Most importantly, Dante the pilgrim in the *Divina Commedia* (completed in
22 ca. 1320), discovers that all souls condemned to Hell have to cross the river Styx, a
23 direct borrowing from Greek mythology. In the anonymous Middle English *Pearl*
24 poem (ca. 1390), the dreamer, who has lost his daughter, enters a paradise-like
25 garden and then spies a delightful maiden, but a deep river separates them, which
26 forces the two to exchange their dialogue across the water, which amounts to
27 Christian teachings about the bliss of the afterlife that can only be comprehended
28 through a vision. The parallels to Dante's experience with his beloved Beatrice in
29 *Paradiso* are not to be overlooked. Certainly, the entire setting in nature and the
30 body of running water provides yet another profound symbolism of the river
31 standing in for the demarcation between life and death, and hence heaven.¹³

¹²For 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.

¹³*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.

1 Moreover, a bit later, the narrative framework of Marguerite de Navarre's
 2 *Heptaméron* (1558/1559) is determined by enormous rainfall that makes all rivers
 3 flood so much that any crossing becomes impossible. A group of storytellers,
 4 however, finds refuge in a monastery and turns to a narrative entertainment, very
 5 much in the vein of Boccaccio's *Decameron* (ca. 1350), though there the Black
 6 Death has forced the young protagonists to flee the city and to pass their time
 7 telling each other stories. We can easily widen this perspective and incorporate
 8 similar literary cases, for instance, in the Arabic tradition.¹⁴

9 We would not need to emphasize particularly the great relevance and value of
 10 rivers as pathways for communication and trade already during the pre-modern
 11 age,¹⁵ or their continued significance until today for commerce, politics, military
 12 operations, and cultural developments – see, for instance, the famous Rhine-Main-
 13 Danube Canal connecting the North Sea and Atlantic with the Black Sea far in the
 14 east, completed in 1992.¹⁶ But we do need to identify the river as a symbol of
 15 human life, in its combination of transitoriness and continuity, ephemerality and
 16 stability, fluidity and constancy. This finds its most poignant expression in the
 17 work of a mostly forgotten but yet still powerful twentieth-century German author,
 18 Werner Bergengruen, the topic of this paper. Since he drew so much from
 19 medieval sources, and was deeply inspired by rivers, we face here a great
 20 opportunity in literary terms to catapult us from the fourteenth to the twentieth
 21 century and gain in that process profound insight into the catalytic significance of
 22 the river in human life. As has become clear so far, we could certainly claim that
 23 the river has commonly represented a major catalyst for the protagonist throughout
 24 world literature, and this also in the modern and postmodern period.

25 26 27 **Werner Bergengruen and the River**

28
29 We have realized already for quite some time the mythical dimension of
 30 rivers for many human societies.¹⁷ They own an ominous agency and lend a

¹⁴Sheila 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.

¹⁵*Flüsse als Kommunikations- und Handelswege: Marschenratskolloquium 2009; 5.–7. November 2009, Deutsches Schifffahrtsmuseum, 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; 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.

¹⁶https://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.

¹⁷Brigitte 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 Peter Coates, *A Story of Six Rivers:*

1 character to the respective *hinterland* and its people, as many poets and artists
 2 have already demonstrated in their works.¹⁸ For the purpose of this paper, the
 3 focus will move away from medieval literature and jump to a twentieth-century
 4 Baltic-German writer, Werner Bergengruen (1892–1964),¹⁹ who enjoyed
 5 enormous popularity well into the 1970s but whose fame has dramatically faded
 6 since then, probably because of the changes in the political culture of his time.
 7 Bergengruen carefully and deliberately drew from numerous medieval sources and
 8 adapted them for his own purposes to investigate symbolism and magic, fortune
 9 and faith, which thus explains the combination of the previous medieval textual
 10 examples with the modern novellas by this Baltic-German writer. In many of his
 11 works, and so in one of the novellas to be discussed here, the author focuses
 12 deeply on his home country, today Latvia, but he transcends those limitations and
 13 offers mythical perspectives on rivers as human lifelines.

14 However, the new student generation since the 1970s tended to reject religion
 15 and mysticism, refused to listen to historical aspects undergirding their own
 16 culture, and demanded radical reforms in the entire education system to gain more
 17 freedom and democracy. Thus, rather quickly and unfairly, Bergengruen lost his
 18 status as a canonical author in advanced schools (*Gymnasium*) or at universities,
 19 especially because he was suddenly criticized *post factum* for his allegedly
 20 dubious stance during the Third Reich, having removed himself from the political
 21 sphere by way of an ‘internal exile.’²⁰

24 “Der Strom”

25
 26 His short story, “Der Strom” (The River), first published in 1955 in his
 27 collection of novellas, *Die Flamme im Säulenholz*, has virtually been ignored by
 28 the public and research alike in the last few decades, although it had experienced at
 29 first quite some popularity, as documented by the repeated reprints of this

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.

¹⁸Albrecht 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.

¹⁹For 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>.

²⁰*Schriftsteller und Widerstand: Facetten und Probleme der „Inneren Emigration“*, ed. Frank-Lothar Kroll. Göttingen: Wallstein-Verlag, 2012. See now also Miriam Kaluza, *Zwischen Geist und Macht: Orientierungssuche und Standortbestimmungen konservativ-bildungsbürgerlicher Autoren in Deutschland (1930–1950)*. Baden-Baden: Ergon Verlag, 2020.

1 anthology (1956, 1959, 1960, 1961, 1965; 1968; 1986; 1987). I would argue,
 2 however, that in light of modern ecocriticism, it is high time to turn our attention
 3 to this extraordinary narrative once again in which the protagonist's life is
 4 intimately connected with a river, which at first seems to separate him from
 5 society. Most significantly, in the course of the story's development, the river turns
 6 into the crucial catalyst for him to grow up, to become a man, to establish his
 7 agency, and to enter adult life.²¹ Only by embracing the river, by gaining the
 8 strength to cross it, and by expressing his love for this mighty waterway and its
 9 people, does new life emerge and can happiness be achieved.

10 As is often the case with Bergengruen's texts (novels, novellas, and short
 11 stories, at times also lyric poetry), we can trace some medieval sources hidden
 12 behind the modern version, but this cannot be the focus of the present study.²²
 13 Instead, here the ecocritical concentration on the river as a determinant factor in
 14 the protagonist's life matters centrally, as much as this motif proves to be
 15 mythical, if not magically. This very element might have also doomed this story in
 16 the German book market during those revolutionary years, although magical
 17 realism, as pursued by such famous Latin American authors as Gabriel García
 18 Márquez, Isabel Allende, Jorge Luis Borges, Juan Rulfo, Miguel Ángel Asturias,
 19 or Alejo Carpentier emerged concomitantly on the literary stage globally.²³
 20 Bergengruen certainly flirted, even if only indirectly, with this magical realism, but
 21 he never received any acknowledgment for this poetic strategy because he lived in
 22 post-war Germany and at the end of his life faced severe criticism for his 'flight'
 23 into medieval literature, mysticism, and magical realism during and even after the
 24 Nazi era.

25 The protagonist of Bergengruen's story, the young man Christoph
 26 Hochgereuth, has inherited from his father a small but valuable library of medieval

²¹I 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.

²²Albrecht 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>.

²³See, 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.

1 and early modern necromantic and magical texts which he himself cannot read
 2 because they are written in exotic languages. He suffers from impoverishment and
 3 isolation, living away from the Latvian city of Riga on the other side of the river
 4 Dūna (today: Daugava), not really knowing what to do with his life.

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

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

27 Morosely, if not despondently, on the third day he walks along the river,
 28 uncertain what to do, when he observes a group of *Strusen* Russians, who tend to
 29 arrive in Riga once a year to sell their goods and then even their boats that look
 30 more like rafts. Additionally, he notices the sculpture of Saint Christopher who
 31 traditionally helps and protects travelers and especially voyagers, that is, those
 32 who entrust their lives to a river – today he is no longer accepted as an officially
 33 recognized saint even by the Catholic Church, and this since 1970 since his
 34 account is now considered as apocryphal and hence not trustworthy.²⁴

35 This saint assumes a central importance in this story because he was said to
 36 have carried the Christ child across a river, which symbolized the transformation
 37 of the world from evil to good and thus the absolution of human sinfulness. He
 38 appears in countless medieval and early modern paintings, frescoes, and sculptures
 39 and can be identified as the saint of rivers.²⁵ Bergengruen never voices any

²⁴See, 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).

²⁵Michael 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*. Kisslegg: fe-medienverlag, 2023.

1 criticism of this saint and casts his protagonist as a fervent admirer who even
2 defends the sculpture against the representatives of the Church (218).

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

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

19 The narrator indicates that she represents a mischievous, magical, or maybe
20 prophetic person who is deeply associated with water: ““There is something
21 underneath the pillow that must be removed. Underneath the pillow or the
22 bedsheet at the place where the head comes to rest. As soon as the light has been
23 extinguished, grab there, say in your thoughts: ‘In the power of St. Christopher’
24 and throw what you will find as far away from you as you can”” (213–14). She
25 herself would later provide him with a counter-magic. This Strusen Russian
26 arrives by way of the river, and metaphorically she then helps Christoph to cross
27 the river, the metaphorical barrier in his head and in his physical circumstances,
28 gaining love and happiness in marriage.

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

40 It is understandable that in light of the current gender debates, the Me-Too
41 movement, and the fight over women’s freedom and independence, this episode is
42 hard to swallow. Bergengruen adapted this scene from his medieval source – the
43 *Gesta Romanorum* – and developed it further because he needed an explanation
44 for why and how these two young people can eventually get together and join a
45 union in marriage. The night scene in her bed is determined by his violence, but
46 she had agreed to him sleeping with her entrusting herself to the magical recipe,

1 hence had offered a deceptive contract. Both persons thus could be blamed for
2 their shortcomings and wrongdoing.

3 The two then spend the night and the next two days in bed together and share
4 all their secrets with each other. Christine admits that she had felt a strong dislike
5 of men and had found the magical recipe to make him fall asleep while she had
6 leafed through his books. He, in turn reveals his experience with the Strusen
7 Russian. Neither one can fully understand the secrets that kept them apart and then
8 brought them together, but the outcome is satisfying. Both suddenly form a happy
9 couple, subsequently marry, and spend decades together until their death. In that
10 long first night, they “also talked about the fact that both their lives [had] been
11 separated and that they now had merged through the natural river” (216).
12
13

14 **The Magic of the River**

15
16 The story then comes to a fairly quick closure, summarizing the shared
17 existence of this couple. While she continues reading the necromantic texts, but
18 with less interest than before, not having any need for magical help, he rises to the
19 level of a councilman in charge of the river. In fact, he loves the river and its
20 people; he welcomes the Russian raft men, spends time with them in the evenings,
21 listens to their melancholy songs, and he takes good care of the sculpture of Saint
22 Christopher. In other words, he knows how much he owes his entire life to the
23 divine intervention, and of course to the old woman, a most mysterious figure.

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

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

43 Her return to the protagonist just before the moment of his death represents
44 the last puzzle which he cannot solve for a while. Even the reader faces a riddle
45 when the Strusen woman explains her own existence: ““The carrier probably
46 stands for what is being carried, and the servant stands in for the lord. . . . The lord

1 will give us a sign when he wants us to approach him to kiss his sleeve, to listen to
 2 his words, or to talk to him personally” (219). The dying man finds it surprising
 3 that the Strusen woman still looks the same irrespective of the decades that have
 4 passed since their first encounter. More curious, he now finally fully understands
 5 her language, whereas before she had used a difficult mix of Russian, Polish,
 6 Latvian, and German. But really stunning proves to be that she confirms having
 7 received her reward already. In her words: “Is not the gardener’s reward the
 8 blooming of the plants? And do you always have to think about good deeds and
 9 rewards as the people in the market do? I had wanted to show you that here in this
 10 world there is yet another mercy than that one of which is taught amongst you. . .”
 11 (219).

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

22 While reflecting upon her deep words, he realizes “that he no longer had to
 23 understand everything, and in this happy tiredness which had overcome him all the
 24 sweetness of growth squeezed out of his entire life seemed to be contained, the
 25 sweetness of bitterness, of pain, worries, and desperation, the sweetness of passion
 26 and excitement, of love, memories and present life” (220). After she has departed
 27 from his bedroom, Christoph dies happily and in harmony with the universe, so the
 28 story comes to an end. Symbolically speaking, we might claim that the protagonist
 29 finally sinks into the welcoming water of the river which had for a long time
 30 separated him from real life, hence love and happiness. By working closely with
 31 the Strusen woman, he had been finally able to overcome the magic and thus to
 32 gain his future wife’s love. The river constitutes the challenge, but it is not a
 33 hostile enemy. Christoph obviously gained the necessary help from Saint
 34 Christopher, that is, from the mysterious Russian woman
 35
 36

37 **Preliminary Conclusion**

38
 39 With “Der Strom” Bergengruen composed a most intriguing novella certainly
 40 in the vein of South American magical realism. His contemporary German readers
 41 appreciated that at first, but subsequently withdrew their support for him
 42 altogether, obviously for ideological and political reasons, although it remains
 43 entirely unclear what the responses to “Der Strom” might have been specifically.
 44 In light of our ecocritical understanding, however, we face here a fascinating
 45 opportunity to study the treatment of a river as the mysterious lifeline of the
 46 protagonist. This body of water both separates and brings together future lovers.

1 Christoph, above all, demonstrates a deep love for the river and its people,
2 especially the Strusen Russians who travel from their homelands to present-day
3 Latvia for trade.

4 The old woman only seemingly operates as an ordinary person, but she has
5 prophetic abilities, understands and commands some magic, and demonstrates
6 deep sympathy for the protagonist who faces the severe danger of losing his entire
7 existence if he cannot establish the desired love relationship with Christine. In a
8 way, we could identify this old woman as the river fairy – not a dangerous water
9 nixie, for instance – who arrives in time of need and offers her help to the
10 protagonist especially because he has a good heart, demonstrates sympathies for
11 her own people, and later takes good care of the river once he has been appointed
12 as the city official in charge of the river. All she expects from Christoph is to live a
13 good life, to accept the bitterness and the sweetness as they come, and to express
14 his thankfulness. That’s the essential mercy the river itself grants to him.

17 **“The Emperor in Misery”**

18
19 We encounter another fascinating example of a river that transforms the
20 protagonist’s life in the story “Der Kaiser im Elend” (The Emperor in Misery).
21 First published in the collection *Die Sultansrose und andere Erzählungen* (118), it
22 experienced numerous reprints and enjoyed a wide readership. Again,
23 Bergengruen drew inspiration from the medieval *Gesta Romanorum*, and perhaps
24 also from the collection of *El Conde Lucanor* by Don Juan Manuel.²⁶ Or, the latter
25 simply used the same source, so Bergengruen can be identified as a modern
26 respondent to this famous fourteenth-century collection of didactic tales in indirect
27 conversation with his Spanish forerunner.

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

34 The narrator offers detailed comments on Justinian enjoying the cool water,
35 swimming back and forth. The loneliness and tranquility of the river setting allows
36 him to reflect upon his life: “With a relaxed feeling of surprise, he thought about
37 the fact that he had felt so much bitterness not having a son who could inherit the
38 empire. Then he got up and slowly walked to the pointed end of the island which
39 was directed against the river’s current” (118–19). All the happiness of this quiet
40 moment then is suddenly gone because everyone has left and subsequently no one
41 recognizes him. After having dipped into the water of the river enjoying the
42 soothing quality of the aquatic medium, the emperor has to accept that he has
43 basically lost his identity and must then go through a long series of trials and
44 tribulations to regain his previous self. For a long time, he does not understand
45 what has happened to him, and only after he has accepted his painful destiny

²⁶Classen, trans., 118, n. 83.

1 (124), that is, has learned his lessons regarding his obligations and responsibilities
 2 as emperor, does the angel allow him to regain his original function: “I have
 3 represented him while he was doing his penance” (126), and: “because he is the
 4 highest here on earth and the one most noble-minded, therefore God had selected
 5 him to do such a penance for which He regarded you all as too weak. And now he
 6 has completed his penance for the shortcomings of his empire. Obey him, and I
 7 will recommend you to God” (127).

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

12
 13 Here he waited for some time in the thicket at the shore, feeling the reddish
 14 sweetness of the light behind his closed eyelids and delighted in the two graceful
 15 experiences of creation, which made themselves felt in the flowing coolness of the
 16 water and in the resting host sun shining during the noon hour. With a relaxed feeling
 17 of surprise, he thought about the fact that he had felt so much bitterness nt having a
 18 son who could inherit the empire (118).

19
 20 The river thus offers itself as a new medium that reminds him of the essence
 21 of life and encourages him to let go of the mundane concerns of politics and
 22 power. There are much larger issues to deal with, such as the entire populace, and
 23 their guilt, as the angel emphasizes at the end. Swimming in the river triggers the
 24 dissolution of the emperor’s old self and eventually the emergence of a new self.
 25 Although the situation after the swim proves to be catastrophic for Jovinian, the
 26 soothing of the water and its healing quality stays with him for a while: “In all of
 27 that, he was without impatience and irritation because he still had the full sense of
 28 refreshment from his rest on the island and of his bathing by himself” (119).

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

36 37 38 **Final Comments**

39
 40 In other words, Bergengruen identified the river, both in this and in the
 41 previous story, as a religious medium for the individual to transform, to shed the
 42 old self and to regain a new, a better one. Sadness, sorrow, even bitterness
 43 dominate the respective individual at the beginning, happiness and love enter the
 44 protagonist at the end, that is, after the immersion into the river, both physically
 45 and metaphorically. Human life begins when the water bag breaks, and in the
 46 course of our lives we swim through many currents. Death finally occurs when the
 47 crossing of the river is completed. If this reading can be sustained, we would have

1 available two most remarkable literary reflections on the universal significance of
2 the river as the cathartic medium for the human being. In other contexts, of course,
3 we hear of baptism in a font, of the purification of the soul through the sprinkling
4 of water, or the consumption of wine as the Eucharist.

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

19
20
21

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