

The Omnipresence of Death in Late Medieval Poetry and Verse Narratives: Johannes von Tepl and Oswald von Wolkenstein. With and Outlook on Some Contemporary Artworks (“Der Schmerzensmann”)

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Abstract

This paper intends to engage with a broad discourse on death that determined the late Middle Ages. Although the greatest epidemic, the Black Death, was not really reflected in contemporary German literature, we observe a clear shift away from the traditional courtly to the deadly worldview since the early fifteenth century. Two poets deserve particular attention who were contemporaries and, drawing from very different genres, offered powerful poetic reflections on death as it affected them drastically in very personal terms, whether this was seen through a rhetorical lens or through standard poetic images.

AIM: Both Johannes von Tepl and Oswald von Wolkenstein have already been discussed from many different perspectives, but by combining their comments on death, we can grasp more concisely the extent to which the topic of death occupied the public discourse in the post-epidemic period. To gain deeper insight into the prevalent discourse, their poems will also be viewed through the lens of contemporary art where we find countless examples of the theme of death, especially in a religious context.

Method: Based on a cultural-historical investigation, this study addresses the timeless topic of death as discussed by prose authors and poets in the early fifteenth century and by contemporary artists. Combining the data from both sides, literature and the visual arts, this article pursues an interdisciplinary approach to establish a firm concept of the dominant discourse on death during the early fifteenth century.

Results: The comparative analysis bringing together fifteenth-century German and European literature and contemporary artworks has shed significant light on the central topic of death which was perceived to be all-consuming and pervasive during the post-epidemic (Black Death) period.

Keywords: Death in The Late Middle Ages, Johannes Von Tepl, Oswald Von Wolkenstein, Fear of Dying, The Allegorical Representation of Death, Schmerzensmann (Man of Sorrow), Meister Francke, Rueland Frueauf The Elder, Albrecht Bouts, Albrecht Dürer

1. Introduction

Life has never been fully stable or predictable, instead, it is contingent, changeable, evanescent, and it is guaranteed to end in death, sometimes early, sometimes late, sometimes coming as a shock, sometimes long in coming. Even though the post-modern world is in command of a vast range of medicine to combat even sicknesses of epidemic proportions, such as in the case of COVID-19, still millions of people died during the period from ca. 2020 to ca. 2023, and the virus is currently undergoing various metamorphoses, which requires the development of yet other vaccines, not speaking even of many other types of viruses (Ebola)

that kill without any mercy and indiscriminately. Moreover, sudden death also lingers around everywhere if we think about terrorist attacks, war activities, mass murder, or simply traffic accidents. In short, modern medicine and pharmacy have provided us only with a false sense of security and safety, as miraculously many surgical operations or medicines can achieve the seemingly impossible. Of course, all living beings are bound to die at some point, but premature and sudden death deeply scares people and makes them terrified about what the future might hold.

In late antiquity and the Middle Ages, when medical doctors had much less opportunity to heal the sick and wounded with their limited means available, epidemics such as the Justinian Plague (ca. 541–542) or the Black Death (ca. 1347–ca. 1351, and many times thereafter) wreaked havoc and had catastrophic consequences for humanity at large [1-5]. Whereas in Italy, Boccaccio responded in a profoundly meaningful manner to the epidemic when he composed his *Decameron* (ca. 1350), poets in other languages across Europe barely touched on this horrifying phenomenon. Only ca. fifty years later, when the first shockwaves had been overcome, did the public discourse turn more directly to the topic of death as an imminent threat and tried to come to terms with this existential experience on a mass scale. Of course, there were ever new waves of new outbreaks, and this continued well into the late nineteenth century [6,3,37]. So, we could easily expand our topic, the topic of death, well beyond the period around 1400, but as a focus for this paper, I will examine only two major poetic voices along with a sample of contemporary paintings in which we discover specific responses to a profound transformation of life due to an epidemic. However, as in the case of Boccaccio's *Decameron*, the Plague itself did not assume any central function – in Boccaccio's case, it determines only the framework and then is lost out of sight for the rest of the storytelling period of ten days.

Certainly, the annals of devotional and other religious literatures are filled with narratives reflecting on the impact of death on human life, urging the individual to keep the end of life constantly in mind [7]. And art history is simply replete with dark, threatening, warning images about paying attention to imminent death especially since the fourteenth century, either in response to the Black Death or to death at large. Both the famous Scrovegni chapel in Padua, painted by Giotto (ca. 1267–1237), and the frescoes in the cathedral of Albi, St. Cecilia (construction of the building began in 1282, created upon the commission of Bishop Bernard de Castanet (1240–1317), completed at the end of the fifteenth century, both depicting the Last Judgment, dramatically convey this deep fear of the afterlife and hence the radical power of death and its horrifying consequences for the human sinner [8-10]. On the one hand, across late medieval Europe, the countless scenes showing Christ's Passion intensified the degree of physical suffering. On the other, the figure of death gained dramatic relevance in popular culture and also among the intellectual elites as poetic and artistic examples richly demonstrate.

In Jean E. Jost's words, "Certainly religious practices increased during this post-plague era. From processions, prayers, invocations, litanies, pilgrimages, flagellations and the Way of the Cross / Passion of Christ, we find the general populace involved primarily at a local level" [11,23,6]. Especially religious plays, such as the *Corpus Christi plays*, *Abraham and Isaac*, the *York Play of the Crucifixion*, and many others offered much more narrative material for the projection of emotions and empathy in face of Christ's enormous suffering [12]. In England, for instance, we witness the emergence of carved corpses commissioned by the wealthy and high-ranking members of society while they were still alive, obviously to demonstrate publicly, and hence to God, their

religious devotion, willingness to repent, and humility in face of certain death [13].

Of course, in all cultural histories, death has regularly played a significant role because it represents such an enormous rupture and causes major grief for the surviving individuals within virtually all human societies [14-20]. As Rebecca F. McNamarra and Una McIlvenna now emphasize quite correctly: People in medieval and early modern Europe experienced death and dying differently from the way we do today: the dead formed a more significant social 'presence' for medieval and early modern Europeans, who typically experienced the deaths of family and community members in far greater numbers than their modern counterparts [21,2].

Throughout medieval Europe, death was actually intimately interwoven into people's daily lives because it occurred so often and regularly and was expected to be dealt with constructively [20]. Hiram Kümper, summarizing much of older research on this topic, highlights the following major components of the culture of death in the pre-modern period: *memoria*, fear of the afterlife in hell and purgatory, the art of dying, the dance of death, performance of death, and the practical aspects of cemeteries, tombs, and epitaphs. Globally, we can observe this strong emphasis on death and dying in many cultural manifestations, especially in art and architecture [22-24].

Subsequently, I will highlight first a famous dialogue poem by Johannes von Tepl (ca. 1400) and then turn to fifteenth-century poetry that reflects on the last experience in a human's life, death, giving preference to one of the most innovative poets of his time, Oswald von Wolkenstein (d. 1445). Neither one has found adequate attention by historians engaged with the topic of death, and yet both created some of the most powerful poetic images of death, each in his own ways.

2. Johannes von Tepl

Around 1400 numerous authors anthropomorphized death and have him operate powerfully on the literary stage or in visual depictions, such as in the famous 'Dance of Death', or in the poems by the chancellor of the University of Paris, Jean Gerson (1425). John Lydgate, translating from a French original, created a series of poems dedicated to this topic as well for a solid text version, see 30, it has survived in 9 mss., for an online edition, see <https://metseditions.org/editions/GPammADHY9jzU9yEU85LzuYad-Vxe4ZM>, cf. also 31, for the Old French source, see <https://metseditions.org/read/mWgep2MSeBYmsyAq5IDLzPIkbmAV7314> [25-29].

In Johannes von Tepl's *Ackermann aus Böhmen* (The Plowman from Bohemia, ca. 1400), the Plowman, or Everyman, debates with death over the loss of his wife and the meaning of death vis-à-vis life. Johannes's debate poem enjoyed a tremendous popularity and has survived, at least outside of Bohemia – during the Hussite wars most German libraries were burnt down – in seventeen manuscripts and seventeen incunabula and early modern prints (for a digital copy of the ms. in the Universitätsbibliothek Heidelberg,

Cod. Pal. germ. 76, see <https://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/cpg76>, for a list of all mss., see <https://www.handschriftencensus.de/werke/936>, both last accessed on Feb. 18, 2025). The Plowman displays almost uncontrolled anger and bitterness, suffering deeply from the loss of his wife whom he had loved dearly. In many ways, we could identify his statements as a poetic paean on marriage, i.e., the good wife, which explains also the depth of emotions displayed here. Eventually, however, the widower calms down, begins to inquire what death really could mean, and probes, at least for himself, what life actually entails.

So, in his lengthy and frustrating engagement with Death, he actually gains deep insights into the essence of all existence because his grief and anger have worked, so to speak, as catalysts to help him gain a better grasp of why people exist here on earth. God finally decides the debate and grants the Plowman honor, but victory, to be sure, to Death [32-35]. Only recently Hans Joachim Solms has suggested that Johannes projected with this dialogue poem a literary medium for the individual to discover and develop personal concepts of happiness beyond the misery of material existence and the dreadfulness of death. This happiness was possible for the Plowman because he had loved his wife and had thus found himself within an incomprehensible world where Death and God seem to operate without regard for the human creature Johannes's contemporary, Christine de Pizan (1364–ca. 1430), also engaged with the same topic, especially in her ballades and in her autobiographical and philosophical treatise, *Livre de la mutation de fortune* (ca. 1403), but she did not treat death as such and only lamented the loss of her husband and hence the universal instability of life.

However, as Death argues, life and death are unchangeably part of the divine creation, and the individual hence ought to recognize and acknowledge his/her own limitations within a world where absolute powers rule and the human creature does not control his/her own existence [36,37]. Nevertheless, which characterizes the entire debate itself, the Plowman revolts against the tyranny of Death and contests his absolute power because he has lost not just his wife, but a beloved person and the mother of their children. Hence, he has taken Death to court and challenges the entire world structure and hierarchy claimed by Death for himself: "I and all humanity wring our hands and scream the hue and cry after you!" (ch. 1, 1). This outcry rings throughout the entire poem, and even though it does not really undermine Death's position or authority, it provides the human being with a voice against the absolute ruler whose insistence on commanding total control the Plowman tries to undermine.

The entire debate follows the principles of a law case, with the two parties arguing vehemently and with the full force of rhetoric, ethics, rationality, and emotions against each other. In that process, both sides expose their own nature, pitting life against death and hence the various arguments justifying both sides of all existence. Johannes provides the readers with a literary voice for the right to life in contrast to Death's absolute claims that human existence is basically worth nothing because the outcome always and

consistently proves to be death. For him, the Plowman's efforts are all useless and futile.

Significantly, Death grants his opponent an open debate because, as he says, "We wish to be right and just before you, right and just are Our proceedings" (ch. 3, 2). However, the exchange between both quickly turns sour and even bitter because their communication does not work properly since each side pursues very different concepts and embraces a very different worldview. The Plowman resorts to a litany of cusswords for Death, he lambasts him vehemently, he appeals to all forces in nature to align with him against this evil foe, attacks him for his alleged injustice, and basically raises a hue and a cry against this murderer who robbed him of his wife [37,38]. For a long time, Death operates successfully and triumphantly as the rationalist debater who is entirely assured in his position since no living creature can avoid death. However, Johannes did not let the Plowman simply slink away in nothingness and grants him considerable space to defend his own perspective, which thus becomes the clarion call for humankind at large.

The bone of contention seems to consist of the conflicting views on who should control life, with God not even addressed much at all in the early chapters. Death, to be sure, refutes the Plowman rather mockingly, and insists, at the end of chapter six: "Leave be with your curses, do not bring new tales from the prattling-rock, do not hew above you, or shavings will rain into your eyes!" Moreover, he refers to God who had assigned all material beings to his dominion: "this sphere of Earth with its flowing rivers and all they contain was commended Us by the mighty Duke of all Worlds, with the order that We uproot and weed out all superfluity" (ch. 8, 6), so the Plowman would not have any reasonable argument against Death since the latter's authority derives directly from the Godhead. As much as the Plowman heaps praise on his virtuous wife, now dead (ch. 9), this does not concede him any chance to defy Death, the almighty entity in life. For that reason, Death mocks him and calls him an utter fool who does not understand reality and hence does not deserve to be respected by him.

Interestingly, Death, drawing from late antique philosophy, reflects himself on philosophical approaches to human values and ideals, such as love, and he dismisses them, stating the paradox, probably an echo of Boethius's teachings in his *De consolation philosophiae* (ca. 524): "if you had abstained from love, you would now be relieved of sorrow, the greater the love you enjoy, the greater the sorrow of life without love" (ch. 12, 9). As we all know, however, Death overdoes his own arguments, eventually ridiculing the human being as nothing but a container of feces, slime, and other disgusting materials. Chapter twenty-four seemingly puts the nail into the coffin of human life, as Death comments most sarcastically and brutally:

a human is conceived in sin, nourished with impure, unspeakable feculence in the maternal body, born naked and smeared like a beehive, a mass of refuse, a churn of filth, a dish for worms, a stinkhouse, a repulsive washtub, a rancid carcass, a mildewed

crate, a bottomless sack, a perforated pocket, a bellows, a rapacious maw, a reeking flagon of urine, a malodorous pail, a deceptive marionette-show, a loamy robber's den, an insatiably slaking trough, a painted delusion. Let recognise who will: every human created to completion has nine holes in his body, out of all these there flows such repellent filth that nothing could be more impure [22].

This litany of negative descriptors continues for quite some time and mirrors Death's utter contempt of whatever might constitute worldly happiness. In particular, he condemns all feminine beauty and warns the Plowman that there is always nothing but a horrifying skeleton: "Show me a handful of beauty of all the belles who lived a hundred years ago, excluding those painted on the wall, and you shall have the Kaiser's crown!" [23].

Of course, here we see the direct influence of famous Pope Innocent III's twelfth-century treatise *De miseria humanae vitae*, also known as *Liber de contemptu mundi, sive De miseria humanae conditionis* (ca. 1194–1195), and Death in a way recapitulates the essence of medieval theology [35, 331–67]. By contrast, the Plowman finally recognizes his opportunity to argue successfully against his opponent, singing a song of praise of the human creature, a product of God's working here on earth: "Where has a workman ever effected so skilled and rich, so masterly and small, a sphere as the human head? Inside it there are artful, wondrous powers, incomprehensible to all spirits. In the eyeball there is the face, the most reliable of witnesses, masterfully worked in the way of a mirror, it reaches the clarity of the heavens. In the ears is the far-reaching sense of hearing, perfectly grated with a thin membrane for the perception and differentiation of a host of sweet sounds" (ch. 25, 24).

Death then resorts to a more defensive rhetoric, obviously bitten by this irrefutable argument, and actually allows some syllogisms to enter his statements and ratiocination, but he still insists, without ever deviating from his central claim, that God granted him full authority to exert complete control over all life. Tragically for the Plowman, when God then finally arrives and issues His Judgment, Death wins, but not without the Plowman receiving God's acknowledgment of his respectable effort: "So plaintiff, yours is the honour!" (ch. 33, 33). The debate thus comes to a completion, and the Plowman has, significantly, the last word, but he no longer complains, fights, or struggles against Death. Instead, he prays for his wife's soul in the afterlife: "Give her eternal repose, bathe her with the dew of Your favour, preserve her in the shadow of Your wings! Take her, Lord, into complete sufficiency, where the slightest find the fulfillment of the greatest!" (ch. 34, 36).

A Czech contemporary created a very similar work, probably under the direct influence of Johannes's debate poem, the *Tkadleček* [39,40,53-56]. The issue addressed in both works prove to be fairly similar, though the Czech author writes in his dialogue narrative primarily about the origin of evil that provokes and challenges people to an extreme. Both death and evil are incomprehensible, especially because God does not seem to intervene and help the

human race to combat it. It might well be that here we recognize in both texts a literary indication that the Christian faith appeared to be weakened, a global phenomenon since the post-Plague period, leading up to the Protestant Reformation since 1517 [41]. Although God is alluded to several times, and although God enters the picture at the end to issue His judgment, Johannes, above all, focused on the individual's loneliness and suffering here on earth in face of the catastrophic consequences of death. There are no direct allusions to the Black Death, but the overall impression of this famous dialogue poem clearly underscores the poet's full awareness of death being a ubiquitous force people have to cope with all the time at any stage in their lives.

3. Death in the Poetic Texts by Oswald von Wolkenstein

In the case of the South-Tyrolean poet Oswald von Wolkenstein (ca. 1376/77–1445), we can clearly trace the historical development in our research field because he was barely known even among scholars until the late 1950s. But ever since, Oswald has been recognized as one of the most significant literary voices in the German late Middle Ages. Whereas some of his contemporaries, such as Hugo von Montfort and the Mönch von Salzburg (Monk of Salzburg) tended to continue with the tradition of courtly love, experimenting somewhat with themes, motifs, images, or expressions, Oswald made a revolutionary effort to innovate the poetic discourse. In his 132 songs preserved in his manuscripts A, B, and c, we come across many remarkable songs (often with the notation) that address new topics, such as his own life (autobiography), travel, war, marital love, experience of Spring, prostitution, the atmosphere in the southern Alps, multilingualism, social criticism, political and legal commentaries. The body of research on Oswald is vast by now, and this for very good reasons since a close analysis of many of his texts shed significant light on the social-historical context, and the conflicts between the individual and the Church [42]. His works have been edited several times and also translated. Literary historians have also made great efforts to correlate his often very personal poems with events in his life, i.e., with relevant documents pertaining to events in Oswald's life [42-45]. When we consider the first group of poems in the manuscript B (for a digital copy, see <https://diglib.uibk.ac.at/urn:nbn:at:at-ubi:5-1050>, <https://diglib.uibk.ac.at/ulbtirolhds/content/pageview/5914065>), which is beautifully illustrated with the poet's portrait, probably created by the Italian artist Antonio Pisanello (ca. 1380/1395–1450/1455) or by one of his students. we hear much about death, the fear of afterlife, the role of the devil, wisdom and repentance, and other religious themes that were rather typical of that time, especially following the major epidemic only ca. one generation ago, or even much less because the Black Death kept returning in regular intervals. As much research has convincingly demonstrated, in the late Middle Ages, the terror which the concepts of hell and purgatory exerted was deeply palpable and impacted most people's minds [10,46,47].

In Kl. 1 (Kl standing for the editor's name, Klein), the poet admits his sinfulness and appeals to Saint Catherine to speak to the Virgin Mary on his behalf because he needs Christ's protection. Oswald confesses that he has become guilty of an excessive love affair

and now wants to return to his senses and retrace the only and true path through life leading to God (stanza 4). In face of death, it becomes clear to the poet, that God wants to be loved under any circumstances (v. 69). Love for God would be the greatest force in all existence and would protect the individual from the horrors of death (stanza 5).

Only by the following stanza, 6, do we realize that the poet reflects on his personal suffering as a prisoner who had been chained by his hands and feet because he had incensed his territorial lord, Duke Siegmund, who is not mentioned here by name. All his previous love wooing only led to him having been taken prisoner (stanza 6). Even though the personal allusions would remain non-understandable for those not directly familiar with the poet's actually quite sordid life, the last stanza suddenly develops the theme of death most explicitly because the poet worries that he does not know "wo mein arme sel hin fert" (v. 114, where my poor soul will go). In his misery, he appeals to the Christ child to protect him in his miserable situation, and he actually requests that Jesus would avenge him and get those punished who have taken him prisoner (vv. 119–20). The poem concludes, however, with the appeal to God that the mistress whom he had wooed would not have to suffer because of him (vv. 125–26) [48,49].

In Kl. 2, similarly to one of the statements by Death in Johannes von Tepl's poem, the poet urges his audience to use their reason to understand God's commands, the dangers of a sinful life, and the threat of hell in afterlife. But, parallel to the first poem, Oswald reflects his personal suffering and torture in prison, having been betrayed by his former mistress. So, the metaphorical and the realistic component pertaining to the experience of death merge and gain predominance. Ironically, the poet appears to express profound religious concerns, but at closer analysis, we regularly notice his very personal complains about the unfaithful mistress who had betrayed him to his enemies (Kl. 3). He goes so far as to associate her with Eve who had seduced Adam to eat the forbidden fruit, and then he rattles off a list of other famous men in the Bible and in ancient history who had likewise suffered from women's disloyalty and seduction, certainly expressions that are topical in nature [50]. Poignantly and sarcastically, Oswald pronounces: "Ain schön böß weib / ist ein gezierter strick, ein spies des Herzen" (Kl. 3, vv. 37–38, An attractive evil woman is like a beautiful rope, a lance into the heart). Hence, he urges his audience to turn away from all love wooing and to embrace the Virgin Mary as the only worthy lady any man should follow. One of the biblical examples to confirm this observation is the suffering of John the Baptist who was decapitated on behalf of Salome (vv. 43–45), so Oswald voices deep fear that the same might happen to him as a result of his erotic transgressions in the past.

As to be expected, the poet urges the listeners to turn away from this world and to embrace only God's love because the material dimension proves to be nothing but deception and determined by "lug, hoffart, spot, hass, zoren, neid" (Kl. 4, v. 15, lying, arrogance, mockery, hatred, anger, envy). Worldly love ought to be replaced by spiritual love, and this would require pursuing a more pious life,

rejecting the temptations by the devil and especially the material temptations of food and drink: "Fleisch, weines tunst / teglichen meid, mässlichen nem die speise" (Kl. 4, vv. 43–44, stay away from meat and wine and eat moderately). The more the individual would be ready to accept physical suffering, actually God's gifts or messages, the more one would be able to wash away one's own sinfulness (Kl. 4, v. 53).

In Kl. 5, old age has set in and the poet laments about the loss of his body's strength and well-being, facing certain death: "mit blaiher farb und ougen rot" (v. 11, pale color and red eyes). He is walking bent down, and his voice has become weak, preventing him from performing his usual songs (vv. 14–18). Following a traditional litany of complaints about the declining health, listing various body parts that indicate his old age (balding, bad teeth, hoarse voice, shortness of breath), the poet anticipates his imminent death: "und gieng mir not der küelen erd" (v. 35, I need the cool soil [burial]). He warns the young men to keep their end in mind because: "wer du jetzund bist, der was ich vor" (v. 41, what you are now, I used to be before). Instead of dedicating himself to the joys of courtly life, for instance, he considers living a pious life, fasting, praying, and attending Mass (v. 45). Famously, Oswald concludes with this lament: "die kindlin spotten mein nu schier / darzue die freulin rain" (vv. 51–52, the children mock at me now, and so do the pretty young ladies) (Giese, ed., 2024). Considering how much Oswald otherwise engaged very concretely with his own life experiences as a sort of autobiographical poet, we would not have to doubt the realistic background of these comments, but we also know how much the poet relied on topical expressions and images typical for the entire late Middle Ages. He concludes his poem by blaming himself for having wasted his youth dedicated to a sinful lifestyle. Hence, he now appeals to the young people, "versaumt nicht gottes huld" (v. 54, do not miss to strive for God's grace).

This leads logically over to his questioning what his soul is doing in the face of death in Kl. 6. Hence, his heart is filled with fear of the afterlife, a very common feeling expressed by Christian poets throughout time, and especially in the wake of the major fourteenth-century epidemics. Oswald wonders aloud about his destiny because in the face of death no one comes to his assistance, neither the children, friends, or neighbors (v. 31). They all take over his material possessions, but they do not offer in turn any support or advice: "wo ist eur hilf und rat?" (v. 32, where is your aid and counsel?). He knows only too well that the greedy heirs take all the goods but leave him alone in the final hour (v. 33) so that he has to dive into the hellish bath where money has no value (vv. 34–35) – certainly an intriguing image combining specific economic aspects (monetary currency) with spiritual aspects (death). The poet then formulates his profound horror of the devil and hell and only knows to appeal to the Virgin Mary to speak up on his behalf to her child, Christ (vv. 43–48). As we commonly hear in late medieval religious texts, Christ's Passion is perceived as the ultimate divine promise to protect the individual from the suffering in hell. However, Oswald specifically incriminates himself, admitting that he did not serve God here in this life, otherwise "so fuer ich wol die rechten far" (v. 53, I would take the right path). Of course, we have

always to recognize the strategic merging of the autobiographical with the topical elements, but the poet had all these religious poems placed up front of the collection of his songs.

Consequently, Kl. 7 (“Loblicher got”) is a direct appeal to Christ and the Virgin Mary for their help, and Kl. 8 represents a direct warning to all people to repent in time before death occurs and the soul has to enter the feared afterlife. Here the poet projects universal perspectives describing the world as God’s creation which people do not properly acknowledge (v. 40). He reminds the audience that Christ, through His Passion, had broken the gates of Hell and thus freed humankind, but people would continue to curse misusing His name (v. 43). In fact, Oswald expresses his astonishment that God demonstrates so much patience with people although they commit sins and act in an evil manner. The only reasonable approach would be quickly to turn to repentance and not to deviate from that path. In that case, there would be hope that Christ would come to the rescue of those tied up in a prison cell and bound by iron shackles (v. 80), again a reference to his personal experience.

In the following poems, Oswald intensifies his laments about the worthlessness of the world, its deceptiveness, and illusion distracting the individual from the only trustworthy path toward God and heaven. Already in Kl. 9, however, we notice a more personal reflection because the poet wonders about his previous life filled with much travel and his acclaim as poet: “Was hilft mich nu mein raisen fremder lande / in manig künigreich, das mir ist bekande, / was hilft mein tichten und gesangk / von manager künigin schöne?” (vv. 16–19, What good were my travels through foreign countries, in many kingdoms that I became familiar with, what good was my poetry and singing in front of many beautiful queens?). The glamour of the world has deceived him, no money or gold would be worth anything compared to the love he would feel in his own heart. The more wealth a person would own, the more protection s/he would need (v. 35), which again proves to be directly derived from Boethius’s teaching in his *De consolazione philosophiae*. Similarly, the more someone would enjoy honor and public reputation, the more s/he would act outrageously and irrationally (v. 36). The more intensively one would experience erotic love, the more pain would result from it (vv. 40–45). In the typical *memento-mori* fashion, the poet emphasizes that neither youth nor strength, and not even wisdom would protect anyone from the consequences of old age and then death: “all wertlich freud neur pringet laid” (v. 55: all worldly joys produce nothing but sorrow).

The poem ends with the laconic observations that the human body is ephemeral, that people have to say goodbye to all earthly joys at the end of life, and that only good deeds would follow the dying individual into the afterlife (v. 73). The same comments determine the two following poems, and we can thus conclude that Oswald created, at least in this compact section of his collected works, an entire discourse on death and dying, and this embedded in religious reflections concerning the relationship between God and the human creature (esp. Kl. 10). He concludes with the advice: “las hoffart, bis gedultig, leb an neide, / so werden all dein veined lam

/ dort in der helle flamme” (vv. 96–98, let go arrogance, be patient, live free of envy, then all your enemies will become lame in the hellish flames). The world itself would be nothing but an illusion, and trust could be found only in God (vv. 103–05). This finds also a very vivid expression in the following poem where Oswald describes a tournament where all people enjoy a good time. Once, however, the end has reached, “gee wider dar, so vindst ain öde stat” (Kl. 11, v. 90, When you return there, you will find nothing but an abandoned place).

In many ways, as Sieglinde Hartmann has already observed in her doctoral dissertation, the poet drew from a wide range of poetic genres, and yet, he offers unique, personalized, emotional comments about the arrival of his old age, his fear of death, and his suffering in prison, under torture, and as the object of public scorn [52,15]. Oswald’s poems reflect the concern of the individual to gain personal protection from God, from the Virgin Mary, or from Christ. He does not turn his attention to any ecclesiastics and seeks out a private form of devotion by means of his poetry. But there are also no references to the secular-spiritual movement of the *Devotio moderna* or to any mystics, as Hartmann suggests [52,37]. Instead, we have to read his poems in direct response to the emergence of a discourse on death, even though neither Johannes von Tepl nor Oswald von Wolkenstein responded to any of the epidemics raging throughout the late Middle Ages.

The focus rests, at least in Oswald’s poems, on a deeply sensed feeling of personal sinfulness and hence the desperate need to turn to God and the Virgin Mary as the only possible helpers in face of death [52,57]. Whereas the poet goes through an extensive process of self-incrimination, repentance, and seeking of divine help, Johannes took up the fight against death charging him with injustice, brutality, carelessness, and unfairness. But ultimately, he as well has to submit under God’s judgment and, turning to humility, he tries to gain spiritual sustenance in a world where all material values prove to be meaningless. Oswald argues from a very individualistic perspective, whereas Johannes assumes a more global position trying to defeat Death in argumentative terms.

At any rate, as our discussion has demonstrated, death and the afterlife deeply mattered for the public discourse around 1400. Whether it would really help to add, for comparative sake, the poetic laments about old age by François Villon (ca. 1431–after 1463) or the melancholy poems by the French Dauphin, Charles d’Orléans (1394–1465), as Hartmann has done [52, 164–75 and 211–28] could be discussed. But I think that both engaged with somewhat different thematic issues, as much as they also reflected on the temporality of all life and the imminence of death [but for an analysis of the autobiographical elements common in early fifteenth-century European literature, see 51]. By contrast, contemporary artists made strong efforts to integrate the component of bodily suffering into their religious paintings, which might help us better to comprehend the emotional dimension of the treatment of death in the literary work [52 includes a number of fifteenth-century pictures, but those are predicated exclusively on the *memento-mori* motif].

4. The Man of Sorrow – the *Schmerzensmann*

In the late Middle Ages, certainly since the early fifteenth century, artists increasingly turned to the motif of depicting the dying or dead Christ in a most painful and horrifying scene, with the focus resting ever more intensively on the terrible wounds and the broken body that is still hanging on the cross or is already taken down by the grieving bystanders. The specific work by the North German or Dutch Meister Francke (ca. 1380–1440), ca. 1425 (Museum der Bildenden Künste Leipzig) can easily serve as one of many characteristic cases involving a paradigm shift in the history of emotions as we have identified already in the literary works by Johannes von Tepl and Oswald von Wolkenstein. In this image of the “Schmerzensmann” (online at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Master_Francke#/media/File:Meister_Francke_004.jpg, last accessed on Feb. 19, 2025), we see four angels tenderly holding up the body of the dead Jesus, whose head is bent sideways indicated that he has perished and exhaled his last breath. Two at the bottom hold up his arms that show the wounds from the nails, while a third one carries the body in the armpits. The latter gazes full of concern at the corpse expressing its grief, as indicated by the lowered eyebrows. Christ’s eyes are still half open, but He is, after all, already dead. The angels’ deep emotional responses are clearly visible through their gazes and subtle gestures, so the image appeals to the viewer with full force. Here we are not confronted by a triumphant Christ, instead, the savior has been killed, and universal sorrow emanates from the painting.

However, the motif of the “Schmerzensmann” emerged already well before the explosion of the Black Death, if we consider, for instance, the incredibly moving wooden sculpture of the dead Christ in the Virgin Mary’s lap from ca. 1340, in the Ursuline Monastery, Erfurt (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Erfurt_Ursulinenkloster_10.jpg). While Christ’s eyes are closed, and his head is bent backwards, His mother gazes with greatest sorrow at her son’s tortured and martyred body, bloody from the various wounds both in his side and on his head (from the crown). The rib cage is extremely profiled, and we clearly sense the presence of death, while the mother’s grief is vividly expressed, who has nothing left but despondency. Although she is elegantly dressed, her face mirrors her infinite pain while holding the broken body upright.

Many painters and sculptors worked on this motif since as early as the thirteenth century, but it gained greatest popularity only since fifteenth century, such as by Rueland Frueauf the Elder (143–1507)’s “Christ as Man of Sorrows” (ca. 1500, online at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rueland_Frueauf_d._%C3%84._001.jpg [cf. the contributions to 53] and Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528)’s same motif, “Christ as the Man of Sorrows” from 1493 (Staatliche Kunsthalle, Karlsruhe, online at: <https://www.kunsthalle-karlsruhe.de/kunstwerke/Albrecht-D%C3%BCrer/Christus-als-Schmerzensmann/4CF6CD9D45DD6B1AC91CECAE9EC57F44/>). The major difference here, however, consists of the fact that Christ has risen from the dead and gazes at the viewer, holding the torture instruments in his left hand while the right hand support the chin. His sorrowful face addresses us directly with the question of how ‘we’

could have done such horror to God’s own son. Christ’s body is marked by the wounds and the blood flow, but otherwise it appears as muscular and strong, may signaling the fact that He has returned from death. Of course, with Dürer, we find ourselves already in the high Renaissance, whereas our focus rests on the pictorial presentation of death in the early fifteenth century, here captured most dramatically through the image of dead Christ. Dürer moved away from that motif and added a strongly reflexive moment which forces the spectator to stand back and remember what had really transpired in the Crucifixion [54].

However, during the early fifteenth century, keeping the various literary manifestations in mind, death and dying gained particularly in importance, and in the course of time, artists and sculptors contributed to this discourse in their own way, adding considerably to expression of pain over the death of a beloved person, God’s own son. An anonymous woodcut from ca. 1465/1470, for instance, today in the Art Institute of Chicago, presents Christ’s naked torso entirely covered with wounds, with His head bowed down expressing extreme pain and suffering. He holds up his hands and displays the wounds in the palms, while the torture instruments and tools for the crucifixion are included in the back (online at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Man_of_Sorrows_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg). A final example would be the most impressive image of Christ as the Man of Sorrow by Albrecht Bouts (ca. 1452–March 1549) (mid 1490s, today in the Fogg Museum, Harvard University, online at: <https://www.meisterdrucke.ie/fine-art-prints/Albrecht-Bouts/833011/The-Man-of-Sorrows.html>, or: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Man_of_Sorrows_by_Albrecht_Bouts_mid_1490s_-_Fogg_Art_Museum_-_DSC02361.JPG). Again, Christ looks out of the picture, but not directly at us, instead, the head is slightly turned to the left while blood streams down the forehead as a result of the crown of thorns. He holds up both Hands that are marked by the nail holes. Although Christ is clad in a rather elegant red cloth, we can clearly recognize the countless wounds on his chest. Most significantly, the face is characterized by the expression of pain, formulated without words simply through the gesture and the eyes. Death appears here in its most dramatic manifestation, the body of Christ who had suffered from His Passion and has now returned to life. Deep sorrow and pain are written over the entire scene evoking deep compassion. If we traced the tradition of the “Schmerzensmann,” we would encounter ever more brutal, emotional, sorrowful, and yet also quiet pictures marked by the ultimate form of sacrifice, the voluntary giving up of life in favor of humanity [55].

Whereas the poets discussed here approached the topic from their own personal perspectives and examined what death really meant for them in their lives, at least via their narrative lens, the contemporary artists obviously endeavored to find pictorial expressions of deepest emotions to evoke pity and empathy, which then served to create new compassion, devotion, and religiosity. There was no direct talk about the Black Death or other epidemics, but the presence of death had become, at the latest since ca. 1400, a universal topic of great relevance for many ordinary people, poets, and artists, which philosophers and theologians were of course deeply in-

vested in the question regarding death and its relevance for human culture vis-à-vis the afterlife.

5. Conclusion

Intriguingly, the various concepts concerning death, whether the Dance of Death or the *Schmerzensmann*, whether the figure of Death in anthropomorphized form or death as imagination related with hell and purgatory, continued to exert greatest influence in late medieval and early modern art. Certainly, Renaissance artists and poets somewhat changed some elements (such as shapes, colors, and forms), in essence, here we observe a remarkable example of the steady continuity of the late Middle Ages far in the early modern age. Death was there to torture and threaten people, and fear of the afterlife was a significant topic in western societies throughout the ages. The Black Death was not necessarily the fulcrum of this 'new' discourse, but the experience of death extremely intensified, which had such a deep impact on art and literature since around 1400, and this as a result of a profound transformation of the emotional framework determining late medieval and early modern society. Old age was no longer simply overlooked, instead, it triggered a strong emotional response as the last stage before death [56,13].

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