

Ruth Klüger
»Wer rechnet
schon
mit Lesern?«

Aufsätze
zur Literatur



Wallstein

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Nachweise

German Studies: The Woman's Perspective

The first question I need to ask before speaking of the woman's perspective on German Studies is whether the subject is at all legitimate. It is not like the New Left and the Comparative perspectives, for these are freely chosen intellectual points of view. And it is not like the American perspective which, as Sammons so forcefully points out, involves the very function of ›Auslandsgermanistik‹.^[1] When we talk of *the* woman's perspective of the field, we are skirting prejudice, for is there not the danger of implying that women must necessarily turn out to be different literary scholars from men? To make the point clearer, I should like to offer an analogy from a realm of ethnic prejudice where our thinking has evolved to a higher degree of sophistication and self-consciousness than in matters pertaining to women: how would you feel about ›The Jewish perspective on German Studies‹? Are there not suggestions of antisemitic overtones and undercurrents in such a heading? Does it not suggest exclusion, an intellectual ghetto? In any case, one would hesitate to put the Jewish perspective in the same category as these others, even though among our numerous Jewish colleagues there can hardly be a single one who has not given some thought to what his Jewishness does to his perception of German culture.

Let me pursue this analogy a little. Sartre describes an antisemitic schoolboy's feeling that his Jewish classmate who receives higher grades in French literature still does not and cannot understand Racine with the same sort of intuitive grasp as the non-Jewish French boy. For it is not the Jew's birthright to understand this literature. It was not *his* ancestors who produced it. In such a view, the Jewish perspective is superficial, clever

perhaps, but not drenched with the right emotions, perhaps corrosive, certainly uncreative.

This view of Jewish literary abilities is now unfashionable, but it is uncannily similar to the widespread feeling that relegates women's insights to the domain of the unsolid, clever perhaps, but also fluffy and ultimately lacking in a true understanding of the masculinity that is the motive force of works written by men. A woman's understanding is axiomatically taken to be more shallow than that of a less gifted colleague who has the advantage of a shared sex with the author under study.

Now if by ›woman's perspective‹ any such exclusionary principle is implied, then the subject is indeed a non-subject and you could no more expect a woman to talk about it than you could expect a Jew to talk about his basic and inherent inability to deal with Christian symbolism. But neither Jews nor women nor, for that matter, blacks can be said to have a special view of literature automatically theirs because of their Jewishness, their womanhood, their *négritude*. One of the joys of reading books is precisely that we transcend our personal background and consent to take on the author's point of view. I believe it was Ralph Ellison who pointed out that when he read *Huckleberry Finn* as a boy it never occurred to him to identify with Nigger Jim who was quite remote from the blacks he knew: like all children, and this includes girls, he identified with Huck. Female children assume the male perspective which most books offer them, and they have no difficulty continuing to do so when they grow up. The difficulty lies rather in pulling away from that perspective. Similarly, Jewish readers have no trouble assuming the Christian or quasi-Christian view of most of Western literature.

Clearly, however, I would not have started on the subject if there was no more to be said on it. For having established that the understanding of a work of literature is not contingent on the similarity of the reader's and the

author's background (one of those truisms that needs to be reiterated once in a while), we can now go on to say that a special group may indeed bring its special experiences to bear on literature and thereby contribute substantially to the understanding of some works and their background. Yet in all cases the added insights must be accessible to all readers, though the interpreter's background may have helped sensitize him to his discoveries. In this sense, as a contributory and not as an exclusive property, there is a woman's perspective as there is a Jewish perspective.

The simplest example of exercising it is to withdraw the consent of which I spoke. A Jew reading *Soll und Haben* will soon disagree with its author and end up disliking the book. That is easy enough. There are other, more complex cases where he may be in a good position to question certain specifically Christian assumptions which the author presents as universals. The analogy to women is obvious: our literature is permeated with unexamined premises regarding the relation of women to men, to society, even to God. Women *are* in a better position than men to ask questions about these assumptions though they have to learn to do so, since until recently they would not even have questioned the most questionable of Freudian assumptions.

Thus we may postulate that as female Germanists we are in a sense outsiders with the outsider's sensitivities, *if* we choose to use this particular perspective. For it is neither our exclusive birthright nor is it our only birthright. I believe that my Jewish background makes me particularly sensitive to ›Blut und Boden‹ rhetoric, and I tend to find it where others tend to overlook it. But I am surely not the only teacher who has gleefully pointed out to a class that an apparently objective and technical book like Kayser's *Kleine deutsche Versschule* may contain stylistically contaminated passages, such as: »die vierhebige Zeile als Ordnungseinheit liegt uns seit germanischer Zeit im Blute.«^[2] Similarly, as a woman I am less inclined to

overlook such passages as the following on Droste-Hülshoff from a standard work on nineteenth-century literature:

Sie war, nach Albrecht Schaeffers schönem Wort, eine Pallas,
jungfräulich und erfinderisch, ›eine jungfräuliche Frau, die alle Kunst
der Welt und ewigen Ruhm ohne Laut hingegeben hätte für zwei
Augenblicke, die ihr unbekannt blieben: den einen, wo sie Liebe
empfang, den anderen, wo sie Liebe gebar‹.[\[3\]](#)

Irrelevant metaphor on the one hand, biography in the subjunctive on the other: both are objectionable by accepted standards, and sensitivity to prejudice may help us pinpoint them.

The mention of women authors brings up the inevitable question: who are they? Nowadays when we are often asked to do a course on women authors, we have to face up to the deplorable fact that in German we simply do not have as sizable a body of first-rate works by women as English or French does. A course on German women writers would presuppose on the part of the students an interest in such diverse and hermetic writers as Mechthild von Magdeburg and Ingeborg Bachmann. It *can* be done, sure, but it is not the same as getting up a course on Jane Austen, the Brontë sisters, George Eliot, and Virginia Woolf. And there is, let's face it, a limit to what can be done with *Die Judenbuche*. So far I have not seen my way to doing a course of this kind. Perhaps I can do a seminar on some *modern* women, such as Lasker-Schüler, Langgässer, Bachmann, and Aichinger. But again the Jewish analogy may provide a warning: Who would want to teach Heine and Kafka together because of their shared faith (or non-faith) in Judaism? In other words, women authors do not automatically form an entity, least of all in our literature.

But if women's studies are not easily accommodated in the ›Germanistik‹ curriculum, there are some other things that we should be

ready to do. One is to clean up or at least object audibly to the sexist inanities which riddle our secondary literature and of which the quote on Droste was just one glaring example. The same goes for our language textbooks, which are a sink of sexism. If you have to use a grammar where the hostess pours coffee and the men talk politics, where the *Student* wants to become a scholar and the *Studentin* wants to get married, correct the picture, reverse the adjectives, treat the text as an object for study, as a source book of stereotypes. (The students will love it because it jolts them out of rote learning.)

Yet the main task, and what the near future will surely bring, is a body of feminist criticism. This will not only involve a reevaluation of women writers and the social background that allowed them to be creative, but it should ultimately give us a consistent view of how the literary presentation of women reflects not the lives of women and not even their aspirations but rather the wish fulfillment and fear projections of their male creators, from Wolfram's Condwiramurs to Dürrenmatt's Claire Zachanassian. To do this will take subtlety, a great deal of knowledge, and a little more than general cries of outrage. For while feminist criticism is regarded with suspicion in many quarters, we should not make it so easy for ourselves as to ascribe this suspicion solely to the entrenched male chauvinism of the profession. The truth is that we haven't even begun to do the job.

Take a medieval example. Everyone knows that Siegfried beats his wife, and the pertinent lines in the *Nibelungenlied* usually get a facetious comment on how reality intrudes on the chivalric code. It is taken for granted that the code cannot accommodate wife beating, and that there is an inconsistency between the earlier and the later treatment which Kriemhild receives. But she herself does not think so, and I think it can be shown that there is no such inconsistency, just as the raping of peasant women was not contrary to the veneration of aristocratic women, as we know on the

excellent authority of Andreas Capellanus. Exalting and abusing women are two sides of the same coin, something that medievalists like to forget, for the value of this particular coin changes considerably when we keep its two faces in mind. We have learned to do this when we read Victorian novels: the purity of middle-class womanhood appears to us in a different light when we think of the widespread acceptance of prostitution as part of the same package. But our sociological consciousness has not been sufficiently raised to perform an analogous task with the medieval ›minne‹ concept. Incidentally, such a reevaluation might show that the poems of Neidhart are not so much a new departure and even less a debasement of the currency of chivalry but perhaps simply a different way of placing the chips.

Or, to take a problem from the 18th century: why does Schiller, who in some ways was as suspicious of women as agents as Nietzsche was, choose them as heroes for his tragedies? It was not an obvious thing to do, and it would be worthwhile to put together the various pronouncements on women in his work and try to make sense of the inconsistencies. Yet again, what about the sudden interest in matriarchy and related societal models which crops up in the 19th century, not only in Bachofen but in Kleist's *Penthesilea*, Grillparzer's *Libussa*, and Stifter's *Brigitta*, an admittedly unorthodox constellation of works which may yield interesting results? These are not problems where it helps to have an axe to grind: they are distinctly non-axe-grinding questions. They call for some courage but mostly for an ability to make literary, sociological, and psychological distinctions.

On the other hand, if you want to be aggressive, there is work to be done in contemporary literature. I suggest that one of our younger colleagues (since they tend to be better axe grinders than we who were brought up in the co-opting fifties and earlier) write an article entitled ›The Machismo of Günter Grass‹, which should be easy, obvious, and publishable and should

deal with the pathetic chicks which this eminent contemporary habitually inflicts on his readers, and which are nothing but Biedermeier stereotypes under a patina of pornography. And why not tackle one of our more recent sacred cows, Brecht's portrayal of women? While it is not unjust to admire the vividness of his female characters and the sympathy which he often shows for them, it would also do no harm to point out that Brecht began his career with the familiar and pernicious position that rapists and sadists have irresistible sex appeal (*Dreigroschenoper*, *Baal*) and that in his later work he showed women almost exclusively as creatures with a golden heart and little rationality (Kattrin in *Mutter Courage*, Grusche in *Kreidekreis*), which is incidentally precisely the combination of qualities that causes the Young Comrade to be sentenced to death in *Die Maßnahme*. In other words, the woman's perspective can be a way of breaking away from a criticism dominated by ›Nachvollziehen‹, that ultimate consent which a reader may, but which a critic should not completely give to his author.

Finally, I should like to return once more to the Jewish analogy. I have a hunch, which does not quite amount to a theory, that Jewish characters in German postwar fiction and drama are treated with the same condescension as women. Jews are often shown as passive and pathetic victims with no sense of their past and future and only a confused, if any, capacity for grief and anger. Such characters can be found in the work of Zuckmayer, Grass, Walser, Hochhuth (all of them quite well-meaning, I am sure) and the same works show a related lack of purpose and reduction of the humanity of the woman characters. I think it would be very useful to work out such a connection, if I am indeed correct and it exists. For it would tend to show that different prejudices against different groups of human beings are after all made of the same cloth.

If feminist criticism will address itself to genuinely and generally interesting questions, it will soon cease to be peripheral. A ›woman's

perspective¹ will then become one of the Germanist's indispensable tools, whether that Germanist be male or female.

Notes

- 1 Cf. Jeffrey L. Sammons: Some Considerations on Our Invisibility. In: German Studies in the United States. Assessment and Outlook. Eds. Walter P. W. Lohnes and Valters Nollendorfs. Madison 1976, 17-23.
- 2 Wolfgang Kayser: Kleine deutsche Versschule. 9th ed. Bern 1962, 23.
- 3 Ernst Alker: Die deutsche Literatur im 19. Jahrhundert (1832-1914). 2nd ed. Stuttgart 1962, 386.

Interrogation in Wolfram's *Parzival*

The story of *Parzival* hinges on a question. Usually a question is no more than a grammatical form or a rhetorical device, but in *Parzival* it is also a central motif. It has been said that in Wolfram's treatment of the story, the ›Erlösungsfrage‹ is merely a mechanism that should not be overrated.^[1] However, the mechanisms of poetry are not a matter of indifference to the poet, particularly when form and content reflect on one another, as they do here, where the course of events is dependent on a question asked or left unasked. This article proposes to examine the manner in which the ›mechanism‹ of the interrogatory form is used by Wolfram von Eschenbach to support, illuminate, and punctuate ›the question of *Parzival*‹.

We may profitably distinguish between the questions which are asked by the characters of the poem and those which Wolfram asks as narrator. The questions of the characters serve first of all to promote the action, and thus they have a definite function within the plot. The narrator's questions, on the other hand, are purely stylistic devices. When a character asks a question, he does so to receive an answer that will modify his opinions or actions, but the narrator asks to produce certain responses in his audience. In other words, he asks rhetorically.

Wolfram uses rhetorical questions extensively and variously. On the simplest level, such a question will place an emphasis and draw the reader's attention to a given point. The poet dramatizes a fact by asking about it and promptly supplying the answer. For example, he is about to introduce a luxurious sleeping chamber. Instead of writing, ›the candles were no mere

tallow butts«, he lingers and says: »ob sîne kerzen wæren schoup? / nein, sie wâren bezzer gar.« (191, 18-19)[2]

Or he creates a little pause of suspense before mentioning the name of a person whose importance for the narrative he wishes to adumbrate:

diu in sô nâhen sitzen liez,
welt ir nû hoeren wie sie hiez?
diu kûnegîn Herzeloide. (84, 7-9.)

This device would seem too simple to allow for unusual variations, but with his characteristic flair for the unexpected, Wolfram once expands it into a full-fledged dialogue. At the beginning of Book IX the poet and »vrou Âventiure« (433, 7) are engaged in a rapid exchange of question upon question, concerning the further destiny of their common hero. The answer to their questions is of course given in the story that follows, and hence the introduction serves to underscore the whole of Book IX in precisely the fashion in which the single questions quoted above serve to underscore the single statements that answer them.

A more complex device is the rhetorical question to which the answer is assumed to be self-evident. Such questions are often of a moral nature, and the required response is one of approval or censure. It is characteristic of Wolfram's style that he frequently turns the sharp point of this type of question against himself. In other words, he invites the reader to judge the author. Two examples will illustrate this. Wolfram has spoken briefly and metaphorically of a merry dancing girl in connection with the mourning Sigune. He then criticizes his own metaphor:

wes mizze ich vreude gein der nôt,
als Sigûnen ir triuwe gebôt?

daz möhte ich gerne lâzen. (436, 22-24)

A similar interplay between statement and criticism ensues after Trevrizent's grave offer of hospitality. The hermit says: »neve, disiu spîse / Sol dir niht versmâhen.« (486, 22-23)

Parzival does not in the least despise the food offered him – but his author does, or pretends to. Unleashing one of his ›flying metaphors‹ (cf. 1, 15) as he calls them in the prologue, and one that actually involves a hungry falcon, Wolfram mercilessly mocks the hermit's poverty, but ends by turning against his own mockery with the words: »wes spotte ich der getriuwen diet? / mîn alt unvuoge mir daz riet.« (487, 11-12)

In thus questioning his own mind and mode of expression, Wolfram interrupts his narrative of past events and superimposes the narrator's time upon the narrated time, so that he seems to carry on the business of composition in front of his audience. Present time intrudes on past time as the dissatisfied author pretends to make and mend his tale in public. Not only does such use of the rhetorical question increase the aesthetic awareness of the reader, but in the two instances selected above it also increases his awareness of a basic theme of the poem, that of sympathy; for Wolfram has planted, asked, and answered the ›Mitleidsfragen‹ in his own person.

Wolfram's rhetorical questions are part of the running comment with which he accompanies his story. As we proceed to look at the questions asked by Wolfram's characters within the poem, it will become increasingly apparent that the attitudes which produce questions in *Parzival* are closely connected with the concept of *zwîvel*, and that they range from questions asked out of curiosity to those asked from sympathy to those asked out of despair. Questions may arise out of the ignorance of the intellect or they may come from the uncertainty of the soul. To define *zwîvel* narrowly as

desperatio, as is often done in Wolfram scholarship, and to allow no meaning other than the theological, is to overlook the dense texture of the poem and to take away much of its richness. Doubt and despair are close neighbors not only to the heart (to quote the prologue), but also to each other within the varied and flexible pattern of the poem. Wolfram shows us gradations and nuances of *zwîvel*, a whole hierarchy of uncertainty, ranging from questions of etiquette to questions on the beneficence of God.

As regards medieval usage of the word *zwîvel*, there is much leeway. Lexer's dictionary lists under ›zwîvel‹ a group of words that reads like a list of ›Stichwörter‹ to *Parzival*: »ungewißheit, besorglichkeit, mißtrauen, unsicherheit, hin- und herschwanken, wankelmut, unbeständigkeit, untreue, verzweiflung«^[3]. A translator is forced to choose one or the other, but the critical reader will keep them all in mind, not as a list, but as a spectrum of meaning. For a truly poetical use of language will explore the fullest possibilities of a word. »One may know what has been put into the pot«, says William Empson with reference to individual words and their context within the language, »and recognize the objects in the stew, but the juice in which they are sustained must be regarded with a peculiar respect«.^[4] The juice of *zwîvel*, i. e., the element which the words given by Lexer share, may be tentatively defined as ›the questioning attitude‹, the state of mind in which questions, ranging from the trivial to the sublime, will be asked. A good example of the former is the volley of questions which Belacane asks herself when she wonders how to receive her hero Gahmuret. Should she go down, should he come up? Is he her equal? Is it proper to kiss him?

wir hân doch vride al disen tac:
dâ von der helt wol rîten mac
her ûf ze mir oder sol ich dar?
[...]

geruochet er mir nâhen,
wie sol ich in empfâhen?
ist er mir dar zuo wol geborn,
das mîn kus niht sî verlorn? (22, 5-7; 12-15)

When Gahmuret informs his recently widowed mother that he is about to depart, she responds in a rhythm and style that are similar to Belacane's, that is, she, too, expresses her discomfort by a series of rapid questions. But hers are deadly serious, the second one even blasphemous:

fil li roi Gandin,
wiltû niht langer bî mir sîn?
[...]
ist got an sîner helfe blint
oder ist er dran betoubet,
daz er mir niht geloubet?
sol ich nû niuwen kumber haben? (10, 15-16.; 20-23)

Here the accumulation of questions is expressive of that mixture of human grief and metaphysical uncertainty which is Parzival's affliction, but, as can be seen, not only Parzival's.

Parzival is, of course, the most important questioner in the poem. He is the hero who fails to ask a question at the right time; and yet Parzival »der tumbe« (155, 19), in his state of inexperience if not innocence, is an indefatigable questioner. Still half a child he asks as children ask, with forthright, direct curiosity, with a keen sense of wonder and no sense of tact. Like all children he believes that his elders have all the answers, for no Trevrizent has yet told him that no man »has stood in the counsel of the Lord« (cf. 797, 22). Since he knows nothing, all knowledge seems perfect,

all answers complete to him. He trusts the evidence of his senses and asks questions to learn facts, not truth, to elicit information, not to gain insight. And yet his three questions span the world.

The first of these is about animate but soulless creation and the causes of physical suffering; the second deals with the nature of God; the third asks about man as a social being. In each case Parzival asks more than he realizes, i. e., the poet takes the question beyond the character into whose mouth he has put it. The simpleton becomes God's fool. Let us now examine these three questions.

The first is a ›Mitleidsfrage‹: »Waz wîzet man den vogelîn?« (119, 10) Its wording is analogous to the Grail question: »›oeheim, waz wirret dir?‹« (795, 29) In both instances, the question does not evoke an answer but produces an effect instead. In the first case, Herzelayde changes her mind about the planned extermination of the birds, and the surviving ones are saved; in the second case, Anfortas is cured and joy returns to the company of the Grail. The first question is asked in utter ignorance, the last in full consciousness; the first concerns itself with the lowest level of suffering creation (animals), the last with the highest; the first question is spontaneous, the last deliberate; the first is not only prompted by nature but asked within the natural setting of a forest, whereas the last is not so much asked as it is staged, performed, and acted out like a ritual, in a castle where knighthood and sainthood meet. Parzival »der tumbe« (155, 19) does not recognize the ramifications of what he sees and asks, he does not know that the birds are a »bispel« (1, 15), like the whole visible world. He sees only the isolated fact, not its place in the moral order.

As an unexpected result of his first question, Parzival hears for the first time the name of God. He proceeds to ask his second question: »›ouwê muoter, waz ist got?‹« (119, 17) Again, for Parzival the question is concrete and specific, yet with its strangely placed »ouwê« the wording echoes

Bernhard de Clairvaux' »Vae, quid est Deus?«^[5] As a deaf person speaks words which he himself cannot hear, so the child Parzival addresses the initiated with a theological depth beyond the reach of his own ignorant and innocent mind.

More complex still are the reverberations behind the third question. Parzival has mistaken the first knights he sees for gods and has been informed of his error. He asks:

dû nennst ritter: was ist daz?
hâstû niht gotlîcher kraft,
sô sâge mir, wer gît ritterschaft? (123, 4-6)

What Parzival actually means to ask is, »If you do not have God's kind of power, then tell me: who bestows knighthood?«^[6] But the passage can also be read as a rhetorical question with a hortatory impact, thus: »If your physical and mental abilities (using kraft in the most comprehensive sense of that word) are not gotlîch, that is, derived from God, then how can you be a knight? Who else but God gives knighthood?« The fool's question probes man's dependence on God, while at the same time the specific and superficial question receives a specific and superficial answer: »daz tuot der kûnec Artûs.« (123, 7)

The answer is satisfactory, as far as it goes, but it does not go very far. It will lead Parzival to Arthur's court, but it falls short even of his own specific future, for as a Grail knight he ultimately does not serve King Arthur.

Indifference, then, is not one of Parzival's initial failings. He is both intensely curious and capable of outbursts of sympathy. Wolfram carefully omitted or modified those scenes from Chrétien that show Perceval to be callous, notably Herzeloyde's death within sight of her son.^[7] Wolfram's

intention was clearly to create a hero who is kind and sympathetic to start out with, not one who has to learn compassion. His pity and his curiosity blend in a striking fashion in the questions with which he showers Sigune at their first meeting: Who gave you the knight? Who killed him? Was it done with a javelot? Tell me who did it and I will fight him (138, 28 ff.). As usual, he cannot distinguish between the relevant and the irrelevant, but nevertheless Sigune becomes attentive, for such sympathy denotes a noble soul and lineage: »dû bist geboren von triuwen, / daz es dich sus kan riuwen.« (140, 1 f.)

She recognizes him because of his concern, and Parzival learns his own name in answer to his sympathy question, as he has once before, in answer to another sympathy question, heard the name of God. This pattern is peculiar and worth pausing over. The question is not directly related to the answer, and yet the one provokes the other. Similarly, a man who prays may be saved, though his salvation will not be ›caused‹ by his prayer, but by the grace of God. This happens to Parzival himself. There is a definite relationship between his challenge to God on Good Friday and his successful return to the Grail castle, but the relationship is not, strictly speaking, a causal one. Similarly, Parzival's final question provokes in some manner the cure of Anfortas, yet that cure is of no man's making. Nor, to Parzival's first meeting with Sigune, is Parzival's name of his own making. The spontaneous nicknames of love and affection are »bon fîz, scher fîz, bêâ fiz« (140, 6), as his mother called him, endearments that bestow no identity, while his true name and true lineage are not things of the moment nor caused by spontaneous acts of goodness.

But if Parzival is gifted with both curiosity and sympathy, why does he fail to ask the crucial question at the Grail castle? At their second meeting, Sigune is quick to point out that either motive would have been sufficient.

ir sâhet doch solh wunder grôz
(daz iuch vrâgens dô verdrôz
aldâ ir wâret dem grâle bî!) (255, 5-7)
[curiosity, R. K.]
iuch solde iuwer wirt erbarmet hân,
an dem got wunder hât getân,
und hetet gevrâget sîner nôt. (255, 17-19)
[sympathy, R. K.]

What has happened between the first and this second meeting with Sigune?
She tells him in unequivocal terms that he has been corrupted and poisoned:

ir truoget eiterwolves zan,
dâ diu galle in der triuwe
an iu bekleip sô niuwe. (255, 14-16)

Yet Parzival has not been exposed to positive evil; what he has been exposed to and what has poisoned him are the answers to his questions, the removal of doubt, a set of rules and certainties. It now appears that there is a kind of *zwîvel*, in the sense of uncertainty, that leads to blessedness, and a kind of certainty that leads to *zwîvel* in the sense of despair. To Parzival all rules are equally valid and important, whether they be, »wash your face and hands when you take off your armor« (172, 1-2) or, »man and wife are as one« (173, 1). He does not distinguish between a matter of etiquette and a sacrament. He has become the tin mirror of the prologue, indiscriminately reflecting whatever he chances to meet. He takes the half-truths of this world for full truths, as he takes King Arthur for an ultimate arbiter and the courtly aspects of knighthood for the essence of life. In this state of mind, when he has ceased to ask questions and has come to accept answers, he

deprives Jeschute of domestic peace, kills his relative Ither, and betrays the hopes of Anfortas, all in the spirit of the righteous who follow a certified code of behavior.

In Book IX, the turning point of his career, Parzival learns to ask questions again. The interrogatory form dominates this book to such an obvious extent that the point hardly needs illustrating. It prevails in all encounters, that of the poet and »vrou Âventiure« (433, 7), of Parzival and Sigune, Parzival and the pilgrims, Parzival and Trevrizent. This exchange of questions and answers produces the effect of a community of worshipers in the making, particularly since the three main characters, Parzival, Sigune, and Trevrizent, live in different types of spiritual and physical isolation. The isolation is bridged in an atmosphere of grief and coldness on a snowy Good Friday. Out of this human interchange comes Parzival's defiance of God which turns into a prayer. For our purposes it is important that the prayer contains a question, and not accidentally, for it is in fact the spirit of the question that makes it a prayer: »waz ob got helfe phliget, / diu mînem trûren ane gesiget?« (451, 13-14)

It is certainly an unrehearsed prayer and a rather wild one, as it continues to question God's justice and omnipotence. The spirit of isolation in which it is spoken is underscored by the meeting with the family of pilgrims that precedes it. But a prayer it is, and for the first time Parzival, or anyone else in the poem, for that matter, turns to God for help: »alrêst er dô gedâhte, / wer al die werlt volbrâhte.« (451, 9-10)

As an indirect answer to his prayer, Parzival now meets Trevrizent and gains his second chance at Munsalvaesche.

What Parzival has to do there is unlike anything he has done before, for he has to ask a question to which he knows the answer. »Das Gewicht, das die Dichtung dieser Frage zumißt, ist modernem Empfinden lästig«, writes Helmut de Boor. »Denn es ist ja alles schon entschieden.« De Boor explains

the question as »Märchenbestandteil«, which Wolfram retained because his medieval audience would have insisted on an exact repetition of form and formula. »In Märchen und Magie führt nur das genau vorbestimmte Verhalten zum vorbestimmten Erfolg. [...] Die Form, und zwar die hier nötige Form, daß die Frage gerade so gestellt werden soll, muß tatsächlich erfüllt sein [...] ehe für das mittelalterliche Empfinden alles in Ordnung ist.«^[8]

What this interpretation overlooks is that Parzival does not ask the exact question he has been told to ask. The words he learns from Trevrizent are, »herre, wie stêt iuwer nôt?« (484, 27), for which he substitutes, »oeheim, waz wirret dir?« (795, 28). The meaning is, of course, the same and if the question were a spontaneous ›Mitleidsfrage‹ or simply asked to elicit information, the precise wording would make no difference. But if it is to function as a magic formula, we may indeed ask why Parzival does not repeat it literally. Any fairy tale will attest that deviations from the ›open Sesame‹ of the given formula have no power whatever. If, then, the question will not qualify either as a sympathy question or as a magic formula, what precisely is it?

First of all, the objection that the ›Erlösungsfrage‹ is cumbersome because it is not the decisive element in an outcome that is already determined, is not relevant for a poem. We do not object to a refrain in a poem on the grounds that after the first time we know what it says. The question in Book XVI is the formal apex to the elaborate structure of questions which I have tried to sketch. It is the question that transcends all the questions that have led up to it, and, literally, it is the question to end all questions, for after it has been asked the Grail knights will forever after discourage all further inquiries (cf. 818, 24-819, 8). De Boor suggests that the mere knowledge of Parzival's maturity would satisfy the modern reader,

which means presumably that a discourse on Parzival's ripeness would be an improvement over the description of the final ritual.

The ritual surrounding that last question is Christian, not pagan, whatever its remote source, and this brings us to the heart of the matter. Parzival has to ask the question to which he knows the answer, just as a Christian must observe Good Friday as a day of mourning, although he knows of the resurrection and looks forward to Easter. Wolfram is describing a miracle, not a magic trick, as is amply clear from the context of Christian references in which he embeds it. The question must be asked because it embodies man's readiness for God's grace, not because the words themselves have inherent power, as they do in primitive rites. In asking, Parzival performs the ritual, but by varying the question he shows that he has finally learned not to follow the letter but the spirit. He acts out a sacrament in front of and for the sake of a crowd of people whose king he will be, and at the same time he subtly makes the question his own, his personal question. For by calling Anfortas »oeheim« instead of »herre«, as Trevrizent advised, and by addressing him in the familiar form, he shows his knowledge of his descent and implicitly claims his place in the company of the Grail knights. He makes the question shorter and more intimate and brings it in its wording closer to that first question that destroyed his Garden of Eden. Thus his pilgrimage ends exactly above the point where it began, a repetition, in near-celestial surroundings, of the first awareness of terrestrial suffering.

The redeeming question, however, could only be asked once the answer was known, that is, when it had ceased to be a functional question and had become a symbolic one. In order to ask rightly man has to have a knowledge that he can only acquire by asking rightly: this is the central paradox around which the questions of *Parzival* cluster.