

The Problematic Nature of Periodization and the Alleged Paradigm Shifts: Courtly Love Poetry (*Minnesang*), Petrarch's Sonnets, Goethe's Erotic Compositions, and Brecht's Dreams of Love

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Abstract

This study raises the scepter regarding the heuristic value of literary periodization and hence also of the concept of the paradigm shift. Undoubtedly, throughout time, changes in the cultural epochs took place, and we can easily determine larger cultural, material, technical, political, and religious transformations. Hence the genre of literary histories that inform us in a concise and authoritative manner about that phenomenon. By the same token, however, we might be forced to realize that many of those changes taking place from period to period affected more the form and the text-external references and less the idealistic concern by

the individual poets. To illustrate this phenomenon, here I trace a long-term discourse on love from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century to identify a fundamental trope that resisted all paradigm shifts and proved to have a universal staying power beyond all measures. Although value systems and social-economic conditions underwent profound changes from the past to the present, the human dimension itself was apparently quite resistant to those transitions, as the topic of love confirms from the earliest time until today.

Keywords: Literary periods, paradigm shifts, courtly love, *minnesang*, Petrarch, Goethe, Brecht, erotic poetry

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Introduction

Since we live in the post-modern world, surrounded by computers and robots, dominated by a deterministic world without much individual freedom left in our personal lives, one of the tragic consequences has been the loss of the love for poetry, at least among the majority of people in the West, so it seems. The paradigm shift that has rung in the twenty-first century, or rather already several decades before that date with the invention of the computer and then the internet, has apparently drowned out the quiet poetic voices and has accelerated our lives so much that the necessary pause to listen to a poem no longer seems to exist. Of course, poetry continues to be written, and in some corners of this world it proves to be very important until today. But the current younger generation apparently displays very little interest in or even knowledge of poetry, abandoning thereby almost two thousand five hundred years of profound endeavors with this literary genre. Many of the greatest poets have become forgotten, whether we think of the twelfth-century *troubadours* (along with the *trouvère* poets and the *troubairitz*), their contemporary *Minnesängers*, Francesco Petrarch, William Shakespeare, Johann Wolfgang Goethe, the wonderfully quixotic Emily Dickinson, or even the socialist/communist playwright and poet, Bertolt Brecht.

However, we might be deceived by the situation in our classrooms and in public spaces and could be victims of our self-deception regarding literary expressions or their non-existence. People continue to listen

to music, whatever genre or type it might be, and many of the modern songs consist of a combination of words and melodies, so poetry continues to occupy people's hearts and souls, but perhaps in a different mode than traditional scholarship has assumed. Only recently, the Noble Prize in Literature for 2016 even went to Bob Dylan in recognition of his profound lyrics, recognizing him "for having created new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition" (<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2016/summary/>) (cf. the contributions to Honneth, Kemper, and Richard Klein, ed., 2007; Marcus 2022).

One of the problems in our critical assessment of this issue might be the firm belief in the impact of or role played by paradigm shifts, which then lead over to the creation of literary histories that could be rather deceiving in giving us a comforting sense of historical order and philosophical concepts (I have discussed this issue already in depth in Classen 2011). Living in a new world today seems to imply that anything that came before us has little to no value because all of our epistemological references have been revolutionized, replaced, if not dismissed in favor of newer ones more appropriate for the twenty-first century.

Hence, assuming that everything has changed in post-modernity divorcing us from all previous cultural periods and products, we could easily throw up our hands and give up on our efforts to understand anything related to our own history, older literature, the arts, or music. In particular, the Middle Ages,

above all, seem to fall by the wayside and could be dismissed as irrelevant (for global introduction to medieval history, see Arnold 2021; see also the contributions to Jones, Kostick, and Oschema, ed., 2020, all arguing in favor of the relevance of the pre-modern era).

By trying to reassert the relevance of history at large, we would, unfortunately, mostly preach to the converted and would not convince the decision makers in our society who prefer quantitative markers over qualitative ones and tend to argue that the value of higher education rests in the direct correlation between graduation and finding a job. Those decision makers might agree that the Humanities carry some weight within the university at large, but they would still prefer to fund STEM and Medicine over Literature or the Arts (Birnbaum 2000). One of the reasons for this powerful but misdirected perception might be the misunderstanding of the notions of historical periods, and hence the concept of paradigm shifts. For instance, as Thomas Kuhn had already explained (1962), once scientists had provided sufficient evidence for the superiority of the heliocentric worldview, all previous efforts to prove the validity of the geocentric worldview were null and void. By analogy, so the argument goes, once the cultural framework of the Baroque, for instance, had been supplanted by that of the Enlightenment, there was no longer any need to study Baroque poetry. Since the ideas had changed, people simply looked forward and so ignored or forgot everything that had happened before them. Hence, since we live in the 21st century, why would we need to study any literary text or art work, not to talk about philosophical treatise, from previous periods?

Undoubtedly, every generation of scholars, students, their parents, and ultimately of policy makers has raised the same concerns since higher education costs

money, and for that reason we always have to look for justifications and legitimizations (Drees 2021; Classen 2022). Throughout time, philosophers, but then also mathematicians, sociologists, psychologists, or theologians have faced similar challenges, and the answers provided are a true myriad (McLuskie 2015). My purpose here, however, is not to revisit the large issue of why to embrace the Humanities, or why to study older literature, for which there exist so many excellent answers, whether they have convinced those in higher-up administrative positions or not (Sadlek 2022; Tracy 2022). I could refer, for instance, to the recent contributions to a volume edited by Alain-Philippe Durand and Christine Henseler about the value of the Humanities also, if not particularly, within the corporate world and the economy at large (Durand and Henseler, ed., 2023). As the online summary highlights:

Across all levels of education, students are given the message that to change the world – or make money – the arts and humanities are not the subjects to study. At the same time, discussions of innovation and entrepreneurship highlight the importance of essential skills, such as critical thinking, storytelling, cultural awareness, and ethical decision-making. Here's the disconnect: the subjects that help to develop these vital skills are derided at critical points in any aspiring entrepreneur's education. This collection of perspectives from entrepreneurs in a range of fields and humanities educators illustrates what individuals, and the wider world, are missing when humanities are overlooked as a source of inspiration and success in business"

(<https://www.routledge.com/The-Entrepreneurial-Humanities-The->

Crucial-Role-of-the-Humanities-in-Enterprise/Durand-Henseler/p/book/9781032462264#).

Or I could comment on the critical importance of the Humanities in the field of medicine where, as we understand it much better today, the human touch, the personal care, the aesthetic dimension, all of which contained within the literary discourse, might matter even more than, or at least as much as, the best medication in the healing process (see, e.g., Charon 2006; Bleakley, ed. 2020; Canalis, Ciavolella, Finucci, ed., 2023).

Instead of Periods, Literary Themes: Love

To proceed differently than most other scholars in that field, I want to brush aside some of the concepts of periodization in literary history and thus also undermine the concept of the paradigm shift and focus on some of the universal themes addressed by love poets throughout time. This also promises to offer new ammunition in the defense of literature as an academic discipline, and of the Humanities at large. At the risk of being a-historical and of blinding ourselves to fundamental stages in cultural-historical terms, we can certainly accept the notion that love has been one of the fundamental topics discussed throughout the age and across the world, irrespective of countless different social, economic, or religious conditions within the external sphere (the court, the private reading room, the learned space, etc.).

Although we know fairly well about the formal and linguistic changes in the process of formatting a poem or in the formulation of feelings about love from, say, the twelfth to the twenty-first century, the fundamental experience of love seems to have been very much the same throughout time, that is, the desire for the beloved person, the hope for getting together, the fear

of the outside dangers for the couple, and the passion itself when the lovers are together. If anything matters in human life, then it can only be love, apart from the quest for God, the challenges of death, and the search for meaning and happiness in one's life.

Oddly, the early Middle Ages seem to have ignored, forgotten, or denied love and its value, as far as the literary testimonies confirm. The Greeks and the Romans, among other peoples, knew very much of love, but it resurfaced as a major theme in the West only by the early twelfth century, perhaps based on the refocus on the Virgin Mary within the religious sphere or perhaps because of the contacts by European crusaders and others with their Muslim opponents in the Holy Land or in Egypt. Those in turn had been continuously familiar with classical Greek and Roman literature through translations and might have been in a opportune position to influence their Christian contemporaries, first in al-Andalus, then in northern Spain, from there in southern France (Provence), and then in the Holy Roman Empire. All that, however, still belongs to the sphere of literary-historical speculations (for an excellent in-depth discussion, see Sayce 1982).

Whatever might have triggered this major transformation, if not paradigm shift, it was there to stay and has never disappeared again throughout the ages. Subsequently, I intend to analyze, in a admittedly rather simplistic but maybe also deeply meaningful way, the emergence of this theme and its evolution irrespective of all cultural periods, and this until today. For instance, the treatment of love in any of the almost countless versions of the romances dealing with Tristan (Tristrant, etc.) and Isolde (Yseut) has been one of the mainstays of literary history, although the popularity of this text faded away by the mid-sixteenth century and resurfaced only by the end of the eighteenth century (Stein 2001; Dallapiazza,

ed., 2003).

Love pangs, love sickness, longing, erotic enjoyment and fulfillment, marriage, and sexuality are some of the major elements that have been addressed by poets throughout time, each regularly pursuing, of course, a different angle, employing innovative expressions, images, and words. Nevertheless, in the ultimate analysis, love poetry has always served the same purpose, to formulate erotic desires and emotions. Intriguingly, when a culture was faced with different problems, such as famine, external threats of an existential kind, religious concerns, or weather-related dangers, the interest in the erotic either faded away or disappeared altogether, such as in the period between the fall of the Western Roman Empire in 476 and the rise of courtly culture in the early twelfth century, with Duke William IX being virtually the first to bring back to public attention the issue of erotic love as a critically important topic for the courtly discourse (see the contributions to Akehurst and Davis, ed. 1995; Classen 2015). Ever since, poets throughout Europe – and of course in other continents as well – have sung about love, and we can easily detect a significant thematic concatenation throughout the centuries, irrespective of the cultural-historical frameworks.

Undoubtedly, of course, society's attitude toward marriage and sexuality has constantly evolved, and the religious superstructure has had a huge impact on the poetic response to those feelings. In short, there are no surprises regarding the growing concern with marriage as the only legitimate conduit for the pursuit of love since the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (Cartlidge 1997; Classen 2005; Avray 2005; for the early modern era, see Karant-Nunn 2022). Nevertheless, despite the new emphasis on marriage, the erotic love song continued to hold sway, and this continuity both conceptually and pragmatically undermines

the entire notion of the literary history and hence of the paradigm shift.

As Ernst Robert Curtius defined this phenomenon, “Great in this sense is the poetry which survives through centuries and millenniums. It is such poetry which is the farthest horizon, the background, of the complex of European literature” (1948/1990, 9). Tropes and topoi have been handed down from generation to generation, and the need to come to terms with the ultimate intangibles that determine all human life has never dissipated. Hence, talking about paradigm shifts in the context of literary history would work only if and when we take the philosophical, social, economic, and political conditions behind the material conditions into consideration. Would, however, those shifts pertaining to the sciences, historical events, economic frameworks, or religions have any real impact on the theme of love?

Middle High German *Minnesang*

Experts have already discussed the literary phenomenon of *minnesang*, courtly love poetry from the second half of the twelfth century to maybe the late fifteenth century, stretching the possible historical dimension almost to the breaking point (see, for instance, Schweikle 1994; the contributions to Köbele, Locher, Möckli, and Oetjens, ed., 2019; Rüthemann 2022). A vast number of those songs were recorded (without the melodies) in the Manesse Codex from ca. 1310-1330 (Zürich), which contains the texts and wonderful frontispieces (Voetz 2015), both of which invite the audience to engage with the dazzling display and to accept both words and images as a medium for courtly discourse (Dechant 2023).

Already early *troubadour* poetry had offered powerful concepts of love which were to transpire throughout the following centuries. But we must not forget that the entire twelfth century was really the age of Ovidian poetry, hence the strong reception

and revival of the poetry by the Roman poet Ovid (43 B.C.E.-17/18 C.E.) (Clark, Coulson, and McKinley ed., 2011). Monastic cultures had strongly promoted the cultivation of classical Latin poetry, even that with erotic contents, as mirrored in the so-called *Cambridge Songs* and the *Carmina Burana*, mostly for pedagogical purposes to teach Latin and to educate the young people about the great classical tradition. Simultaneously, a theoretician such as Andreas Capellanus (ca. 1180-1190) had already composed a highly complex, if not contradictory guide book about how to achieve love, *De amore* (Monson 2005). Altogether, we can claim that the discourse on love, which might have been slowed down or somewhat lost during the post-Roman period, experienced a tremendous revival since the twelfth century. The Middle High German *minnesang* is a vivid example of that phenomenon (Moser and Tervooren, ed. 1988).

The point of this study cannot be to examine a large body of various text in great detail. Instead, the focus will rest on demonstrating that neither the concept of literary history nor the model of the paradigm shift truly contribute to a good understanding of the universal experience expressed in many of those verses. One of the earliest examples of *minnesang*, stunning in its simplicity and beauty at the same time, confirming the universal properties of love poetry, proves to be the anonymous stanza “Dû bist mîn, ich bin dîn” (You are mine, I am yours):

Dû bist mîn, ich bin dîn	You are mine, I am yours
des solt du gewis sîn,	be assured of that,
dû bist beslozen	you are locked
in mînem herzen,	in my heart,
verlorn ist das sluzzelîn,	the little key is lost

dû muost ouch immer	you must always
darinne sîn.	stay in it. (My trans.)

Without any doubt, this stanza could have been composed at any time; it speaks intimately to us today, and it is most powerful through its plain language and imagery. The speaker, either male or female, asserts him/herself as firmly bonded to the other as they are both locked in their hearts, to which the key has been lost, meaning that they are not going to leave that highly symbolic location in the human body. Time and space serve as critical markers of the stable love relationship. Since we do not know the speaker’s gender, and since the narrative voice places both people on the same level, both being driven by love for the other, we recognize a profound level of equality in terms of feeling for each other. And the reference to the heart as a ‘cell’ for both underscores even further the intimacy of their relationship. Of course, there is somewhat a sense that the one whose heart has captured the other, perhaps as a result of force. However, at closer analysis, there is no one-sidedness since both persons are completely committed to each other, as the use of the two personal pronouns in the first line clearly signals. We are not told why the key to the heart is lost, but the symbolism conveyed could not be more impressive.

By contrast, there is no sense of unfulfilled longing, or unrequited love; there are no indications of social implications, limitations, or barriers, and we do not learn anything about any people outside of that relationship, that is, of the social context. The stanza has nothing to say about marriage, sexuality, or responsibilities; there is no fear about losing the other; there are no threats from the outside, no concerns as to challenges or dangers. Instead, in its truly plain appearance, this stanza proves to be timeless both with respect to the love experienced in the heart and to the intimate

experience revealed therein.

This stanza could easily serve as a motto or epigram, as a love letter or confessional statement. Certainly, we know virtually nothing about this love affair, except that the two have found each other and are not going to leave since the key to the door of the heart has been lost. Nevertheless, the poetic voice unequivocally states that these verses refer to a happy love couple that has found each other and will not get separated again. As the narrator comments, this relationship is completely independent from the social environment, being focused on the pure emotions. Again, in negative terms, there are no references to the age or social status of the two, to their external commitment, or to their family conditions. The less we know, in fact, whether one of them is married, or whether s/he is still at a young age, or not, the more the poem is free to concentrate on their bonding in the heart, beyond which no further words are necessary. In many ways, then, here we encounter a supremely well-developed stanza about love in its purest form (Kühnel 1977; for textual comments, see also <https://www.staff.uni-mainz.de/pommeren/Gedichte/dubistmin.html>).

The stanza was penned down at the end of a love letter contained in the Tegernseer collection of correspondences in Latin by a courtly lady or a nun (Codex latinus Monacensis 19411), fol. 114v, sometime at the end of the twelfth century. The first line could have been derived from the *Song of Songs*, 2:16, so it would be a kind of quote from the biblical text (<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Song%20of%20Songs%202&version=NIV>), which could indicate that the entire collection was composed by a learned person, such as a nun, in contradiction to her vow of celibacy (for unique pedagogical perspectives, see Šlibar 2009). We might be able to argue that the very fact that this stanza

appears in such poetic isolation, disregarding the letter, supports the claim that this poem belongs to the global discourse on love from antiquity to the present. Although certainly a medieval stanza, the idea expressed here and the imagery used support us in arguing that the theme of love is far beyond any periodical categories.

Consistently, even though mostly confounding the human mind, the *minnesänger* (pl.) reflect on the impact of love on their body and mind, repeatedly lamenting their personal suffering as a result of their experience of love. But it is a very playful enterprise, with each poet experimenting with different approaches, probing various angles in the love relationship, moving from happiness to sorrow, and at times poets even engage with intratextual strategies (Kellner 2018), so when Bernger von Horheim emphasizes that he loves more ardently and passionately his lady than Tristan and Isolde did after they had drunk their love potion (XVI, I, “Nu enbeiz ich doch des trankes nie,” p. 224, ed. Moser and Terhooven). Then, however, he turns to the usual lamenting because of his unfulfilled love, a main topic of courtly love singers in whatever language. Bernger’s example is his song “Mir ist von liebe vil leide geschehen” (XVI, III, p. 226-27; I have experienced much sorrow through love). Hartwig von Rute highlights the loss of personal freedom due to his feelings of love (XVII, II, “Ich bin gebunden,” p. 231-32). Heinrich von Morungen, by contrast, invests in a glorious praise of his lady who is the most virtuous and most beautiful woman (XIX, I, “Si ist ze allen êren,” p. 236-37). But the love discourse, whether determined by happiness or sorrow, ultimately thrived on itself and was predicated on the essential idea that love served as the catalyst for poetry itself, as Heinrich von Morungen also formulated (XIX, II, “Mîn liebste und ouch mîn êre,” pp. 238-40), similar to many other poets of

his time. The experience of love entails the experience of happiness, so poetry translates ultimately the erotic experience into an aesthetic process, as Heinrich reflects in his “Ich hörte ûf der heide” (XIX, XXIII, p. 268-69). As much as wooing creates sorrow and trouble (“arebeit,” as Reinmar der Alte coined it in XXI, XIII, 3, 3, p. 317), it constitutes the foundation of the cultural process and lends its full weight to courtly society. After all, as we hear from Gottfried von Straßburg, the poet of the famous romance *Tristan und Isolde* (ca. 1210), the feeling of love has a deep impact on the poet’s speaking abilities, that is, it strongly impacts his communicative strategies (XXIII, II, pp. 432-35).

We would also have to take into consideration the dimensions of genre (wooing song versus dawn song, pastourelle versus canzone, etc.), the growing interest in adding more natural and social elements (Neidhart, Steinmar, both first half of the thirteenth century), in personalizing this erotic discourse, as mirrored especially by Oswald von Wolkenstein (1376/77-1445; cf. Müller and Springeth, ed., 2011), and then the turn to more intimate reflections revealing sexual elements and marital relationships. Undoubtedly, both *troubadour* songs and *minnesang* constituted highly complex poetic expressions, although the shared concerns and interests, the fundamental theme of love did not undergo dramatic changes, even when in the late Middle Ages much of the literary interest turned increasingly to more folkloric aspects, often more sentimental in nature (Richter 2010).

Love in Renaissance Poetry: The Case of Francesco Petrarch

Poets have always drawn from many different sources; sometimes they were inspired by religion, sometimes by classical philosophers, sometimes by nature, and

sometimes by contemporary poets. When we consider Petrarch (1304-1374) as a love poet, then we find ourselves in the context of the early Renaissance, as scholarship has explored already almost *ad nauseam* (see, for instance, the contributions to Ascoli and Falkeid, ed., 2015). Petrarch embraced antiquity wholeheartedly and modeled much of his rich literary work on the ideals as outlined by Roman poets, above all. It is not my intention here to enter into detailed analyses of this famous poet’s biography and works; instead, all I can do in the limited space of this comparative article is to highlight the specific theme of love as it came to the foreground of his sonnets and other poems. As different as those prove to be in format, language, and context compared to medieval courtly love poetry, there are nevertheless strong similarities and parallels. In fact, we would be victims of the overarching paradigm shift concerning the transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance if we regarded Petrarch’s works as completely different from the poems by his predecessors in France, Germany, or Italy.

As the translator of his poems, David Young, asserts, “The body of poetry he organized is essentially a love story, one marked by failure and frustration in life and an expectation of something better after death” (Young, trans., 2004, x; cf. also Durling, trans., 1976; for a collection of his later sonnets online, also in English translation, see https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Italian/PetrarchCanzoniere123-183.php#anchor_Toc10863112, and https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Italian/PetrarchCanzoniere184-244.php#_Toc11161988). Undoubtedly, with Petrarch we face a deeply learned poet who drew from many different sources, ancient and medieval and who strongly advocated, particularly later in his life, the ideal role model played by classical Roman

poetry. Nevertheless, his fundamental experience of love for his lady Laura, with whom he could never develop a relationship because she was married and refused to connect with him, easily evokes the same sorrowfulness and longing as in *minnesang*, for instance (Walter and Zapperi 2007). The use of the genre of sonnet immediately indicates Petrarch's effort to pursue a highly sophisticated, learned style, which distances him again from his predecessors. So, in short, we have to balance out formal and internal criteria in the critical assessment of what the paradigm shift really meant in terms of the poetry by this major contributor to the early Renaissance.

There is a much higher level of self-reflection in all of his texts, but this does not shield us from the basic desire to reflect on his erotic feelings of desire and longing, faced by an unresponsive lady. As the poetic voice emphasizes in sonnet #3: "Love found me wholly undefended, with / the way from eyes to heart completely open, / eyes that are now the conduit for tears." Already in sonnet #5, we hear of his love for Laura, which he describes in sonnet #6 as "mad desire" (1, 1) because she has turned away from him managing to escape all of his snares that he had set up – clearly a reference to the world of hunting, a very common literary trope throughout world literature (Thiébaux 1974). Once love has affected a person's heart, all previous tranquility is lost, and sorrow and longing replace the peace and freedom an individual might have enjoyed (sonnet #8). The experience of love "lift our spirits up from earth to Heaven" (sonnet 10, 3, 1), which the singing of the sorrowful nightingale accompanies weepingly (3, 2-3). Not being able to reach out to his beloved, the poet laments that he is bound for death, irrespective of the weather conditions (sonnet #11). Time will transform both his lady and himself, bringing old age upon both, but the singing in longing and loving still matters

centrally for the poet: "If time should be adverse to my sweet wishes, / at least it won't prevent my pain receiving / some small relief from my belated sighs" (sonnet #12, 12-14). Petrarch thus resorts to the same topic as many courtly love poets before him, that is, love as the catalyst to bring about poetry itself, or the feeling of love as the springboard for the creative art of composing verses.

The experience of love constitutes an internal force that make the wooing suitor to a better person: "The loving thoughts that she aroused in you / can make you climb up toward the highest good, / and teach you to hate things most men desire" (sonnet #13, 9-11). Being affected by erotic love thus has a huge impact on the individual's ethics, or his virtues, educating him profoundly and instilling in him "courageous joy, / and lead you thus toward Heaven, a straight path" (12-13) (for medieval perspectives regarding the correlation of joy and love, see Christoph 2008; we also notice direct echoes of Dante's *Divina Commedia*, completed ca. 1320, which Petrarch was certainly familiar with). The experience of love is thus identified as the springboard for a spiritual journey to God.

Nevertheless, love brings about joy and sorrow, and both feelings are embraced by the poet as the essence of a virtuous life determined by love (sonnet #13). Longing for his lady, however, threatens his life (sonnet #19), whereas in face of his beloved, he finds his "pen and hand and intellect" being "all defeated in the first assault" (sonnet #20, 13). Although scholarship has regularly identified Petrarch with the emerging Humanism in the fourteenth century, and this very good reasons (Kirkham and Maggi 2009), especially in light of many of his later works since ca. 1340 (e.g., Foster 1984), the close reading of his sonnets presents to us a vernacular poet who uses slightly different language and formal aspects to express his feelings but who does not, at least in essence,

differ dramatically from his many predecessors (cf. now Santagata 2020).

When Laura passed away, Petrarch composed a sonnet on his personal loss which took him onto a new path through life, providing him with sustenance in ethical and spiritual values: “the steep and alpine slant of the ascent, / by which you can rise up to worth and goodness” (sonnet #25, 13-14 and sonnet #26). Here as well we observe how much love proves to be engine that drives the individual along, always in the hope of finding meaning, relevance, and direction (for the concept of life as a trail in medieval literature, see Classen 2021, 215-31, regarding Petrarch’s climb up to Mont Ventoux). The loss of his beloved takes him on to the road toward God, which allows us to draw a significant parallel with the situation in Dante’s *Divina Commedia*, where Beatrice was waiting for the pilgrim while already in Paradiso. Not surprisingly, perhaps, Petrarch resorted to the timeless metaphor of the ship: “behold just now the comfort for your ship, / already sailing from this bad, blind world / unto a better port” (sonnet #28, 7-9).

A comparison with the role of the ship vis-à-vis love and death as described in “Guigemar” by Marie de France (ca. 1190) and the ballad “Mutacion de fortune” by Christine de Pizan (ca. 1403) would yield significant insights, but here suffice it to connect this Italian love poet with a long tradition relying on the same metaphor. Petrarch’s strong religious reflections underscore the intensity of his feelings for the departed Laura, while it makes us wonder where the ‘Humanist’ might be found in this text. The emotions behind the poem, however, connect him with countless other love poets throughout time, so we can safely argue that even this famous early modern poet, if that’s the right term, belongs to the same cohort of those who resort to the poetic words to come to terms with the wide-

ranging gamut of erotic feelings.

If he cannot find consolation after Laura’s death, he might perish as well, as is reflected in his constant flow of tears (sonnet #37). Petrarch often refers to the ancient Gods from Greek mythology (sonnets #42 or #52), and also reflected on Narcissus (sonnet #45), which reminds us both of the *Carmina Burana* (ca. 1210-1220) and of the famous *Roman de la rose* by Guillaume de Lorris (ca. 1230-1240) and Jean de Meun (ca. 1260-1270). As C. S. Lewis had already coined so brilliantly, “In fact, however, an unmistakable continuity connects the Povençal love song with the love poetry of the later Middle Ages, and thence, through Petrarch and many others, with that of the present day” (Lewis 1936/2013, 4).

Ironically, we could argue that this famous poet does not really say anything new in his love poems since many of his tropes and topoi are almost cliché and worn, but like all great poets, Petrarch transcends the limitations of the verbal material available to him and creates new expressions of the ever-driving force of love within him. We hear of love as a trap that captures the innocent soul (sonnet #56), specifically of the “noose” by which Love caught and bound me” (sonnet #59, 5); we hear of the lover’s “sighs and all the tears and the desire” (sonnet #61, 11); and we hear, once again, of the lady holding the key “of my heart / there in our hand, a fact that makes me happy” (sonnet #63, 11-12). Love binds two people together in a most intimate fashion, and Petrarch was neither the first nor the last to conceptualize that experience in his poems. As he realizes in the last two tercets of his sonnet #65, quite strikingly:

Defense of any kind is too late now,
except to measure how much or how
little

Love pays attention to our mortal
prayers:

and I don't pray, since it's impossible,
that my poor heart might burn less
furiously;

I simply pray that she should share the
fire.

The poet does not hide his feelings, and it would be erroneous to talk about love sickness (*amor hereos*). Quite on the opposite, he is very open about it and engages directly with the erotic force raging through his breast, consenting to be the victim of this strong emotion, expressing only the hope that his beloved would share in that feeling. The poem serves Petrarch to reveal his hidden feelings with his lady, exposing to her his heart: "but I cannot resist the great desire / I've carried in me since / I saw you first, saw what no thought can match, / let alone speech, my speech or any others's" (sonnet #71, 18-21). And from here, we could easily roam up and down in the poet's collection of sonnets, coming across ever new metaphors and expressions of his emotions, his longing, his fear, his desire, and passion, all of which make him truly feel alive: "and your angelic song, your very words, / your own sweet breath (I can't defend myself), / these make the breeze that drives my life to flight" (sonnet #133, last tercet).

There are many good reasons to identify Petrarch as an early representative of the Italian Renaissance and Humanism, especially if we consider his many different Latin treatises, essays, and other narratives. In these sonnets, however, we come across a Petrarch who addresses love from many different perspectives, and it would be truly challenging to determine the literary-historical period to which we should assign them. Many times, the language itself has a different ring to it compared to much of *troubadour* poetry or *minnesang*, but in essence, there are no specific markers that would set Petrarch's poems noticeable apart from the global discourse on love. He also

expresses his sorrow, his longing, his delight about his lady, his happiness that his feelings translate into verses, and his joy when he spies the beloved. Consistently, the sonnets reflect his loneliness, his separation and distance from Laura, and hence his helplessness in building bridges to her.

It would be difficult to claim that all that might be sufficient to place Petrarch into a new category, as a spokesperson of a paradigm shift. On the contrary, if at all, then these sonnets are rather universal in their formulations and draw from much of the same classical material as the poems composed in the Provence, Northern France, or the Holy Roman Empire. In essence, then, here as well we come across rather solid arguments against the usual trend to create literary-historical periods, as useful as those prove to be in other contexts. After all, the experience of love belongs to the fundamental conditions in human life, whether the poet is fortunate enough to be welcomed by his lady, which is hardly ever the case, and especially not in Petrarch's sonnets, or whether he is tortured by his longing for the woman whom he loves but who does not return his feelings for whatever reasons. Love is, after all, a force in our existence that exerts its power on most people in whatever circumstances, irrespective of age, race, religion, or economic and social status. This insight then allows us to take a huge leap and focus on some of the love poems composed by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832).

Love in the Classical Period, or a Timeless Experience?

To add famous Goethe to the mix of our selection of love poets could be a risky enterprise, simply because he was such a giant in his field and represented various literary-historical periods, from Storm and Stress to Romanticism, and then Classicism. His works have been edited, translated,

interpreted, set to music, used for visual representation, and so forth. Whatever we might try to argue about his poems might be doomed to failure because so many different types of poems flowed from his pen, and arguing on the basis of one group of texts could be countered by reference to another group. Scholarship has extensively discussed his work, and it would be impossible here to review even the most influential studies. However, all that matters here is to identify some examples from Goethe's rich opus that might allow us to continue with the same argument insofar as he formulated, just as his many predecessors, universal ideas about love that continue to appeal to us today, irrespective of his historical distance of nearly two hundred years.

The poem "Gefunden" (Found; see the edition of Goethe, ed. Eibl, 1987; online, e.g., at: <https://www.oxfordlieder.co.uk/song/1521>, composed in 1813), one of Goethe's most popular texts until today, might not specifically address love at first sight, and seems to reflect primarily respect for the beauty of nature and the need to protect it in its own dimension. However, he wrote it on a specific day, the twenty-fifth anniversary of his marriage and sent the text to her as gift on the occasion of that date. He describes that he was wondering through the forest without any particular purpose when he suddenly came across a beautiful flower and wanted to pluck it. But he did not simply break of the flower; instead he dug out the entire flower with the roots and took it with him home where he planted it again in a quiet corner of his garden. The poem concludes with the moving verses:

Nun zweigt es immer

Und blüht so fort.

[Now it always develops branches
and keeps blooming.]

It would be moot to try to offer a new interpretation here since it has often been observed that Goethe obviously expressed his respect not only for nature, but also for the female gender, although the patriarchal position of the speaking voice is still obvious. There is nothing of longing, of feelings of unrequited love, of sorrow, or frustration because the woman does not respond to his requests. Instead, Goethe presents himself as being completely in control of the situation; he is the master of the flower and takes it home to his own domain; away from free nature – the forest – to his domesticated territory. Nevertheless, there is still a deep expression of love for this flower which he treats with great tenderness and carefulness because it requires good soil, water, and sunshine. The end proves to be happy and unproblematic; the flower takes root and grows further, but of course, in his garden, under his control.

One of the stanzas, however, at the central juncture, introduces the woman's voice:

Ich wollt es brechen,

Da sagt' es fein:

Soll ich zum Welken

Gebrochen sein?

[I wanted to break it off,

when it tenderly said:

Must I suffer to be picked

only to wilt away?]

The violent-prone man immediately stops mid-way, changes his mind, recognizes the individuality of the flower and its fragility, and approaches it like a gardener, digging it out with all of its roots, which then allows the flower to continue growing, although no longer at its original location (see, for instance, Bernhardt 2008).

As much as Goethe commonly

formulates the usual tropes of longing, erotic feelings, and personal delight, there is, however, in clear contrast to the older tradition, a sense of conquest, triumph, demands, and sexual fulfillment. In his poem “Ja, die Augen waren’s” (Yes, the Eyes were the Culprits; <https://www.liebesgedichte-geschichten.net/goethe/kurze-gedichte.html>; sometime prior to ca. 1790), for instance, the poet takes a deft approach, describes the woman’s body, and views her through a sexual lens: “Hüfte schmal, der Leib so rund, / Wie zu Paradieses Lüsten” (The hip so slender, the body so round, / lustfulness like in paradise). But she has left, after having copulated with him, and in this process has cast a spell on him: “Hat gegeben sich im Fliehn / Und gefesselt all mein Leben” (She gave herself to me while fleeing, and has fettered all my life).

In his equally famous “Mailied” (1771; Song of May), the poetic voice is overjoyed about the month of May with all of nature experiencing its delightful rebirth. Love permeates nature everywhere: “Du segnest herrlich / Das frische Feld, / Im Blütendampfe / Die volle Welt” (You bless wonderfully the freshly plowed field, the entire world is filled with the breath of flowers). The singer then appeals to a maid and jubilates that she loves him. Her love, however, which is deeply reminiscent of medieval and Renaissance poetry, serves as a trigger for his own poetic creativity: “Zu neuen Liedern / Und Tänzten gibst. / Sei ewig glücklich, / Wie du mich liebst!” (For new songs and dances! Be happy in eternity, the way how you love me).

Much more than any of his predecessors, Goethe expressed strong optimism and delight in the erotic and embraced love fully as one of the greatest joys in his life, especially because he obviously experienced much luck in his many erotic escapades. The “Fifth Roman Elegy,” for instance, speaks volumes as to the

aesthetic dimension which the erotic offered him.

Composed after his journey to Italian between 1788 and 1790, it is one of the most graphic poems he might have composed, revealing that while he spent the days studying the Roman ruins and feeling the beauty of the marble with his hands he enjoyed the night with a courtesan in bed, touching her entire body from top to bottom. But in defense of this turn of events, he emphasizes explicitly that experiencing the beauty of the female body with his hand would teach him profoundly how to appreciate the beauty of the ancient marble: “Sehe mit fühlendem Aug’, fühle mit sehender Hand,” an impressive type of synesthesia expressed in this parallelism of two short sentence (10; I see with feeling eyes, I feel with seeing hands; for an online version, see <http://www.goethezeitportal.de/index.php?id=2892>). The woman’s breast and hips would teach him more about the ideals which the ancient Romans had pursued than many theoretical studies. After their lovemaking, he would lie next to her in bed, watching her sleep, and reflect on his various experiences, which then resulted in his own poetic creativity: “Oftmals hab’ ich auch schon in ihren Armen gedichtet / Und des Hexameters Maß leise mit fingernder Hand, Ihr auf den Rücken gezählt. Sie atmet in lieblichem Schlummer” (15-17; Often I have composed verses while resting in her arms and have counted the hexametric meter with the extended finger of my hand on her back).

While her quiet breathing profoundly evokes feelings in him, “Und es durchglühet ihr Hauch mir bis ins Tiefste die Brust” (18; And her breathing burns down into the bottom of my breast), the god Amor, present there the whole time, remembers the time when he had caused the same emotion among the famous triumvirate of Roman poets, Ovid, Catullus, and Tiberius (19-20). In other

words, classical ideals and values percolate into Goethe's veins while he enjoys the sexual union with his lady, so the elegy itself turns into a paean of extraordinary expressivity about the critical importance of the erotic in order to comprehend beauty in abstract terms (see, for instance, Krobb 2010; Hillenbrand 2022).

Undoubtedly, this elegy stands far apart from any of the poems we have considered so far, but this has also something to do with our selection. If we take into consideration, for instance, the songs by the first *troubadour*, Duke William IX (early eleventh century), or the poems by the South Tyrolean Oswald von Wolkenstein (1376/77-1445), we discover very similar examples where the experience of love is cast in explicitly sexual terms (Verdon 2008; Fajardo-Acosta 2010, 42-49). Sexuality per se would amount to pornography, whereas erotic love poetry, both in the East and in the West, has always implied either directly or indirectly the sexual element for a variety of purposes.

Indeed, Goethe cannot be simply equated with his medieval forerunners, but the differences in his elegy pertains to the ultimate purpose with his poem, whereas the strong subscription to the experience of love, at the risk of committing an error of anachronism, remains the same. After all, his relationship with the courtesan transformed him into a new personality finally able to comprehend more intuitively and sensuously what the inner beauty of the marble columns might have truly meant. Behind the erotic in most love poetry we find the ideal, the transformation of the self into a higher being, as faintly indicated by means of human words (Classen 2012). There would be hundreds of other examples of Goethe's love poems, such as his "Neue Liebe, neues Leben" from 1775 (New Love, new Life, from his Storm and Stress period; online, e.g., at [\[neues-leben-1775.html\]\(https://www.deutschelyrik.de/neue-liebe-neues-leben-1775.html\); which an audio version\), in which the poetic "I" finds himself suddenly in a new erotic relationship and cannot recognize himself any longer and discovers that he is bound by magical forces to a new lady: "Und an diesem Zauberfädchen, / Das sich nicht zerreißen lässt, / Hält das liebe lose Mädchen /](https://www.deutschelyrik.de/neue-liebe-</p>
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Mich so wider Willen fest" (3, 1-4; The dear, free maid holds me tightly with this little magical string which cannot be torn apart, and this although I am opposed).

As much as he utters pleas to be freed again, love does not pay attention and holds him tightly. The poet thus projects a crucial role reversal giving the woman complete control over the male voice. Again, we recognize how much the force of love has a transformative effect and takes the individual from the material dimension to a spiritual one. Little wonder that Goethe's Storm and Stress poems, or those from his Romantic period, have exerted a continuous influence on the subsequent history of lyric poetry (Sill 2009). However, he was not the absolute originator of this genre, as innovative as his own compositions prove to be in tone, imagery, and language.

Instead, we recognize in Goethe, just as Shakespeare, for instance, a significant link in a long chain of the erotic discourse. Undoubtedly, there were major paradigm shifts, historical epochs came and left, but in essence, the focus stayed on the theme of love and was examined from many different perspectives. We observe, in other words, a steep tradition and yet also paradigm shift. Those certainly serve us very well for heuristic reasons, but we ought to be careful not to overemphasize them and to grant the literary histories the absolute authority. To test this hypothesis, let us take into view one final example from the twentieth century, the love poems by Bertolt Brecht.

The Socialist Poet vis-à-vis Love

Arguably, Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) might have been the most influential and important playwright of the twentieth century. As a communist, he pursued very specific ideological purposes with his dramas and revolutionized in that context the Aristotelian drama, creating the new 'epic theater.' But Brecht also deserves great respect for many other literary genres in which he proved to be rather brilliant, such as short stories for the calendar, diaries, essays, letters, and love poems (see the contributions to Thomson and Sacks, trans. and ed., 2006). As sharp and biting his plays can be, pursuing a socialist perspective, attacking the failures and misdeeds of the capitalist system, his love poems can be soft, intimate, emotional, and sensitive (Brecht 2015/2019; for a good selection [online](http://www.literaturundkunst.net/bertolt-brecht-liebesgedichte/), see: <http://www.literaturundkunst.net/bertolt-brecht-liebesgedichte/>).

For our purpose, let us consider only one final poem, "Erinnerung an die Marie A." (1920; Remembering Marie A., in Thomson and Sacks, trans. and ed., 220-21; for an audio [recording](https://www.deutschelyrik.de/erinnerungen-an-marie-a-916.html), see <https://www.deutschelyrik.de/erinnerungen-an-marie-a-916.html>). The narrative voice reminisces the time when he held his beloved in his arms under a plum tree, but she was nothing but a "sweet dream" (3), which he associates with a cloud in the sky, a clear symbol of the evanescence of love, as in the case of Marie A. In his typically sarcastic fashion, the poetic voice then basically dismisses that memory, which is only pale and distant in his mind. He would not even be able to recall her face, though he remembers: "I kissed it once upon a time, that's all I know" (2, 8). Much time has passed, and even the plum tree has been felled, as he opines, as if he wants to protect himself against the pain of love now lost in the past.

Shockingly, as the third stanza then

underscores, he would have forgotten even that kiss that he had exchanged with his beloved, if he did not remember that fleeting cloud: "It was very white and high when it came over" (3, 4). Trying to stay sober and not to let the feelings of that old love overwhelm him, the poet speculates that the plum tree might still be standing, that the woman might have married and could have seven children by now. The cloud passed over his head, he noticed it, but then "it vanished in the wind when I looked up again" (3, 8). What would love hence be or mean for him? Was it only a tiny and fleeting memory of no significance? After all, the woman's last name is abbreviated, and there seem to be no specific features of her face or body that would help him to evoke that old passion.

Nevertheless, the youthful love was a reality, it took place "in the blue month of September" (1, 1), and he had embraced her. The memory of her amounts to nothing but a dream, and the white cloud seems to be more concretely burned in his mind than this almost anonymous woman. Both the color and the distance high up in the sky impressed themselves on the observer, whereas the woman slipped away from his mind. Reality has set in, and past is past. Nevertheless, Brecht dedicated three stanzas to this Marie, whom he associates with the cloud, a beautiful phenomenon. Nothing could be held onto, and life went its own course, but there used to be love, and it expressed itself through the white cloud, a somber and yet also appealing symbol of the fleetingness of love once experienced many years ago.

Brecht grudgingly recognized and embraced the value of love, but he also distanced himself from it as much as possible because of its lack of endurance and stability. Beyond the erotic passion, however, there was the aesthetic experience, in the form of the cloud, which itself did not last at all, maybe because of its natural property. We could not argue that Brecht intended to

dismiss love, to ridicule it, or to belittle it as a youthful sensation of no relevance. Instead, he dedicated three stanzas to this woman whose image he can hardly remember.

More important prove to be the plum tree, the specific season – the blue month of September – and the cloud. Natural objects thus substitute the erotic memory, which in itself still seems to carry weight, even decades after that day long passed (Görbert 2020). As important as the cloud proves to be as an aesthetic signal, the erotic relationship still matters, even decades later, whether he has a clear memory of her or not. Without having held her in his arms, he would not have looked up, and hence would have missed the aesthetic experience, which in turn leads over to philosophical reflections.

We could agree with Kittstein (2012, 82) that Brecht made great efforts to distance himself from love, from the woman of his youth, substituting both with natural images as ‘better’ alternatives in resistance to the foolish emotions from his youth. However, without that erotic experience, the aesthetic one would not have happened either. It seems as if Brecht the poet fights against his own inner self by repressing the memory of Marie A, whereas the poem itself evokes her against his own intentions. The fleeting cloud is not irrelevant; and the feelings of love were also not irrelevant, even though the poet knows no longer her last name or her face. The very moment when he embraced and kissed her is specifically identified with the color ‘blue’ for the month of September, the plum tree, and the cloud, and all those elements reflect in turn on the experience of love that was unique despite its fleetingness.

Conclusion

If I were to push this button further, I would face an ocean of textual infinitude. Most of the pertinent research has not even been engaged with, and instead, I have touched upon a number of love poems from the

Middle Ages to the twentieth century. What is then left in our basket of investigations, simply apples and oranges, or a more harmonious bouquet of literary flowers?

First of all, it would be far away from me to suggest that there was no evolution in literary-historical terms. Of course, medieval poets were very differently oriented than, say, Goethe or Brecht. Both religious and political conditions had changed profoundly between ca. 1100 and 1800. There is no denying that the age of the Reformation was replaced by the Baroque, which in turn gave way to Enlightenment, Storm and Stress, Romanticism, Classicism, Realism, etc. The relevance, hence, of literary histories, will not disappear even in the near future because their authors create most valuable narrative scaffolds and thematic structures by which we can better situate categorize individual poets, novelists, or dramatists.

By the same token, the topic of love in all of its dramatic dimensions, its deeply discursive character, its painful realization, its negative impacts, and its hugely influential nature through which the visual and narrative arts got impacted, its joyful and spiritual transformation, and in its graphic, material, sexual features, found hugely diverse manifestations throughout the centuries and in many cultures across the globe. On the one hand, it makes good sense to distinguish clearly high medieval courtly love poetry from Renaissance sonnets, for instance, or to keep Romantic reflections on love neatly apart from Baroque or twentieth-century poetry. On the other, since the universal experience reflected in all of those poem did not essentially change from century to century, from culture to culture, or even from generation to generation, we are strongly encourage to treat historical periods and paradigm shifts with considerable sensitivity. It is easy to employ labels for individual poets or poems, but when it comes to specific topics, concerns, ideas, themes, or motifs,

such as love, which is highly multifarious in its manifestations, then we face serious difficulties. While external features might separate a love poem composed in the seventeenth century (Baroque) concretely from a love poem mirroring Classical or Romantic ideas, the philosophical idea behind it consistently proves to be surprisingly similar, sharing conflicts over values with all the members of the audience who might contradict or approve of the presented opinion.

As we could observe, elements of satire, irony, sarcasm, and negative criticism, along with the full approval of the erotic experience, such as in the case of Goethe's poem, all depending on the individual circumstances, could gain the upper hand or disappear once again. Brecht's gingerly handling of his memories of love stand in strong contrast to Goethe's full approval of sexuality and the enjoyment of the sexualized body. Nevertheless, despite these strong features encouraging us to rely on notions of literary-historical periods or paradigm shifts, in the final analysis we observe ultimately the one and same experience of love as the ultimately human value.

I venture to say that concepts of literary history are still relevant and provide us with important guidance in the evaluation of individual texts and in placing them within specific cultural periods. By the same token, those categories are also rather dangerous in creating artificial barriers, pretending that the experiences or ideas reflected by Walther von der Vogelweide or Oswald von Wolkenstein, by Dante or Petrarch concerning love would differ profoundly in philosophical, ethical, spiritual, or even aesthetic terms from those pursued by Friedrich Schiller or Dirk Grünbein (contemporary).

All these reflections address, at first the specifically European literary history, but they easily and quickly invite us to consider

the extent to which they also apply to the complementary history of Chinese, Indian, Congolese, Peruvian, or Siberian poetry. I do not suggest to flatten all cultural and aesthetic differences across space and time, but I encourage us strongly to be more sensitive to universally shared notions and concepts. Humanity has not developed so radically from antiquity to the present day to make the reflections of love in the older period incomprehensible to the present generations, and vice versa. This also applies to the horizontal level, encouraging us to consider much more carefully shared ideals and values across the world at various historical periods.

As A. T. Hatto has already observed, for instance, the genre of the *dawn song*, the *alba*, or *tagelied* has been popular throughout the world and throughout time (Hatto 1967). Of course, it would be foolish to abandon the traditional scaffold of historical literature, but it would be similarly misleading to overemphasize the difference between the individual cultural periods, here disregarding changes in language and material conditions outside of the poetic discourse. Lyric poetry, from the oldest time until today, is predicated on the realization that the word itself represents music, which in turn is situated in the human heart, with its rhythm, connecting that also with universal experience of the rhythm of nature, both human and non-human.

As Boris Maslov commented, "[t]o read lyric as world literature is to make legible (and audible) its deepest sediments" (2018, 146). To come to terms with love represents the oldest and the most universal human desire, as conflictual, problematic, painful, and stressful it might be. People will never lose that touch of love; it is the ultimate force transforming children into young adults, parallel to the awakening of sexuality, of course. Irrespective of countless different verbal or conceptual manifestation, irrespective of deep struggles to fight off love

for many different reasons (religious, anti-spiritual, Marxist, economic, etc.), love is there to stay; it has always been with us, even in the darkest hours of humanity, and it promises to carry us into our future. This is

not to reject the heuristic value of literary periods or the concept of the paradigm shift, but we always have to keep in mind their hermeneutic limitations.

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