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Melancholie – zwischen Attitüde
und Diskurs

Konzepte in Mittelalter und Früher Neuzeit

V&R unipress
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Andrea Sieber / Antje Wittstock

Einleitung


> Während die Zeitschriften und Medienpräsenz die Hypothesen der Melancholie präsentieren, dass wir im 21. Jahrhundert am Ende einer langen historischen Entwicklung möglicherweise in einer ›Black Box‹ melancholischer Bewusstseins ‚gefangen‘ sind, führen wir dazu herausfordernd, in dem vorliegenden Band nochmal den Blick zurück zu wagen: zurück auf historische Diskursformationen und Ästhetisierungen, zurück auf ›Masternarrative‹ der Melancholie und zurück auf einschlägige Theoriebildungen.

> Zentral bei der Historisierung von Melancholie erscheint ihre diffuse Begriffsgeschichte, die seit jeher durch die Heterogenität der prägenden Diskursfelder hervorgebracht wurde und sich in den disziplinären Kontexten von Medizin, Philosophie, Astrologie und Moraltheologie, aber auch in den un-
Christiane Ackermann
Written Woundings
The Significance of Melancholy in the German prose »Lancelot«

Das große Thema des »Prosa-Lancelot« ist die unmögliche Liebe zwischen Ginover und Lancelot, die quälende Leidenschaft des Protagonis-
ten, seine emotionale Verschüchterung. Doch nicht nur die Distanz zwischen den Liebenden ist ein zentrales Motiv, Trennung und Trennungs-
schmerz erscheinen als wesentliche Modalitäten von Sinn und Identität im Werk. Sie wirken als Movers des Protagonisten, determinieren die Figuren und
die Handlung. Trennung und Trennungsschmerz sind gerade deshalb central, weil sie offensichtlich an der Basis der Sinnbildung des Romans
liegen. Elementar ist die spezifische Wiederholungsstruktur des Leidens Lancelot, welches sich dadurch als Melancholie charakterisieren lässt.
Ausgangspunkt der näheren Bestimmung von Melancholie sind im vor-
liegenden Beitrag die Überlegungen der Kulturtheoretikerin und Semio-
tikerin Julia Kristeva, die dazu anleiten, Melancholie im Zusammen-
hang von Sinnbildungsprozessen zu begreifen. Es ist so möglich, die
Funktion und Funktionsweise von Melancholie, insbesondere im Rah-
men der narrativen Strukturen, im »Prosa-Lancelot« zu erklären.

I. Lancelot's indispensable pain: self-induced separation as an indication of melancholy

It is common knowledge that the main topic of the prose »Lancelot« is the
unfulfilled love between Queen Ginover and the knight Lancelot and the
unique passion of the protagonist, his pain and emotional wounding. Longing
for his beloved, Lancelot seriously suffers; he is often restless and cannot
think about anything else but Ginover:

Die sache sagt uns das Lancelot sere zu ungenoch ist und sere verdacht
doch de wuoren die er mynet [ ... ]. Er erzupelt oder lacht noch enhett
deyn freud in der welt anders dann das er allwey in grossen gedencken
was. Er enllt noch trincket noch erscheintet wedder tag noch nacht, er
ist oben off dem thorn zu allererster und steht alumb als ein man der ser-
re in ungenoch ist. [ ... ] De lag Lancelot zu allererst und
gedacht als er gewon was zu thun. (STEHHHOFF I, 1202,29-1204,35)

1 »The story tells us that Lancelot was very unhappy and restless and could not help
thinking about the woman he loved [ ... ]. He is joyless and does not laugh and has
Lancelot’s symptoms that result from his being completely absorbed in love, his loss of self and occasional disorientation have sometimes been compared to medieval concepts of melancholia and amor heros, that is, lovesickness.2 Kurt Ruh, who was one of the first to see Lancelot as the image of no other pleasure in the world than being deeply lost in thought. He does not eat or drink and sleeps neither day nor night; he [...] looks around like a man who is completely restless (henceforth all translations of the quoted passages from the prose >Lancelot< will be provided in the footnotes. The translation is the author’s own). – The following abbreviations (provided in the brackets below) will be used for quotations taken from the STEINHOFF-edition: Lancelot und Ginevra, Vol. 1 (Prosa-Lancelot I). Nach der Heidelberger Handschrift Cod. Pal. germ. 147. Hg. v. Kluge, Reinhold, ergänzt durch die Handschrift Ms. al. 8017-8020 der Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal Paris. Transl., annot. and ed. STEINHOFF, Hans-Hugo. Frankfurt a.M. 1995 (Bibliothek deutscher Klassiker 123; Bibliothek des Mittelalters 14) (short title – STEINHOFF I). Lancelot und der Graf, Vol. II (Prosa-Lancelot IV). Nach der Heidelberger Handschrift Cod. Pal. germ. 147. Hg. v. Kluge, Reinhold, ergänzt durch die Handschrift Ms. al. 8017-8020 der Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal Paris. Transl., annot. and ed. STEINHOFF, Hans-Hugo. Frankfurt a.M. 2003 (Bibliothek deutscher Klassiker 183; Bibliothek des Mittelalters 17) (short title – STEINHOFF IV).


the great melancholic, states that although the love between Ginevra and Lancelot spurred him onto heroic action, it does not, however, purify, invigorate or illuminate the soul; instead, love throws shadows of grief upon the soul. >And these shadows are reflected by Lancelot’s countenance: the head is cast down, thoughts are running restlessly through it, while it seems difficult to communicate them. C> Ruh’s diagnosis is based on Lancelot’s recurring mental condition throughout the romance, his being lost in thought. Ruh also calls attention to Lancelot’s >swaren moed<, his sad, depressed and dark state of mind. Another symptom of Lancelot’s melancholic mood is his gedenken, his absent-mindedness, which befalls him repeatedly after he first catches sight of Ginevra:

Er sah wieder off sie, wann das nymant gepranzt mochte, und wanderte yn sere wie die frauwas so seheb mocht gebev [...] Die konigin nam yn mit der hant und fraget yn wannum er waren we. Da er ir hant enzicz, er erschrock als ob er von ein traume erwacht ware; er gedacht so sere nach yre das er nit erwacht was sie gesprochen het. Sie sah zuhant wol das im nicht recht was, und frage es yn anderwert. >Saget mir<, sprach sie, >wannum sint ir? Sie sah off sie sere einfelliclichen und sprach suffezende: >Frauwe, ich bin ein knappe und hast mich ein jungfrauw biffherra gezogen.< >Wie heibent ir dann<? sprach sie. Des weiz ich nicht, sprach er. Die frauwe sah zuhant wol das er einsichts nit geweit was mit den gredenck ze die er hette. Sie getroz mit vollliclichen gedencken das es durch yren willen waren [...] und fraget yn nit imme, um das sie yn in mere affenheit nolt brigen. [...] Sie dukht wol das er in syn synne nit erwans [...] (STEINHOFF I, 566,8-37)<4

Walter BLANK rejects those who would describe the protagonist as a melancholic and regards Lancelot’s depressive mood as an expression of his >Mundkrankheit<, that is, his suffering from love, only to a certain extent does Lancelot’s >pathology< correspond to the usual symptoms present in a melan-
also a result of mental wounding that is closely related to language or man’s existence in language. KRISTEVA’s understanding of melancholy within a semiotic context and her emphasis on the connection between melancholy and the process of signification can be of some help in grasping how the logic of melancholy functions within the framework of the narrative structure of the prose »Lancelot«.

II. Melancholy according to Julia KRISTEVA

KRISTEVA’s concept of melancholy is based on FREUD’s explanation, but she adds a semiotic dimension to it. According to FREUD, the melancholic, unlike the mourner, holds on to loss. The lost object usually consists in an imaginary, abstract quality; it is hardly possible to say what has actually been lost. The attitude towards the lost object is ambivalent; it is destructive and Lokhndal at the same time, characterized by the urge to destroy the object and simultaneously to maintain the relation to it. KRISTEVA agrees with FREUD only partly since she argues that there is no actual hostility toward what is lost and that the melancholic feels wounded rather than hostile. This understanding is based on the idea that melancholy does not originate from the loss of an object, but rather from loss itself. The cause of melancholy is closely related to the most basic human condition, that is, to exist in language and also to experience separation out of necessity. According to KRISTEVA, different experiences of separation are central to the constitution of the individual’s psychic life: [...] birth, weaning, separation, frustration, castration. Real, imaginary or symbolic, these processes necessarily structure our individuality. They are accompanied by a depressive stage that is essential to the [...] access to the realm of symbols and linguistic signs.


7 Of course it is necessary to differentiate between medieval concepts and a modern understanding of melancholy. Since I focus on structural phenomena of the text and its inscribed poetics in correspondence with the protagonist’s constitution and action my argumentation is based on a semiotic understanding of melancholy in analogy to KRISTEVA’s conception. This does not imply a rejection of investigations interested in extrapolating the medieval idea or occurrences of melancholy. Doing so calls for, as KLINGER points out, »separating melancholy as a medical term and melancholy as a literary topological field that overlaps with the multifaceted pathology of the melancholic [...]« KLINGER (note 2), p. 241 (translation: C.A.).

8 The term is used following concepts in the field of literary and semiotic studies, cf. besides the works of KRISTEVA, e.g. those of Rolf SILVERMAN and Slavoj ŽIŽEK.


13 KRISTEVA (note 9), p. 132.

14 KRISTEVA (note 9), p. 133.
The subject’s parting from objects, from the representation of the absent thing inevitably causes sadness. It is by language, however, that we are able to cope with the parting from objects; language sustains the cut between subject and object. Mental confusion will result if the subject rejects or repudiates separation. Dramatisation of loss is a source of exorbitant and destructive anguish. The subject’s being absorbed in separation leads to melancholy.

Kristeva states that signification results from the need to create sense, the need for significance in life. Language is the instrument that helps to fulfill that need; it is the very instrument that produces sense. If loss predominates and the subject realizes loss despite the possibility of producing sense through language then melancholy might result. According to Kristeva, melancholy denotes an actual or imaginary loss of meaning, an actual or imaginary despair, an actual or imaginary razing of symbolic values, including the value of life [...]. At the same time, the experience of melancholy may function as a fundamental stimulus for human action, it may be a kind of basic mode that results from the inevitable experience of loss. To be abandoned by someone is part of the human experience and, as previously stated, it is a fundamental experience of human existence in language. It is by loss that man learns to express himself. The subject, however, needs to accept, internalize and overcome the experience of loss and the melancholic mood that may accompany this experience.

Usually the subject is able to overcome loss and melancholy, although this is obviously not the case in the prose <Lancelot>. In that work, separation, loss, and the wounding that results from it stay with the protagonist until the end and, what is more, even define the very structure of the romance. It is true that generally separation is a basic experience of the protagonist in the courtly novel. This, for example, is present in <Parzival> by Wolfram von Eschenbach; here the hero first loses his father Galmuret and his mother Herzeloyde. After having married Condwiramus, Parzival needs to leave his wife and does not see her again for years until they reunite at the end. It is important for the structure of the romance that they indeed reunite. Although separation is a basic experience in the courtly novel, the resulting wounds can be cured by reunification, that is, they can be surmounted by love or the promise that love will be fulfilled. In other words, separation serves to perform the negation of separation, to establish a closed meaning regarding the individual as well as the structure of the romance. The promise of narrative closure, which is closely related to the promise that love will be fulfilled, is the great promise of the courtly novel. In the prose <Lancelot>, this promise vanishes, and the text instead illustrates that it is impossible to undo separation. It is the realisation of this impossibility to which the melancholic gesture of the romance bears witness.

20 Klinger, too, though on the basis of some other arguments, observes a crucial structural difference between the prose <Lancelot> and the Arthurian romance: While a single crisis is central for the structure of the latter, there is a series of crises which are not as clearly defined but less ambiguous. In contrast, slices of the protagonist’s other desire and the various ways in which he realises them. He suggests that the structure of <Lancelot> is in some way similar to that of <Parzival>. In fact, the same structural pattern is present in <Lancelot>, which consists of a series of crises that are not as clearly defined but less ambiguous. In contrast, the protagonist’s other desire and the various ways in which he realises them. He suggests that the structure of <Lancelot> is in some way similar to that of <Parzival>. In fact, the same structural pattern is present in <Lancelot>, which consists of a series of crises that are not as clearly defined but less ambiguous. 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In the following section I shall attempt to demonstrate how the logic of melancholy functions in the prose »Lancelot« not only as an emotional state of mind in the protagonist but also as a poetic principle. To this end, I will use Julia Kristeva’s concept of melancholy (merely) as a point of departure in order to understand the structure of melancholy and its relation to language, that is, to signification. On this basis, it is possible to examine the ‘texture’ of melancholy in the prose »Lancelot« and comprehend its relevance for the signifying process that is present in the romance. My interpretation owes much to the insights of Judith Klinger and Andrea Sieber, who have recently explained the role of desire and melancholy in the prose »Lancelot«. My interpretation, however, is based on a different theoretical background and my perspective stresses other aspects of melancholy. I am thus less interested in the emotional constitution of the protagonist,22 instead, I regard melancholy in the prose »Lancelot« to be a mode of poetic expression, poetic composition and reflection.

III. Written Woundings:
The significance of melancholy in the German prose »Lancelot«

[T]he whole of him was one huge wound [...] (Ovid, Metamorphoses 6.388).23

Central to my argument are the issues of the pain of separation caused by repeatedly deferring fulfilling love, Lancelot’s return to distance and his recapitulation of absence. The interplay of distance and closeness and especially the experience of separation within this interplay are the central motivating factors for both the protagonist and the plot on the whole. The separation of the lovers not only forms a central motif in the romance but separation

22 This, of course, does not mean that the works of Klinger and Sieber are reduced to such a viewpoint. Klinger, for instance, investigates Lancelot’s ‘false history’ in its multifaceted appearance and shows its meaning for the constitution of the individual as a complex process: In the prose »Lancelot the pathology is most closely connected to the conception of love. [...] Showing the lover in a pathological light seems to maintain the constitution of a subject of love being at risk and unstable and at the same time to submit it to a system of understanding which makes it possible to socially classify the lover as a ‘sick man’. O. Klinger [note 2], pp. 241f. (translation: C.A.).

in a more general form defines the structure of the narrative itself, including the characters and the plot. Separation is not only significant because it refers to a sad story of unfulfilled love, around which further stories are arranged, but also because it provides orientation in a complex narrative with a vast network of subplots. And even more importantly, separation, suffering and the repetition of both are central to the romance since they form the basis of how signification and narration work in the prose »Lancelot«. On the basis of the model of melancholy I previously described, it is possible to regard the intensity of sorrow in the romance in relation to its structure and its poetic implications. The extent to which the staging of the melancholic mood, the creation of identity and the production of meaning in the text are related will be made evident in the following section.

Separation and Identity

The relation of separation to the constitution of identity and the production of meaning is expressed most strikingly in a well known scene in which Lancelot paints pictures of Ginever and himself on the walls of his prison in the palace of the sister of King Arthur, Morgane. Uwe Ruberg has called this episode one of the most surprising and remarkable scenes of the romance.24 It is noteworthy, however, that the episode perfectly expresses the poetic principles of the prose »Lancelot«. A short recapitulation of the scene may help to understand its significance for the whole text: By means of an act of betrayal, Morgane gains power over Lancelot. After Lancelot has been given a drink that makes him weak and tired, he is taken into a room from which he cannot escape. He stays there a full month without knowing that he is imprisoned. Only when Lancelot wants to leave, does he realize that he is a captive. Despite his inquiries, Lancelot is not given any reason for the imprisonment (Steinhoff IV, 46,6) and seeks relief from his emotional distress by imagining Ginover’s presence. From his room he is able to see a man who paints the Trojan War on the walls of Morgane’s palace. Inspired by what he sees, Lancelot himself starts to paint pictures of his beloved on the walls of his prison:

[...] er weit in der kanmer mahn, darinn er gefangen lag, von der die er so lieb hett und sere begeret zu sehen [...] Das solt im gross lichterung

between him and his beloved, while, at the same time, he creates a setting in which he can act out his emotions. According to Sieber, the hero is able to cope with the absence of the desired person and even recreate his identity with the help of the pictures. Klinger, too, refers to the episode when he explains the construction of Lancelot's identity and the paradoxical form of the construction and destruction of Lancelot's identity by love. As Klinger explains, the problem of distance and closeness is brought to full expression by the hero, although other characters are affected by that very distance as well, especially those who desire Lancelot, even though he is inaccessible. After all, distance is what generally characterizes Lancelot's and Girouer's mimesis community. The principle of distance is reflected by different objects that work as substitutes for the lovers. Similar to the suffering caused by separation, the description of passion in the prose «Lancelot shows an ecstatic intimacy with absence that can very concisely be grasped in the episode about Lancelot's frescoes.»

The aforementioned studies refer to the interplay of presence and absence that is staged by the paintings. I begin my argument at exactly this point, since, as I see it, the repeated, revitalized distance is crucial for the organization of the text. By taking a closer look at this phenomenon it is possible to explain why the interplay of presence and absence is important for Lancelot's melancholic character and why it also reveals a poetics implied by the text. First of all, however, it is necessary to describe in (more) detail how the paintings act as a substitute and why this substitution is crucial for the scene and its staging of presence and absence.

After having portrayed Girouer on the walls of his prison, Lancelot behaves in front of the images as if they were real:

[...]

25 [...] he wanted to paint in the room in which he was imprisoned, [pictures] of the one he loved so much and whom he very much desired to see [...]. He thought it would be a great relief from his distress if he could look at the painting in his prison.


27 The motif of gedenken is central to the text. Connected to the term is a wide field of meaning. Moreover, the motif of gedenken does not apply to Lancelot alone but also for instance to Artus, though his gedenken is evoked by other causes, cf. RUBERG, Uwe: Raum und Zeit im Prosä-Lancelot. München 1965 (Medium Aevum 9), pp. 173-178; WALTENBERGER [note 2], pp. 63, note 164. WALTENBERGER describes gedenken in the prose «Lancelot» as a gap of significance produced by the narrator, which makes it hardly possible to extrapolate an unambiguous meaning of the term, cf. WALTENBERGER [note 2], pp. 63f. On the meaning and role of gedenken in the prose «Lancelot» cf. also von MERVELDT, Nikolai: Translatio und Memoria. Zur Poetik der Memoria des Prosa-Lancelot. Frankfurt a. M. et al. 2004 (Mikrokosmos 72), pp. 329-340; KLINER, [note 2], pp. 192-197.

28 RIDDER [note 27], p. 76f.

29 RIDDER [note 27], p. 79.
The portrait of Givover serves as a substitute for direct contact. On the morning after his first day of creative work, Lancelot hugs and kisses the image. This contact, only possible via the medium of art, stimulates the continuation of the signifying process. In the course of this process the painter and his life become more and more important: Though Lancelot starts by painting pictures of Givover, he finally makes himself the main character of his illustrations. He projects his whole life on the walls, including his childhood and youth: How he was brought to King Arthur’s court by the Lady of the Lake in order to be made a knight, how he went to Camelot and was arrayed by the queen’s beauty when she saw her for the first time, and how he had to take leave from her when he rode to the Duchess of Notus to help her (cf. STEINHOF IV, 47,36-35). It is not Givover but Lancelot and his identity as a knight that become the main subject matter of the depiction. Moreover, the text emphasizes Lancelot as the creator of the paintings (Do hab ez an zu male [...] von tag zu tag male in dysterve; emphasis mine) and, in this way, it accentuates the individual’s participation in the process of defining identity.

It is no coincidence that Lancelot finishes his work exactly when Easter, the feast that celebrates the resurrection of Christ and the conquest of death, has passed. Because the text brings Lancelot’s self-projection to a close at exactly this point, it emphasizes the significance of the paintings: Analogous to the Christian myth, the paintings bring Lancelot back to life. It is quite telling that this act of self-creation results from the separation from and the desire for the absent woman. After all, it is not so much her who is made present but the painter himself, whereas the act of painting actually repeats the distance between the lovers. Givover turns out to be secondary in relation to the projection, which is, in reality, narcissistic. Givover plays, to a certain extent, the role of a mirror used by Lancelot to project his narcissistic ideal. In this way, the text performs separation and the anguish resulting from it as the premise of the creation of identity and as a force leading to signification. Furthermore, the creation of identity and signification are interdependent upon one another. Lancelot’s paintings result from a mental wounds and they signify this wounding. Isolated from society, the melancholic individual is thrown back on his essence, that is, separation, and, in the moment in which he is occupied by that state of consciousness, he cannot help to record and signify absence.

It is a characteristic of the text that the essential meaning of separation finds a correspondence in its narrative technique.

Separation as a principle of narration

Previously I have stated that separation motivates Lancelot to create art, images, and signs. His inspiration, however, is a man whom he can see from his prison working on murals depicting the Trojan War. This observation seems to be of no further importance for the episode. Nonetheless, this incident is crucial, because it anticipates and reflects the poetic implication that is implied by the scene involving the frescoes. The motif of the Trojan War is not chosen indiscriminately, since it refers to the tradition of describing and writing pictures in literature. The images of the Trojan War are significant in medieval literature: If paintings are mentioned in medieval texts, most often they depict the Troy theme, as Elisabeth Lienert has shown. In non-Trojan and non-historical literature, Troy has not an historical but instead an ideological relevance, since it symbolizes the origin of knighthood and courtly love. Descriptions of paintings of Troy refer especially to the escape of Aeneas from burning Troy. Those descriptions – and this is a very important point to remember – do not actually describe real paintings, but rather perpetuate a literary tradition of fictional paintings appearing in literature.

34 »And when he got up in the morning he opened the windows where the garden of trees was. He looked at the painting of his lady, he bowed in front of it and gazed at it, then he hugged and kissed it on the mouth in such a devoted way as he would kiss no other woman but his lady. Then he started to paint what happened to him when he rode to the Dolores Garden and how he captured the castle by his bravery. On this day he painted what had happened to him until the day of the tournament and how he wore his green armor on the day when the king came down from the hall and praised him before all the other knights. And after that, day after day, he painted his whole story, but only his story and not that of the others. And when Easter had passed his composition was complete.«


36 Cf. STEINHOF’s commentary on 46,15 in STEINHOF IV, p. 847; RIDDER [note 27], pp. 76f.


38 LIENERT [note 37], pp. 210-213.

39 LIENERT explains that, in the middle ages, Troy has two functions: First, a real-historical, and, secondly, an ideological-historical function. The historical role of Troy is marginal in non-Trojan and non-historical poetry though this does not reduce the realistic idea of Troy, cf. LIENERT [note 37], pp. 200f. Most crucial is
...tradition originates from Vergil’s »Aeneid«. After his escape from Troy, Aeneas catches sight of murals in the temple of Juno in Carthage that show the battles of Greeks and Trojans as well as pictures of himself (»Aeneid« I, 450-493). In this way, Aeneas is confronted with his own history and this is brought up again in the prose »Lancelot«, though it is crucial to remember that the hero himself is the painter. Within the framework of the literary tradition mentioned above, pictures of Troy and Aeneas exist in literature without being bound to actual models outside the text. The pictures relate not directly to actual objects but are instead images that represent certain values and ideals; within medieval literature, the images may represent important aspects of the courtly ideology such as courage and beauty. The function of these pictures is to serve as representations of the courtly ideal and to provide meaning. It is necessary to consider this tradition in order to understand that Lancelot’s frescoes work analogously to the logic of those literary paintings. The romance makes reference to the tradition of literary paintings. They serve, however, not only to represent courtly values, but also to represent the individual, personal sphere. The paintings represent Lancelot’s life, albeit in an idealised fashion. Moreover, the pictures create and form meaning based on absence, which itself produces a meaning of its own. The prose »Lance-

Troy’s ideological significance as the origin of knighthood and minne. The Trojan War is understood as the origin of knighthood which is defined as the fight for a lady. The values of the present are projected onto an idealized past in order to gain dignity and legitimation of the present. Troy is the model for exemplary courtly existence and behaviour (p. 202). The literary texts referring to the topic do not give detailed information about Troy as this is assumed to be known. In any case, authors do not aim at giving detailed information about Troy; in that way, historical data becomes the subject of a literary game without guaranteeing correctness (p. 209). The Trojan War appears as literary text or image not as an incident. The most popular example is Helmbrecht’s helmet in the »Meiser Helmbrechts« by Werner der Gartenarzt ca. 1250/80. Amongst other things it shows the theft of Helena, the conquest of Troy and the flight of Aeneas (p. 210). These pictures have a literary tradition only. The original image is the shield of Achilles in Homer’s »Iliads«. Although this image was present in the Middle Ages the frescoes with Trojan motives, which are shown on the walls of the temple of Juno in Carthage in Vergil’s »Aeneid«, were of most influence. But hardly ever do the pictures have a key role like in the prose »Lancelot« (p. 211).

41 Cf. STERNSTOFF’s commentary on 46,15 in STERNSTOFF IV, p. 847.
42 Cf. e.g. the description that Lancelot het t mye keyn ritterspiel getreben groß und cleyen, er hett es darim gemald and gemacht, so das yglieche syn recht maalt hett” (STERNSTOFF IV, 58,30-32; emphasis mine). Translation: »Lancelot did not take part in any knightly contest, major or minor, which he did not paint in it and he made the pictures in such a way that each had its perfect form.«

...tale takes up the tradition of literary paintings, a signifying chain without an actual object. The romance carries the signifying chain further by making the motif of the pictures personal; thereby Lancelot uses the pictures as an instrument to produce depictions of himself. In this way, the text draws specific attention to the central narrative framework, namely the interplay between absence and presence. When the protagonist picks up the brush, it becomes clear that the subject is responsible for the creation of signification and that signification creates the subject. Subject and signification are mutually dependent, each one is unable to exist without the other. The implication of this is that the individual who creates art is bound to art and art is bound to him or her; both the identity of art and the individual’s identity strongly depend on absence.

The specific performance of this interdependency may be regarded as being self-reflection and a poetics inscribed on different layers of the text, that is, on the plot and narrative level. Absence of the object as a source of art-creation is articulated on different textual layers:

1. In the plot, because the absence of Ginover (that is, the object of deferred desire) motivates Lancelot’s painting.
2. In aesthetic reflection, since the pictures that inspire Lancelot’s art exist only in literature; they are marked by the absence of a direct referent. Analogously to the pictures of Troy (which have a representational function since they serve for self-definition of the courtly society), Lancelot defines himself by his paintings.

Though Lancelot visualizes Ginover, she is only present in a mediated fashion. This mediated presence does not undo separation, but instead recreates absence. This paradoxical process is essential not only to the relation of the lovers to each other but also to the creation of Lancelot’s very identity, his melancholic character as well as to the plot. Separation is repeated time and time again, defining both the protagonist and the narration by loss. 43 Repetition of separation is what characterizes Lancelot as a melancholic and provides the analogical basis of the romance. The protagonist and the narrative structure continue along but they simultaneously preserve the notion of separation, which is the source from which meaning is created.

43 In regard to this cf. HIRSCHBERG’s statement about the protagonist who, as she explains, is most present for the society when he is absent, unable to act due to weakness, illness or imprisonment. In those moments everyone talks about him, celebrates his meaning for the community by endless questions and lamentations and search operations. HIRSCHBERG, Dagmar: Die Ohnmacht des Helden: Zur Konzeption des Protagonisten im »Prosa-Lancelot«. In: Wolfram-Studien IX (1986), pp. 242-256, here p. 253 (translation: C.A.).
IV. Conclusion

The episode of Lancelot’s painting reflects a form of the literary creation of identity. The images illustrate the motivation of signification that is caused by the separation from the signified object and the suffering connected to that separation. Presence as the aim of art is a less important concern. The episode performs the separation of the lovers and shows the power of the melancholic mood. Melancholy results from the basic condition of separation, which in the episode motivates the process of self-signification.

Julia Kristeva states that the experience of melancholy works as a fundamental stimulus for human action: It stimulates an act of creativity and an act of creating meaning. Because this sense is based on absence, the episode depicts the power of melancholy and mental wounding even though it is not overcome but recapitulated and recreated. The episode illustrates that melancholy cannot be surmounted by the individual, but also makes it clear that this emotion, which is of such great importance for the text, literally makes sense. It is apparent that melancholy is not only a mood characterizing the protagonist but itself a modality of identity. In the literary text, this modality is a basic element and a constituent of a literary way of narrating and signifying.

Ultimately, however, melancholy is not only an emotional condition of the protagonist but crucial for the text as a piece of art and for its aesthetic quality, especially in regard to its narrative structure. The specific structure that underlies Lancelot’s temperament and acting finds a correspondence in the overall idea of the romance: Separation cannot be overcome. At the end, it is impossible for the individual to find his or her place in the Arthurian community, whose decay must be confronted by its members, while the individual withdraws from the community and chooses monasticism, that is, reclusion. 44 When everything is said and done, though, the prose «Lancelot» proposes its own vision. It presents an individual who is forced into a state of separation and reclusion, who eventually absorbs separation into his very being, integrating it not as a condition for glory, 45 but as an indispensable condition and essence of life. It is by acknowledging his isolation and facing absence that the subject (as presented in the romance) attains a state in which he finds himself in a disillusioned – a melancholic – but dignified position.


45 Kristeva [note 9], p. 118.

Matthias Meyer
Parzifals Schwester – eine melancholische Textgeste?

This paper deals with Parzifal’s sister, one of the, if not the most enigmatic figures of the »Prose Lancelot«. While many of her narrative functions are clear, so far no satisfying interpretation for her very spectacular and completely useless death has been proposed. I suggest to read her as a melancholic gesture of the text. The content of this melancholic gesture is the ambivalent role – and, ultimately, exclusion – of women from the history of salvation.
