Hans Sachs and the Birth of Poetic Self-awareness: Autobiography, Criticism, and a Paradigm Shift in Literature

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Abstract
This paper reflects on the rise of poetic self-awareness during the sixteenth century. Although we can identify numerous poets from the twelfth through the fifteenth centuries who began to incorporate references to themselves and their activities as authors, the full-blown development of vernacular autobiography did not come to full bloom until the latter half of the sixteenth century, as best illustrated by the work of the Nuremberg cobbler and mastersinger, Hans Sachs. On the one hand, he included numerous comments about his writing itself, political problems, religious tensions, and his literary sources; on the other, he offered the first comprehensive analysis in poetic forms of his complete works, his *Summa* from 1567. In many other respects, Sachs also reflected consistently upon his own writing, and his personal experiences, continuing and intensifying, for instance, the trope of the widower's or widow's mourning. His *Summa* deserves particular respect in light of the rise in new autobiographical writings by his contemporaries, such as Thomas Platter.

Keywords: Hans Sachs, autobiographical writing, Nuremberg poet, early modernity, paradigm shift, Thomas Platter

1. Introduction

It has been fashionable to identify the emergence of the modern individual invested with a strong sense of the own identity with the time of around 1800, a topic which has been discussed intensively since the late nineteenth century. Other suggestions have focused on the Italian Renaissance as the starting point of modernity mirrored in the emergence of the pride in the own self (Jules Michelet, Jacob Burckhardt, et al.; since these are so well-known names, I have not engaged with them further). There are many good reasons to support such claims, as contradictory as they may be, but it also turns out quite quickly how badly informed we are about this phenomenon in earlier times, as if cultural markers or terms for epochs could be utilized so easily. For instance, already Gottfried von Strassburg included a detailed account of the literary scene of his time in his famous *Tristan* from ca. 1210, which sheds much light on his cultural context and his personal contacts as a minstrel, revealing a strong awareness of his own accomplishments and role as a courtly poet. As I want to argue here, to grasp more deeply the notion of the autobiography, we ought to move beyond traditional notions of it being a narrative focused factually on a person's biographical details (the famous scholar Misch, 1969, never even mentions some of the early modern autobiographers such as Hans Sachs, maybe because he

pursued a rather narrow literary-historical concept. Many others followed him in that regard and mostly repeated his comments; see, for instance, Pascal, 1960/1965; May, 1979; see also the contributions to Moog-Grünewald, ed., 2004).

Many of Gottfried's contemporaries, such as Wolfram von Eschenbach and Der Stricker, left numerous remarks in their works confirming that they wanted to reflect quite deliberately about themselves and their writing. Poets such as Walther von der Vogelweide and Neidhart were not shy at all to comment on their own lives, though we cannot assemble sufficient references in their poems to project a more biographically identifiable sense of self (Wehrli, 1984, 92–94). However, even in the following centuries, when the interest in the autobiographical element expanded considerable, if we think of Ulrich von Liechtenstein, Hugo von Montfort, Oswald von Wolkenstein, and Michel Beheim (Classen 1991), we cannot fully talk about autobiography in the modern sense of the word. Late medieval Dante is famous until today for his *Vita nuova* (between 1290 and 1304/1308), perhaps the first significant medieval narrative – a prosimetrum – about the experience of love as experienced by this poet during his youth (Dante Alighieri, 2024). Glorious and resolute, Christine de Pizan reflected deeply about the suffering in her own life and wrote also quasi autobiographical verse narratives, such as her *Le Livre de la mutation de fortune* (ca. 1403) (Christine de Pizan, 1993, 109–36; cf. now Griffin, 2009).

At the same time, there was already a long tradition of similar narratives composed in Latin, going as far back as St. Augustine of Hippo's *Confessiones* (ca. 397–ca. 400), but those did not necessarily influence the vernacular writings as they slowly but surely emerged by the late middle ages (The most seminal work on this topic was published by Georg Misch. But Misch was a strong defender of scholarly positivism, which we no longer subscribe to as a theoretical model in modern philology). At any rate, Augustine's monumental self-reflections remained unmatched for hundreds of years although they were read and admired throughout time. Nevertheless, comparable works emerged slowly, but not until the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, if we think of Peter Abelard, Othlo of St. Emmeram, Hermann of Scheda, and then, in the fourteenth century, Petrarch (*De* secreto, 1342) (Lehmann, 1997, 169–73. The late middle ages and the early modern age do not even play any role in this otherwise comprehensive survey. There are numerous similar reference works, but they either do not engage much with any pre-modern literature or ignore mostly German contributions to this genre. Online reference works are equally useless, see, for instance, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Autobiography (last accessed on Aug. 24, 2025). In short, even in terms of the autobiographical self-reflection, it proves to be rather difficult if not opaque to establish clear lines of historical demarcations separating, for instance, antiquity from the medieval world, and then the early modern age. The investigation of the emergence of an individual's self-consciousness, either in religious or secular terms, has always been a major litmus test regarding the development of cultural sophistication.

To be successful in that regard we must rely on a large body of evidence so as to reach critical mass that would then allow us to confirm with confidence that a true paradigm shift had occurred. We can achieve that goal especially when we consider the development of the genre of the autobiography. In the fifteenth century, for instance, individual writers increasingly made

attempts to inject themselves into their narrative projections, such as the English mystic Margery Kempe with her *Book* (ca. 1435) and the German-Hungarian author of her own memoirs, Helene Kottannerin, in her *Denkwürdigkeiten* (ca. 1451) (Aurell, 2012; see also the contributions to Smyth, ed., 2016; Wagner-Egelhaaf, M., ed., 2019, vol. 2: *History*. Cf. also the contributions to Bennewitz, Löser, together with Fischer, eds., 2022. For a helpful research review, see Singer, 2010).

Terms such as 'late middle ages' or 'renaissance' prove to be heuristically problematic and not really useful, whereas we should look for the intensification of the poetic/literary self-reflection as a major category for a true paradigm shift which certainly took place, but mostly in a much more diffused manner than we might think of today. On the one hand, we encounter a growing number of pilgrimage accounts in which the traveler/author increasingly referred to him/herself in autobiographical terms; on the other, the genre of autobiographies gained full traction especially among urban writers, such as Burkard Zink (1396–1474), Johann Steinwert von Soest (1448–1506), Ludwig von Diesbach (1452–1527), Hans Frenzel (1463–1526), Johannes Butzbach (1477–1516), Matthäus Schwarz (1497–1574), Thomas Platter (1499–1582), Andreas Ryff (d. ca. 1574), and Hermann von Weinsberg (1518–1597) (Despite the common scholarly problems with Wikipedia, see this useful list of autobiographies from antiquity to the present: https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liste_autobiografischer_Werke; last accessed on Aug. 24, 2025. Surprisingly, Hans Sachs, my most important witness here, is not even listed. As is commonly the case with this webpage, we have to take it with the grain of salt). On the other, lyric poetry increasingly mirrored a new level of self-awareness, whether we think of the fifteenth-century English/Scottish poets Thomas Hoccleve and King James, or whether we take into consideration the writings by Petrarch and Boccaccio in fourteenth-century Italy, who then passed on the literary baton to writers such as Antonio Pucci, Francesco Saccetti, and Poggio Bracciolini.

1.1 Purpose of this Study

By examining the self-reflections by the Nuremberg poet Hans Sachs, who at one point took a clear account of his own writings and compositions, we will be able to identify much more precisely a major turning point transforming the late middle ages into the early modern age. With Sachs, we may say, a true paradigm shift had occurred although he still drew extensively from medieval literature for his own writing. After a close analysis of his poetic account, this paper will then also consider some contemporary autobiographical writing to confirm the broad picture of the rise of the early modern age as mirrored through the use of this genre.

2. Early Modern Autobiographical Reflections

2.1 The Contribution by Hans Sachs

The situation changed more extensively, however, in the sixteenth century, beginning with the highly complex work by the famous artist Albrecht Dürer who painted himself numerous times and wrote about himself as well (Ekserdjian, 2023). The next step in that long-term process was certainly the Nuremberg cobbler, Hans Sachs (1494–1576), who left us, as scholarship has repeatedly pointed out, some of the most remarkable self-reflections especially regarding his

poetic output (Brunner, 2009. Although Sachs is mentioned in virtually every literary history covering also the sixteenth century, we do not yet have available more critical studies that would go beyond the traditional biographical account). Fortunately, we can also draw from contemporary narratives intended to relay a good idea about the writer's life to grasp more in detail the development of this new genre, such as the autobiographical verse compositions by the lansquenet Captain Georg Niege (1525–1588) (For a brief account online, see https://www.bach-cantatas.com/Lib/Niege-Georg.htm; for a full examination and edition, see Bei der Wieden, ed. and commentary, 1996. For a full examination and edition, see Bei der Wieden, ed. and commentary, 1996; see also Bei der Wieden, B. 2002. Otherwise, research has not yet engaged with his work to any measurable extent). Whereas Gottfried von Strassburg only engaged with the literary works produced by his contemporaries, Sachs was the first German poet to demonstrate proudly what he had produced in sheer numbers and what genres he had drawn from. Although the relevant texts have already been extensively anthologized, especially his *Summa all meiner gedicht*, the latter deserves much more in-depth analysis because here we encounter a true milepost in the history of German literature leading us into the early modern age where the individual in his/her social and secular context emerged focused specifically on the personal accomplishments (Sachs, 2003, 19–28).

Undoubtedly, throughout his work, Sachs commented on himself and his life in the city, on his relationship with the Protestant Reformation, and his marriages. But the most impressive document, truly unique in all pre-modern literature, proves to be his *Summa*. I will focus on this verse narrative in detail and then reflect finally on the subsequent development of the genre of the autobiography, rounding this study off with some observations on Sachs's contemporary, the autobiographer Thomas Platter.

In a way, in the *Summa*, we face a kind of inventory as any business owner would have to put together on a regular basis, and this until today. In the case of Sachs, this inventory pertained to his literary works that he had produced during his long lifetime. There are no parallel efforts by any of Sachs's predecessors (Chaucer), contemporaries (Rabelais), or successors (Shakespeare, Milton).

He wrote this *Summa* on January 1, 1567, and this specific date already signals how much the poet approached his task like an accountant of his own literary record. But, as the first few lines already indicate, he intended to pursue a broader perspective, beginning with a reference to his birth in 1494, on November 5, as he adds, outlining thus in greatest detail how accurate he wanted to be in his reflections. His parents suffered from an epidemic, and only he was not affected, which altogether reminds us, of course, of our own recent epidemic, COVID-19.

At first, Sachs mentions his school experiences, then his apprenticeship as a shoemaker, which subsequently led to his years as a journeyman who learned under many different masters to accomplish his craftsman skills, staying in Regensburg, Braunau, Salzburg, Reichenhall, Passau, Wels, Munich, Landshut, Oetting, Burghausen, Würzbug, Frankfurt, Koblenz, Cologne, and Aachen. Contrary to some fanciful comments, Sachs thus did not travel outside of the German-

speaking world, although the itinerary itself proves to be quite impressive, covering five years. In contrast to other journeymen, he did not turn to gambling, drinking, and whoring; instead, he committed himself to the art of singing, practicing "meistergsang," which he calls "löbling kunst" (44). He even shares the name of his major teacher in this art, Lienhardt Nunnebeck (46; died prior to 1527) and then comments on his early beginning of composing songs himself and setting up singing schools wherever he stayed, such as in Frankfurt and Nuremberg (62 and 64).

Even though Sachs then continues with biographical data, such as his marriage to Kunegunde Kreutznerin (Küngundt Creutzerin), their seven children, who all passed away, and then Kunegunde's death in 1560, followed by his second marriage to Barbara Harscherin in the same year, his real focus rests on his works and hence on the inventory that he wants to create for himself and his posterity. In fact, he calls it himself an inventory, "Da inventirt ich meine bücher" (91). It is the year 1567, and it is time for him to review his output of "gedicht, sprüch und gesang" (89; poems, didactic verses, and songs). Sachs proves to be very diligent in that process, outlining in detail how many books containing the texts of the various genres he has assembled, both those that he had completed and those that were still unfinished. Although the printing press had already taken over the book market to a large extent, the poet remarks, which is of extreme importance for us considering the survival of the manuscript culture, "Alle geschriben mit eigner hand" (100; all written by my own hand) (Neddermeyer, 1998. However, he does not mention Sachs at all. For the continuity of the manuscript culture far into the late sixteenth and also seventeenth centuries, see Classen, 2024a). However, we have to discriminate here further since Sachs does not talk about his published texts, only about the handwritten works in his private possession.

Nevertheless, the poet then indulges us with a look into his writing workshop, or his practice of choosing sources and utilizing them for his poetic inspiration, that is, primarily the Old and the New Testament: "Auch auß apocalypsis schon / Auß den ich allen vil gedicht / In meistergsang hab zugericht" (116–18; also from the Book of the Apocalypse, from all of which I have created poems arranged as mastersongs). Moreover, here we learn, maybe for the first time in the history of German literature, about his daily efforts to create new poetry – there are no modern examples that I could easily draw from because contemporary poets also normally do not reflect on their own writing process the way Sachs does. Undoubtedly, he considered himself as an interpreter of the major biblical narratives which his songs accompanied like glosses and "außlegung" (119). He believes that those have become widely known at singing schools all over Germany, which amounts to the assumption that his songs would serve parallel to Luther's sermons as teaching material all over the country. Sachs was no trained theologian, but he considers himself as a sort of teacher by means of his "Meisterlieder" and consistently aimed at instructing his audience about a proper, God-fearing lifestyle.

Moreover, Sachs was particularly proud of his secular songs, "weltlich histori" (126; worldly stories), through which he could convey ethical teachings: "lob der gutn erhaben" (127; praise of those who are good) and "der argen lob tief vergraben" (128; the praise of the evil ones being deeply covered in the ground). Sachs did not care about originality and openly referred to his

many sources, such as historical chronicles, fictional accounts, philosophical treatises, fables, parables, didactic tales, and jest narratives: "kurtzweilig schwenck" (146). In other words, he conceived himself as a poetic medium to draw from the widest range of sources that could be used, after his adaptation, for ethical, moral, religious, and spiritual teachings. Very similar as the many different authors of *Schwänke*, he aimed at presenting literary entertainment for those suffering from sorrow and being in need of uplifting narratives. However, none of his texts were supposed to titillate the audience in any immoral fashion: "Doch alle unzucht außgenommen" (148; free from all ethical transgression).

While he focuses at first on the type of songs he had produced, next Sachs turns to sheer numbers, specifying concretely how many melodies he had used and how many of those had been his own creations. Going more deeply into detail, the poet mentions also various types of plays, specifically tragedies and comedies, many of which had been performed in Nuremberg and in other cities. Proudly he highlights that he had been very sought after as a playwright: "Nach dem man schicket meiner zeit" (168), explicitly presenting himself as a leading literary figure of his time. Through his fictional works, he had been in the position of teaching young readers about ethical ideals, and through the adaptation of philosophical insights he managed to convey many timeless insights: "Und auch von manchen weisen heiden, / Von der natur artlich, bescheiden" (175–76; And also from many wise heathens who knew much about the essence of nature).

Referring to the genre of the jest narrative which he had also employed, he boasted of having provided easy entertainment and moral instruction at the same time, following, for example, though not mentioned here, the model created by the Franciscan sermon poet Johannes Pauli with his *Schimpf und Ernst* (1522), a cornerstone of sixteenth-century didactic literature (Classen, 2003; Classen, 2024c). For a solid discussion of the genre of the jest narrative, see Bausinger, 2005). As in the case of his predecessor, Sachs embraced the Horatian principle of *prodesse et delectare* (19 B.C.E.), to teach, in a light but firm manner, basics of human behavior and a logical and rational mode of thinking: "Doch nit zu grob noch unverschemt" (179; but not too crudely or recklessly). Subsequently, he returns to the inventory and lists the exact number of texts that he had produced in that vein and genre. Here he also specifies how many books with his texts he had printed, the sheer quantity of which greatly amazed people: "Darob sich mannich mann verwundert" (190). Similarly, referring to his didactic verses, he announces that a good number of them would soon appear in print. In other words, Sachs surveys both his manuscripts and the printed books and thus creates a significant verbal bridge between both media. To avoid the danger of being accused of bragging, he constantly presents himself as an investigator who went through the private records by someone else and here now lists what he had found in the archive: "Auch fand ich in mein büchern gschriben" (195).

In a way, Sachs carries out a self-performance, so as if he were studying the library of another poet and rummaged through his manuscripts, outlining the results of the investigation, which seemed to surprise him as well: "Nach dem fand ich auch in der meng / Psalmen und ander kirchengsäng" (219–20; After that I found in the mass of material also psalms and hymns). With

just a brief comment, he then adds that he had commonly created *contrafacta*, i.e., worldly songs based on melodies for religious songs by other poets: “Auch verendert geistliche lieder” (201; also adapted hymns). Remarkably, which highlights Sachs’s enormous breadth of genres, which was unparalleled by any other late medieval and sixteenth-century poet as far as I can tell, he had also created “gassenhawer” (202; popular sings, or, in modern terms, single hits), war songs, and erotic songs, all with their own melodies, sixteen of which he had composed himself (Interestingly, this term is still being used today in German for a light, entertaining, and hence popular song. See the *Deutsches Wörterbuch* by the Brothers Grimm, online at: https://woerterbuchnetz.de/?sigle=DWB&lemid=G01823. And for contemporary usage of this term, see https://www.dwds.de/wb/Gassenhauer).

Proudly, adding up all his works in numerical terms, Sachs then concludes his inventory, stating that he could look back to a total of six thousand and hundred seventy pieces. Perfunctorily demonstrating a humble attitude (humility topos), he characterizes them all as literary expressions of God’s greatness, while he calls himself God’s mouthpiece: “Zu gottes preis, rhum, lob und glori, / Und daß sein wort werd außgebreit / Bey christlicher gmein ferr und weit” (222–24; in the praise, fame, laudation, and glory of God so that His word be disseminated among Christian communities near and far). But then it breaks out of him after all, that is, his pride about being so popular all over Germany: “Und im Teutschland an allen orten” (226). He regards himself as an apostle of virtues and honor, which gains him praise and fame: “Werd hoch gepreiset und perhümt” (229). By means of his verses, Sachs could assume the position of a spokesperson in all the German-speaking lands upholding traditional virtues and ideals.

As probably all poets throughout time, Sachs, not shy of profiling himself in the strongest possible terms, thinks intensively of his posthumous glory and hopes that his verses will survive him long after his death: “Wie mir das auch nach meinem leben / Mein gedicht werden zeugnuß geben” (234–46; how even after my life, my poems will give testimony [of myself]) – the concept of *memoria*. Whereas Oswald von Wolkenstein (ca. 1376/77–1445) had still worried greatly that he might quickly become forgotten once he would have passed away (Kl. 117, stanza I) (Oswald von Wolkenstein, 2015, 298–300), Sachs is filled with much more self-confidence and hence presents the *Summa* of his complete works as a testimony of his universal and timeless praise. He explicitly underscores what he expects from his posterity regarding his literary compositions: “Darbey man wol abnemen mag, / Daß der spruch von gedichten mein / Gar wol mag mein valete sein” (240–42).

The poet admits openly that many signs of old age vex him and that he feels the urge “Daß ich zur rhu mich billich setz” (245; that I deservedly retire) (for the same phenomenon, see the contributions to Classen, ed., 2007; Classen, 2024b; Martin, Ch., 2012; Porck, 2019; Classen, forthcoming). The very sensation of approaching death makes him survey what he has written and composed so far, and to leave no doubt about his accomplishments, he concludes his creative life with this extraordinary summary (Mattern, 2015). As he then concludes, he expects his works to serve as teaching tools for the ordinary people who would profit from the messages contained in them: “mit gotts hülff sich besser darvon” (249; improve himself with God’s help).

Drawing from a traditional humility topos, Sachs ends his long poetic inventory by expressing his gratitude to God for having granted to him this literary creativity although he himself describes himself as unlearned, i.e., as someone who “weder latein noch griechisch kan” (252; knows neither Latin nor Greek), certainly formulated in the same way as we have heard it already from Wolfram von Eschenbach in his *Parzival* (ca. 1205, 115, 26–27) (Hartmann, 2025, 55–56).

The self-satire is quite obvious, and in the case of Sachs we can be even more certain about that because he had attended only local school during his youth and had never received advanced or intellectual education. However, in both cases, the formulation hides a considerable degree of irony and self-assurance because both poets proved to be extraordinarily receptive of a wide range of literary sources, both the Bible and classical-ancient works, French and probably also Dutch romances, and heroic epic poems (Wolfram), and then the wide range of late medieval verse narratives and romances (Sachs). Both were fully aware of their literary accomplishment and used this traditional model of self-deprecation to highlight their actual mastership and poetic abilities. As we can read at the end of Sachs’s long autobiographical poem, he sends it out to his audience far and wide to assure that his works would continue to bloom long after his death.

We are certainly justified to talk about an autobiography although the poet emphasizes primarily his works and not so much his personal life. Uniquely, he offers a historical frame, giving us even the specific day when he composed this poetic inventory, but then he pushes all his literary works into the foreground because he identified with it above all and did not need to talk much about his profession as a cobbler.

When we comb through his other works, we often perceive his personal voice serving as a figure in a dialogue, for instance, explaining thus the occasion of the specific poem, such as the death of the much-hated Margrave Albrecht Alcibiades of Brandenburg in 1557. As in the case of many medieval dream allegories, most famously Guillaume de Lorris’ and Jean de Meun’s *Roman de la rose* (first ca. 1235, later ca. 1270), Sachs situates himself in a dream setting where he encounters “Genius” and engages with him about the horrible impact of the Margrave’s military operations all over Germany (here quoted from Sachs, 2003, 52–64. See, for instance, Nolte, 1984; Trappen, 1992). Again, a specific date is given, and then an explanation what the gravamina would be regarding this rebellious and brutal military leader (see, for instance, Kneitz, 2012; Lauer, 2012). The poet makes it very clear that he only relates of a dream, and yet that one provides him with the narrative platform to examine the issue with this tyrannical Margrave from the safe distance behind the fictional screen. Somewhat fearful of possible political fallout, he finally calls his poem only a “gesicht” (293; a vision) and cautiously leaves it up to the audience to determine what this verbal exchange might have been: “ob der traum on gefer / Die-selbig nacht sey kumen her” (295–96; where this dream might have come from that night). He himself would not be wise enough to figure this out and defers to others who might speak up on his behalf which thus would protect him from negative reverberations: “Das mir kein ungunst daraus wachs” (299; so that no harm for me might result) (Palmer, Philipowski, and Rühemann, eds., 2022. Hans Sachs, however, does not figure here at all).

To be sure, this is not autobiographical in the modern sense of the word, but it still confirms both here and many times throughout his work that Hans Sachs emphasizes his personal perspective and position, making sure that the audience knows exactly who created this poem and others. Concluding each text with the precise date perfectly rounds off this approach, so we can conclude that here we observe a definite move away from most medieval fictional or factual engagements with the own self, again disregarding the tradition of theological writing (Augustine) (see the contributions to DiBattista, Wittman, eds., 2014).

Whereas the topic of the widow's or widower's lament had already been worked on since around 1400, if we think of the contributions by Christine de Pizan (*Ballades*) and Johannes von Tepl (*Ackermann*), we can credit Hans Sachs for being the first major German poet to employ his poetic art to formulate an elegy on the death of his first wife, Kunigunde Kreutzerin (see, for instance, the contributions to Mirrer, ed., 1992. Unexpectedly, Hans Sachs is not even mentioned here. But in German-language research, we observe the same desideratum; see Kruse, 2007). In his efforts to come to terms with his mourning, he also found a significant way to explore his own emotions and the conditions of his private life. Almost like in a funeral sermon, which was a highly popular literary genre since the sixteenth century (Classen, 2000; Schlosser, 2016). Sachs presents many details of their married life, their children, and especially their love for each other: "Wolt Got, das ich sie solt auff erdt / Gehabt haben biß an mein endt! / Gott aber selb hat das gewendt" (25–27; By God, I had hoped that she would have stayed with me until the end of my life, but God Himself changed that) (Keller, ed., 1878/1964, Vol. 11, 462, 25–26).

In surprising detail, the poet traces the course of her illness which then led to her death. After her funeral, as the poet says, "Ach Gott, erst wart meim hertzen bang, / Weil ich mein gmahel nit mehr het" (463, 20–21; Oh God, then my heart felt real pain because my wife was no longer with me). More than ever before, even more than in the mournful ballads by Christine de Pizan about the loss of her husband, Sachs creates a psychogram of his deep grief, the painful feelings of his loneliness, and the desperation that filled his heart: "Wenn ich mich denn bedacht, das sie / Gestorben were und nicht mehr hie, / So wurdt mein hertzenleidt mir new" (463, 37–39; When I realized that she had died and was no longer here, the pain in my heart became renewed). Sachs even presents a dream image of her returning to him at night, but he had to realize that it was only a shadow, "Zu trösten mich in meiner schwer" (464, 35; to console me in my sorrow). Nevertheless, the poet engages with this spirit and inquires about the afterlife, which his wife cannot answer because it would be impossible for people to understand: "Wann kein mensch in dem zeitling leben / Mit nichte die ding kan verston" (465, 32–33; No human being here in this world can understand any of those things). Only death would open people's eyes, and until then, nothing could be revealed (466, 8). The same dream message he had received a long time ago from his previous teacher Nonnenbeck, so there is a repeat, and Sachs thus combines the memory from the past with the experience in his new dream to tell a consistent message.

Of course, the entire poem is primarily theological in its core, but the framework certainly underscores the autobiographical reflections since Sachs works hard to come to terms with his

mourning and to correlate the experience of his wife's death with the universal condition of all human life since only death can help the individual to gain divine understanding. More than ever before in the history of medieval and early modern German literature does this poet endeavor to make his entire work biographically transparent because he was, like his contemporaries, increasingly concerned with his own self both in this and the other world.

To round off our investigation, we could also include some comments on the autobiography of the Swiss Thomas Platter (1499–1582), who was even more concerned with describing all details of his life in a prose text. But this would take us into another dimension of this genre and hence would constitute the topic of another paper. Suffice it here, hence, to highlight how much this writer was already fully aware of the great relevance which such writing could have for the entire family and community. As he states right at the beginning, his life was determined by God who had protected him many times from life-threatening dangers. Since Platter rose from abject poverty to a respectable position in society holding an honorable profession as a teacher, he specifically perceives the need to write his autobiography for didactic purposes both to instruct his son Felix and to illuminate his wider readership about his experiences under God's protection (Platter, 1999; cf. Wirth, ed., 1999; Meyer, ed., 2002).

Results

Of course, the differences to comparable efforts in medieval literature are not huge, especially if we keep both the didactic and the religious purpose behind the autobiographical writing in mind. Nevertheless, more than ever before, both in the case of Sachs and Platter, the individual writing of these accounts truly assumes central position for these two authors because it is their main concern to figure out the course of their own lives and to gain a good understanding of their purpose and direction here on earth. Medieval poets such as Wolfram von Eschenbach, Boccaccio, and Christine de Pizan had, of course, already similar ideas in mind, but they did not take the essential step forward to create essentially an autobiographical account as later poets would do.

In this regard, Hans Sachs remains an extraordinarily self-conscious poet who identified himself through his vast œuvre and thus set a new tone in the history of this genre, although most philologists have not yet fully recognized his accomplishment in that regard (see, for instance, Lehmann, 1997). Ironically, recent scholars have been willing to include Thomas Platter's account and that of his son, Felix Platter, into the genre of early-modern autobiography (Wagner-Egelhaaf, 2000, 128–29), but they then entirely ignore the truly monumental contribution by Hans Sachs who reflected upon his own literary accomplishments more than anyone else before him. Even Sachs-research has not yet adequately recognized this poet's major step forward in the intellectual history of the early modern times (Behr, ed., 1994).

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