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THE WISE KING'S VANITY:  
THE הבל MOTIF IN THE RECEPTION OF KING SOLOMON

Elisabeth Birnbaum and Susanne Gillmayr-Bucher

ABSTRACT

The artistic receptions of Solomon frequently constructed his image by using elements from several biblical books. Solomon is not only portrayed as a great king in the manner of the books of Kings and Chronicles, but also as the royal lover of the Song of Songs and the author of wisdom texts. When Solomon is identified with Qohelet the disturbing thoughts of vanity become a characteristic challenge for the figure of Solomon in literature or music. Depending on their respective cultural context, the way how the motive of הבל is inserted into the story of Solomon differs considerably. הבל can be depicted as an enlightening insight into an erroneous way of life or a warning cautioning against an apotheosis of the world; the challenging questions of הבל can also be caused by an onslaught of black thoughts or the experience of a substantial loss. Corresponding to the different reasons provoking the insight that everything is הבל, various ways of dealing with this recognition are unfolded and Solomon is shown to overcome, to succumb or to endure הבל.

Identifying Solomon as the person who struggles with the brevity and futility of life permits artists to deal with these questions paradigmatically. As a legendary king, Solomon is portrayed as a privileged man who can draw on unlimited resources and thus represents humankind at its best.

‘Vanity of vanities, all is vanity’ (Eccl. 1.2). With these words the book of Ecclesiastes opens Qohelet’s reflections about humankind and its role in the world. The comment ‘all is vanity’ echoes throughout the whole book like a *Leitwort*, summarizing almost all aspects of human life. As the central qualifying remark this phrase has posed a challenge for interpreters of all times, theologians and artists alike. They have wondered whether it should be regarded as the desperate outcry of a pessimist or just as an unemotional reminder not to overestimate worldly things; and they also have been highly sceptical towards a perspective that offers joy in reply to vanity. Questions like that have frequently led them to search for the author of this book, his attitude of mind and the discourses he was engaged in. Such an interest is

already implied in the book of Ecclesiastes itself when the ‘royal fiction’ in Eccl. 1.12–2.26 hints that Solomon is the speaker.<sup>1</sup> In this way sapiential considerations are contextualized and open the possibility for readers to combine the story of Solomon with the thoughts of Ecclesiastes. This point of view was frequently picked up in artistic portraits of Solomon and thus Qohelet’s thoughts about vanity often became an essential part of the literary portraits of Solomon.

The present study focuses on the reception of King Solomon under the perspective of הבל. Using examples from the era of Baroque and modern times we will show the challenges artistic works express when they pick up the motif of הבל and the ways they try to propose an answer by bringing Solomon and הבל together. We will thus explore how this combination of biblical motifs is used to make a contribution to the discourses of different cultural contexts.<sup>2</sup>

### 1. Solomon and הבל: Forcing a New Perspective

When the book of Ecclesiastes and the story of King Solomon merge, two new perspectives appear: On the one hand this combination provides a plausible setting for the reflections in the book of Ecclesiastes and enhances their authenticity and legitimacy. On the other hand, these thoughts offer a insight into the inner life of King Solomon and this information might even provide an explanation for his sudden downfall, however, often only in hindsight. In this way Solomon is no longer only a great and wise king

1. The so-called ‘royal fiction’ implies that Qohelet identifies himself with Solomon as a thought experiment. Thus, his query for joy is tested under the best possible conditions. The royal fiction offers many intertextual connections with the story of Solomon in 1 Kings 1–11 without mentioning his name explicitly. For further details see, for example, Ludger Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet* (Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Alten Testament; Freiburg, Basel, Wien: Herder, 2nd edn, 2011), pp. 188–89, 207–17. Nevertheless the royal experiment fails: Qohelet has to acknowledge that a Solomonic way of life does not lead to the happiness that is searched for. Most exegetes see the end of this royal experiment in 2.26 (e.g. Robert Gordis, *Koheleth—The Man and his World. A Study of Ecclesiastes* [New York: Schocken Books, 3rd edn, 1968], p. 209; Elisabeth Birnbaum and Ludger Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Das Buch Kohelet* [Neuer Stuttgarter Kommentar Altes Testament, 14,2; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2012], p. 22; Thomas Krüger, *Kohelet [Prediger]* [Biblische Kommentare Altes Testament, 19 (Sonderband); Neukirchen–Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2000], pp. 123–52); others suggest 2.11 (e.g. Diethelm Michel, *Untersuchungen zur Eigenart des Buches Qohelet* [BZAW, 183; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1989], p. 9) or even 3.22 (e.g. Franz Josef Backhaus, *‘Es gibt nichts Besseres für den Menschen’ [Koh 3,22]. Studien zur Komposition und zur Weisheitskritik im Buch Kohelet* [BBB, 121; Bodenheim: Philo, 1998], pp. 186–205).

2. Cf. Timothy Beal, ‘Reception History and Beyond: Toward the Cultural History of Scriptures’, *BibInt* 19 (2011), pp. 357–72 (364).

but also a man struggling with the challenging realization of הבל. The different lines of thought in the book of Ecclesiastes can now be read as King Solomon's considerations, his personal struggle and his attempt to deal with these demanding questions.<sup>3</sup> This mutual extension of the ways the texts can be understood provides the basis for their later receptions. Together, the varied and sophisticated philosophical reflections of Ecclesiastes and the stories of a great, wise and peaceful king form a rich reservoir for an artistic continuation.

Recognizing הבל as a comprehensive concept radically challenges accepted social and religious systems of values. It forces anybody struggling with הבל to reconsider his or her basic attitudes, religious opinion and philosophy of life. The critical potential of הבל is further enhanced by the fact that the Hebrew word הבל has several shades of meaning, ranging from futility, emptiness, uselessness, vanity, insubstantiality and transience to absurd or enigmatic.<sup>4</sup> Translations or interpretations of the book of Ecclesiastes, hence, focus on different aspects and so do literary receptions of this motif when they transfer it to different situations and cultural contexts.<sup>5</sup> Although the values and world views change throughout time the radical challenge of הבל remains the same.

## 2. הבל—*Looking Back in Remorse*

Solomon's insight into the vanity of the world is often depicted as the consequence of his repentance. Solomon, who despite his wisdom and explicit warnings had turned apostate, suddenly realizes what he has done and

3. Furthermore, these presentations of Solomon and his struggle with הבל are a way to deal with the challenges the book of Ecclesiastes presents. They not only attempt to interpret the king's struggle with הבל but also to present an explanation for the existence and the purpose of the book of Ecclesiastes. This becomes especially obvious in works presenting Solomon as the author of the book of Ecclesiastes (e.g. the novels of Merkel and Obermeier). They depict Solomon's painful efforts to deal with הבל as poetological struggles.

4. Cf. Anton Schoors, *Ecclesiastes* (Historical Commentary on the Old Testament; Leuven: Peters, 2013), p. 43; Craig Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes* (Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), p. 104; Detlef Dieckmann, 'Worte von Weisen sind wie Stacheln' (Koh 12,11). *Eine rezeptionsorientierte Studie zu Koh 1–2 und zum Lexem דבר im Buch Kohelet* (ATANT, 103; Zürich: TVZ, 2012), p. 58; Birnbaum and Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Das Buch Kohelet*, pp. 32-37.

5. Such usage of biblical motives corresponds to the intertextual relation Genette calls 'transformation'. According to Genette this relation is 'the most important of all hypertextual practices' (Gérard Genette, *Palimpsestes, Literature in the Second Degree* [trans. Channa Newman and Claude Doubinski; Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska, 1982], p. 212). With regard to the motifs of הבל and Solomon satirical and serious transformations can be found.

acknowledges that everything he has achieved and lived for is vanity.<sup>6</sup> The works focusing on Solomon's downfall usually point out his reversion to a god-fearing life as the main consequence of his insight. Especially in the Baroque era such a course of events is often depicted. In the tradition of the *Contemptus mundi* Solomon's insight into the vanity of the world is considered to be a catharsis and thus a turn for the better.

The idea of the *Contemptus mundi* is not primarily contempt or denigration, but rather neglecting or avoiding idolization of the world. The insight into the vanity of every worldly good is closely connected with adoring and seeking the everlasting good. Thus, it has to be promoted, for it enhances virtue and spiritual development.<sup>7</sup> The admonition to the *Contemptus mundi* is widespread in the Baroque era.<sup>8</sup> Solomon as the wisest of all kings appears to be the perfect role model for this reminder. His wisdom, however, does not prevent him from failing. Only when he sees the vanity of all worldly goods is he able to change his life. Even if Solomon is not able to make a new start in life, his regret and insight are depicted as a success.

A fine example of this literature is the lyrical portrait of Solomon by Augustin Grieninger in his *Salomonischer Scepter* (1685).<sup>9</sup> In forty songs he shows Solomon's life,<sup>10</sup> from his accession to power and his achievements

6. In the Baroque era lust for life and dread of vanity are closely linked. Cf. Gerhart Hoffmeister, *Deutsche und europäische Barockliteratur* (Sammlung Metzler, 234; Stuttgart: Metzler, 1987), pp. 174-75.

7. In the 17th century literature is always closely related to social and political issues. The literary figures and their attitudes and deeds convey modes of behaviour. Thus literature often serves educational, political and religious interests. Cf. Volker Meid, *Barocklyrik* (Sammlung Metzler, 227; Stuttgart: Metzler, 1986), pp. 8-10.

8. See only the scores of *memento mori* or *ubi sunt* literature in these times. The concept is rooted, however, in both classical philosophy and biblical texts. Stoic and Neoplatonic philosophy claimed *ataraxia* as the supreme aim in life; Paul distinguishes between *sarx* and *psyche*. The Church Fathers adopted the concept to promote asceticism. Jerome, following Origen and Didymus, understood the book of Ecclesiastes as a manifesto of a *Contemptus mundi*. This interpretation had an impact on interpretations of this book up to the modern era; cf. Elisabeth Birnbaum and Ludger Schwienerhorst-Schönberger (eds.), *Hieronymus als Exeget und Theologe* (BETL, 268; Leuven: Peeters, 2014).

9. Augustin Grieninger, *Salomonischer Scepter. Das ist: Über Salomons Hof-Haltung / Lebens-Lauff und denckwürdigen Sprüchen / leicht-verständig und nützlich Gemüths-erfrischende Poeterey / Dann: Ob Salomon selig oder verdammt sey / Lehrreiche Muthmassungen...* (Augsburg, 1685).

10. The songs follow the chronological structure of the biblical narration in 1 Kings; however, many quotations and allusions include the sapiential writings and thus depict their thoughts as a part of Solomon's biography. Cf. Cornelia Rémi, 'Salomonische Rede. Lektüreangebote und Wahrnehmungsmöglichkeiten der Sinn-Getichte', in Thomas Althaus and Sabine Seelbach (eds.), *Salomo in Schlesien. Beiträge zum 400. Geburtstag Friedrich von Logaus (1605–2005)* (Chloe. Beihefte zum Daphnis, 39; Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), pp. 151-84 (180).

as king to his apostasy.<sup>11</sup> An essential part of these songs is dedicated to Solomon's downfall and his repentance. Once he realizes what he has done he not only regrets his lapse but sees the world from a different point of view. In hindsight Solomon interprets everything on earth as הבל.<sup>12</sup>

This motif is also picked up for musical implementations. The oratorios of Bernardo Pasquini<sup>13</sup> and Fr Maria Veracini<sup>14</sup> focus on Solomon's idolatry because of his love for foreign women (1 Kings 11). Both describe his downfall as consciously turning away from virtue and wisdom and surrendering to lust and emotions. Only after sacrificing unto Moloch does Solomon become aware of the extent of his wrongdoing. At this moment, in Pasquini's *L'idolatria di Salomone* (1686), Solomon declares:

*Il tutto è vanità*

*[everything is vanity]*

denigrating with 'il tutto' especially the enjoyment of love and the veneration of foreign gods. However, this insight turns out to be too late. The narrator ('testo'<sup>15</sup>) concludes the oratorio by emphasizing that Solomon's remorse was too late or not sufficient to save him from the wrath of God and men and from the downfall of his reign.

In Veracini's oratorio, *La caduta del savio nell'idolatria di Salomone* (1720), however, Solomon is restored and becomes the wise man who proclaims the 'moral' of the play himself. Out of his experience he admonishes his bystanders and every mortal to flee worldly pleasures:

*Da si gran male / fuggi o Mortale / Che il mondo è scena / di vanità.*

*[From such a great evil flee, O mortal, because the world is a stage of vanity.]*

In Georg Caspar Schürmann's opera *Salomon* (1716)<sup>16</sup> the intrigues of love and idolatry are even more expanded. The libretto develops a very

11. Rémi, 'Salomonische Rede', p. 179.

12. Songs 18–19 especially address the vanity of all things.

13. Bernardo Pasquini, *L'idolatria di Salomone. Oratorio, cantato nella Sala del Collegio Clementino...* (Rome: Domenico Antonio Ercole, 1686).

14. Maria Veracini and Giovanni Pietro Berzini, *La caduta del savio nella idolatria di Salomone. Oratorio per Musica da cantarsi...* (Florence: Michele Nestenus, 1724).

15. The *testo* or *historicus* is the narrator in the Latin or Italian oratorios. He not only reports the story but comments on and evaluates the actions of the *dramatis personae*. Especially in Italian oratorios he concludes the play with the 'moral' of the story.

16. Georg Caspar Schürmann (1672–1751), *Salomon. In einer Opera nebst einem Prologus ...* (Wolffenbüttel: Christian Bartsch, 1716). Online: [digital.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/dms/werkansicht/?PPN=PPN696793059](http://digital.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/dms/werkansicht/?PPN=PPN696793059). The librettist is Duke Anton Ulrich von Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel, the father and predecessor of the reigning Duke August Wilhelm. He wrote his *Salomon* c. 1700. See also note 18.



complex plot full of love-triangles and intrigues, and full of desired, feared or enjoyed love-affairs. In the end it seems to be not merely remorse, but maybe a little bit of annoyance that leads the king to repulse his countless wives and to state:

*'Ja / Ja / nur Eitelkeit sind alle Ding auf Erden. /  
Sieht man das Thun der Menschen an / was ists? nichts, das bestehen kann /  
denn alles fällt und schwindt doch mit der Zeit / und bringt nur Jammer  
und Beschwerden.  
Ja / ja / nur Eitelkeit.'*

*[Yes / yes /all things on earth are only vanity. / One looks at the doings of  
humankind / what is it? Nothing that can persist / because everything falls  
and diminishes with time / and brings only lament and complaints. /  
Yes / yes / only vanity.]*

The final words of the drama are:

*'Ich bin des Lebens müd und satt / dann ich befind / daß alle Ding jedoch  
nur eitel sind / und nichts Bestand auf dieser Erden hat / drum bin ich nun  
des Lebens satt. /  
Ja alles ist nur eitel / eitel / eitel. Ja alles ist nur eitel / eitel / eitel.'*

*[I'm tired and fed up with life / because I find / that all things are only vain  
/ and nothing can persist on this earth / that is why I am now fed up with  
life. / Yes, everything is only vain / vain / vain. Yes, everything is only vain  
/ vain / vain.]*

Quite similar to this opera is the Singspiel *Die über die Liebe triumphierende Weissheit oder: Salomo*<sup>17</sup> of Reinhard Keiser with the libretto of Christian Friedrich Hunold (Menantes) (1706)<sup>18</sup>. Remorse and repentance for a misguided way of life lead to the painful yet healing insight that all this has to be evaluated as vanity. Yet his insight leads him to turn away from 'worldly confusion' and to bethink himself. He sends away his foreign women and rejects idolization.

The portrait of Solomon presented in these works serves as an example of the insight that everything is הבל, even the king. In Baroque literature figures usually have to follow a role that corresponds to their class and that also fits into the standards of an absolutist regime.<sup>19</sup> For contemporary

17. Reinhard Keiser, *Die über die Liebe triumphierende Weissheit, oder Salomon* (Hamburg: Greflinger, 1703).

18. Reinhard Keiser (1674–1739) based his *Singspiel* on the libretto of Christian Hunold, alias Menantes. The similarities to Schürmann's opera are due to the fact that Menantes relied on Duke Anton Ulrich von Braunschweig's *Salomon*.

19. Cf. Gerhart Hoffmeister, *Deutsche und europäische Barockliteratur* (Sammlung Metzler, 234; Stuttgart: Metzler, 1987), p. 179.

rulers, hence, the comparison with Solomon, the wisest of all biblical kings, is simultaneously a compliment and a warning.<sup>20</sup>

Although this line of interpretation recedes in later years, it is not abandoned. At the end of the nineteenth century Ludwig Frankl<sup>21</sup> dedicates a cycle of poems to Solomon (1876).<sup>22</sup> He tells the story of Solomon, who loses his kingdom to a demon. One day, however, he gets the chance to restore his power. In this situation he recalls his lost glory but ends with the well-known insight that everything is הבל.<sup>23</sup>

*Als solches meine Augen sah'n  
All' Werk, das meine Hand gethan,  
War es wie Staub des Wasserfalles  
Die Luft, das Glück, es ist nur Wahn,  
Und Jammer nur und eitel Alles!*

*[When my eyes fell upon / All the work my hands did / It was like dust of  
a waterfall / The air, luck, it is just a delusion / And only misery and vain  
everything!]*

Not only his achievements as a king but also his former happiness appear to him as vanity and nothingness. In close resemblance to the book of Ecclesiastes, Solomon first laments the futility of wealth, power and wisdom before he takes another possibility into account, namely of enjoying life as a gift of God. Having reached this point Solomon explicitly rejects the possibility of regaining his former power. This reaction is a clear renunciation of Solomon's kingship: Solomon sees no possibility of combining kingship with his insight into the vanity of all things. In this way Frankl's poem goes one step further and criticizes sovereignty per se. Only a simple lifestyle giving up human ambitions makes it possible to enjoy life as God's gift.

In these works insight into the vanity of the world stands at the end of the plot. Solomon's way of life has led him into a crisis. Facing his wrong doings and repenting of them, however, gives way to a new beginning. The first and most important step into his new life is achieved by his new world view. Regarding all worldly things as vain puts his former pretentious way of life into perspective.

20. This is especially obvious if the work is dedicated to a specific ruler. In the Baroque era, most composers were employed at court and had to write for royal celebrations. Schürmann's opera, for example, is dedicated to Duke August Wilhelm of Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel on the occasion of his saint's day.

21. Ludwig August Frankl von Hochwart (1810–94) was a Jewish Bohemian-Austrian publicist and writer.

22. Ludwig August Frankl, *Gesammelte poetische Werke*. II. *Epische Gedichte* (Vienna: Hartleben, 1880), pp. 223–70.

23. This poem of the cycle is entitled *Kohelet* (Frankl, *Salomo*, p. 247).

Sammy Gronemann<sup>24</sup> presents Solomon as a philosophical king in his play *Der Weise und der Narr* (1942) in a humorous way.<sup>25</sup> At the beginning, several short dialogues portray Solomon as a deep thinker who takes his responsibilities as a king very seriously but takes little account of the world outside his palace. Even when he is asked in passing to take his royal duties more lightly, he answers with a reflection on the meaning of life (freely adapting Ecclesiastes)

*Ja,—sich verlieren in der Liebe Spiel,  
Sich freu'n des Lebens, das so schnell entflieht.  
Alles ist eitel,—nirgends winkt ein Ziel  
Denk' oder denk' nicht—stets dasselbe Lied.  
S'ist alles eitel ohne Unterschied.*

*[Yes—to lose oneself in the game of love / To enjoy life that flees so fast . /  
Everything is vain—no target in sight / Think or think not—always the same  
song. / Everything is vain, either way.]*

In this way the vanity motif is used to characterize the king's state of mind and to present him as a worldly innocent. This is continued in a playful yet mocking comment that Joram, a scribe, adds to the king's philosophical reflections.

*Wenn Ihr dem Starken seine Hoffnung stehlet  
Wenn Leichtsinn gar mit Tiefsinn sich vermählet  
Und er im Spiel sich noch mit Skrupeln quälet,  
Ja, dann entsteht wohl solch ein Buch Kohelet.*

*[When you steal the hope of the strong / When carelessness is wedded to  
profoundness / And even in jest he is agonized by qualms / Yes, this then  
might form such a book as Ecclesiastes.]*

With this opening the sapiential considerations of the book of Ecclesiastes are not only linked to the biography of King Solomon but also evaluated as philosophical, yet futile, reflections. After the introduction the theme of Solomon as author and philosopher fades into the background and the play focuses on the king who involuntarily exchanges his role with that of a cobbler and, as a consequence, has to spend a day as a man in the street. For the first time Solomon sees what life is like for most people.<sup>26</sup> This new insight

24. Sammy Gronemann (1875–1952) was a jurist, writer and satirist in Germany and Palestine.

25. Sammy Gronemann, *Der Weise und der Narr. König Salomo und der Schuster. Ein heiteres Versspiel in sieben Bildern* (Tel Aviv: Palestinian Play Publishers, 1942).

26. The opposing figures of King Solomon and the cobbler allude to the widespread tradition of a competition between Solomon's wisdom and Marcolf's provocative cleverness. This contest between a king and a smart prankster, fool or peasant was very popular text during the Middle Ages and Early Modern period, as many manuscripts and different

also puts his own knowledge into perspective. He not only recognizes the vanity of the world but also his own arrogant attitude. Finally, this insight is turned into literature, as it inspires the king to write an ending for the book of Ecclesiastes he is currently working on.

*Oh, Menschensohn, Du sollst bescheiden bleiben,  
Du wirst ja stets nur Gottes Werkzeug sein,  
Du weißt es nicht, was eitel ist, was wichtig,  
Manch' Blödes scheint Dir gut, manch' Ernstes nichtig,  
Was böse scheint, kann gut, was gut scheint, böse enden,  
Den Ausgang kennst Du nicht, er liegt in Gottes Händen.*

*[Oh, son of men, you shall remain humble / You will always be God's tool  
/ You don't know what's vain, what's important / Some silly things appear  
good to you, some serious things futile / What seems bad may end well,  
what seems good may end badly / You do not know the outcome, it is in  
God's hands.]*

Solomon's philosophical considerations are not revised, but they are put into perspective.<sup>27</sup> The playful tone fades into the background and more solemn and humble thoughts conclude Solomon's book. He no longer claims to be able to distinguish between things that are important or vain, good or bad. God, who plays no significant role in the play, is now used as a guarantee of a true, though hidden, evaluation.

The humorous catharsis of King Solomon once more confirms the traditional perspective of the *Contemptus mundi* and as well invokes the image of a steady social order. The king may be challenged, the social system may not be perfect; however, what matters is only God's plan. Although Gronemann's play does not deal with the disastrous events of his time, this biblical play with its reassuring insight reinforces the perception of his own, Jewish heritage<sup>28</sup> including the confidence that there is a greater, divine plan.

Such a reassuring point of view is severely contested by Bertolt Brecht.<sup>29</sup> *The Song of Solomon* is probably the most famous and also the most critical

versions of this subject document. For a detailed description of this tradition, cf. Sabine Griese, *Salomon und Markolf. Ein literarischer Komplex im Mittelalter und in der frühen Neuzeit. Studien zu Überlieferung und Interpretation* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1999).

27. This combination of a humorous mix-up with a literary reflection that leads to the creation of a biblical book is also a playful commentary on the book of Ecclesiastes, offering a critical view on philosophical wisdom without rejecting it.

28. Margot Klausner emphasizes in the preface to the comedy's publication that contemporary writers recollect the biblical heritage together with the Midrash. She interprets this new start as a sign of the new beginning in the land: 'Es ist vielleicht kein Zufall, dass unsere Dichter erst jetzt wieder damit beginnen, die Märchengestalten unserer Vergangenheit lebendig zu machen, jetzt, wo wir wieder auf eigenem Grund und Boden stehen' (Gronemann, *Der Weise und der Narr*, p. 6).

29. Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956) was a German poet, playwright and theatre director.

poem to take up the *Contemptus mundi* tradition in the twentieth century. The song, which is part of the *Threepenny Opera* (1928)<sup>30</sup> and the play *Mother Courage and her Children* (1939),<sup>31</sup> portrays famous characters from the past depicting their rise and fall as a result of his/her most famous virtue in several stanzas. In both versions of this song the biblical king Solomon leads the sequence of the exemplary figures.

*King Solomon was very wise  
So what's his history?  
He came to view this world with scorn  
And curse the hour he was born  
Declaring all is vanity.  
King Solomon was very wise  
But long before the day was out  
The consequence was clear, alas!  
And wisdom 'twas that brought him to this pass:  
A man is better off without.*<sup>32</sup>

The awareness that everything is *הבל* is presented as the result of Solomon's wisdom. He knows about the vanity of all things, and, again, this insight is presented as a warning. Although we are not told what the consequences are that Solomon has to face, it is obvious from the following stanzas that they are negative. The most obvious element is the perspective of *הבל* itself, destroying Solomon's joy of living. Considering the narration of the first Book of Kings the negative end could also refer to Solomon's lost kingdom. Although he was the wisest of all kings, he was not able to secure his reign. Brecht thus recalls once more that all striving for wisdom is *הבל*.

The following stanzas also refer to the *Contemptus mundi* poetry, emphasizing that worldly greatness does not last. One by one the virtues of beauty, daringness, curiosity or sensuality are put to a test and they all fail.<sup>33</sup> In this way the song puts all worldly ambitions into perspective. At the end of the

30. In the third act of the *Threepenny Opera*, Jenny presents the Solomon-song as an interlude, sung before the curtain. 'This Bänkelgesang cements the impression introduced in the prologue, that Macheath is joining company with the illustrious historical figures customarily celebrated in ballads.' However, it is not a great end that is forecast in this song (cf. Peter Ferran, 'The Threepenny Songs. Cabaret and the Lyrical Gestus', *Theater* 30.3 [2000], pp. 4-16 [10]).

31. In the *Threepenny Opera* the list of figures is: Cleopatra—beauty, Caesar—daringness, Brecht—curiosity, Macheath—sensuality. The *Solomon Song* also continues the motto of John Gay's *Beggar's Opera*: *Nos haec novimus esse nihil*. Cf. Bertolt Brecht, *Anmerkungen zur 'Dreigroschenoper'* (Bertolt Brecht, *Stücke*, III [Berlin, 5th edn, 1962], pp. 141-60 [141]).

32. Bertold Brecht, *The Threepenny Opera* (trans. Desmond Vesey and Eric Bentley; New York: Grove Press [1964]), p. 78 (Act 3, Scene 1).

33. The Solomon song also refers to the *ubi sunt* motif, which emphasizes the transience of life. This motif is popular in medieval to Baroque lyrics.

song, Solomon proves worthy to be the leading figure in this line of historical characters. His insight, that everything is הבל, is repeated time and again and thus remains true.

The version of the song in 'Mother Courage' even goes one step further and not only rejects worldly aspirations but also the striving for the greater good.<sup>34</sup> The further virtues put under the perspective of הבל are integrity, altruism and the fear of God. In this way the song deconstructs the tradition of the *Contemptus mundi* and denies any exception from the all-encompassing הבל. With this shift Brecht emphasizes the unsettling and disturbing aspects of the tradition while declining an alternative of searching for a greater good. The only way not to fall for הבל is to enjoy life free from traditional values, expectations and ambitions.

### 3. הבל—*Overcome by Dark Thoughts*

A sudden, blindsided onslaught of doubt and despair can also summon up images of vanity. They obscure the sense and purpose of life and cast doubts on a previously steadfast world view; הבל thus is presented a severe challenge. Artistic images of Solomon make use of such well-known, common experiences to form a vivid portrait of the king's inner life. Through no fault and undeservedly Solomon has to struggle with such thoughts. Again, the insight into הבל causes a shock, evoking substantial changes. In these works, however, Solomon does not return to a given world-view but changes his perspective and behaviour.

#### הבל—*A Turn for the Worse*

Some artistic portrayals present the insight into הבל as Solomon's turn for the worse. It leads him to a wrong, sometimes even cruel, attitude that endangers either others or himself. His awareness of הבל is presented as a threat to his piety and, subsequently, as a threat to the social order. In these works הבל is explicitly rejected and thus everything should be done to overcome this thinking.

In Klopstock's<sup>35</sup> *Salomo* (1764), Solomon is portrayed as an unsatisfied, weary and desperate man who despairs of God's absence and inscrutability. He longs for knowledge of the truth and, when he fails, he desires death.

34. In *Mother Courage* this list of famous persons is slightly changed. After Solomon and Caesar the following figures are mentioned: Socrates—integrity, St Martin—altruism, audience—fear of God.

35. Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock (1724–1803) was a pietistic German poet and an important representative of the era of *Empfindsamkeit* (sentimentalism) as well as a precursor of the era of *Sturm und Drang*. In his *Vorrede* to *Salomo* Klopstock points out that the most difficult part of the play for him was to show the impact Solomon's intellect had on his downfall. Therein he sees the tragedy of this subject that surpasses every

Though not explicitly mentioning vanity Solomon's attitude is full of allusions to the book of Ecclesiastes.<sup>36</sup> He is tired of life because of the inscrutability of the world and of God.

*Zu leben ist viel bitterer, als der Tod (...) Dieses Leben / Ist reich genug an Qual, des Denkens Kreis / Ganz auszufüllen ... (1. Akt, 2. Auftritt).*

*[To live is much more bitter than death (...) This life / Is full enough of torment, the circle of thinking / To be filled entirely ... (Act 1, Scene 2).]*

*Ach, wünsche mir den Tod [...] denn satt bin ich zu forschen! / Satt, mühsam in des Denkens Labyrinth / Herum zu kriechen, und kein Licht zu finden, / Nichts, das mir Wahrheit sey! Viel ist Euch Wahrheit, / Mir nicht! (1. Akt, 6. Auftritt).*

*[Ah, I wish for death (...) for I am tired of researching! / Weary, tedious in the labyrinth of thinking / To crawl about, and not finding light / Nothing that is truth to me! A lot is truth to you! /Not to me! (Act 1, Scene 6).]*

This constant weariness leads to cynicism, idolatry and, even worse, to child sacrifice. As his friend reproves the murder of young boys for the sake of Moloch, Solomon answers:

*Und über das, was ist der Knaben Blut / Stirbt der zu früh, der nicht unsterblich ist? /*

*Wir armer Staub, zu spät wir sterben oft / zu spät und nie zu früh (1. Akt, 2. Auftritt).*

*[Moreover, what is in the boys' blood / Does he die too soon who is not immortal? /*

*We, poor dust, we often die too late / too late and never too soon (Act 1, Scene 2).]*

Qohelet's praise of the dead more than the living (Eccl. 4.2) in the mouth of a child-sacrificing King Solomon turns into a most cynical and cruel self-defending strategy to exculpate himself from felony. Thus, in Klopstock's play, the insight of vanity leads to cruelty and to the destruction of life.

Ludwig Siegfried Meinardus<sup>37</sup> compiles a set of biblical texts to form a plot dealing with the life of King Solomon in his oratorio *König Salomo*

other famous play; cf. Monika Lemmel (ed.), *Biblische Dramen von Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock* (Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock: Werke und Briefe, Abt. 1: Werke, 5; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2005), p. 33.

36. His words are inspired by Eccl. 1.3; (the labour of life); 2.15-20 (Qohelet's weariness with life); and 7.23-24 (the unattainability of wisdom).

37. Ludwig Siegfried Meinardus (1827–96) was a Protestant composer and writer. His oratorio *König Salomo* was performed only five times and was rediscovered only in 2010. Much more famous, however, became his oratorio *Luther in Worms* (1871), turning the great reformer into the national hero of the recently established German Empire.

(1862–63).<sup>38</sup> The story includes the building of the temple, Solomon's wedding, his idolatry, the prophecy of the partition of the kingdoms, and finally the conversion of Solomon.

Interestingly, the *הבל*-motif is neatly connected with Solomon's wedding in the second part of the oratorio, forming an effective contrast to the cheerful scene that introduces Sulamith as Solomon's bride-to-be in the midst of her maids. Quotations of the Song of Songs (Sulamith) and of Psalm 45 (entitled 'Brautlied' and sung by the maids) indicate the imminent wedding. Diametrically opposed to the lighthearted ambience is the subsequent monologue of Solomon, brooding gloomily and apparently for no reason at all over vanity.

*Unsägliche Mühe hat Gott den Menschen gegeben, darin sie sich plagen müssen.*

*Denn Alles ist ganz eitel, ganz eitel und voll Jammer (cf. Eccl. 1.13; 1.2).*

*[God gave unspeakable troubles to humankind in which they have to labour. Because everything is all vain, all vain and full of misery.]*

These are the introductory words of an extensive monologue paraphrasing the first four chapters of Ecclesiastes, especially the so-called 'Königstravestie' (1.12–2.26) with its focus on the thought of vanity. In Meinardus's compilation Solomon not only regards his great deeds, his wealth and his wisdom as worthless and vain. As in Klopstock's drama, he goes even further, extending his dark thoughts to doubting God's goodness. The following compilation of Eccl. 3.11, 14 and 4.1-2 arouses an irritating suspicion on this issue.

*Aber Er, der in der Höhe thront, Er thut alles zu seiner Zeit (cf. Eccl. 3,11) und lässt ihr Herz sich ängsten (cf. Eccl. 3,14), also dass die Thränen derer, die Unrecht leiden, keinen Tröster haben (cf. Eccl. 4,1).*

*[But He on His throne high above, does everything in His own time and lets their heart be scared so that the tears of the ones who suffer injustice do not have a comforter.]*

Whereas Eccl. 3.11 claims that God has done everything *well* or *beautifully*, but that humankind is not able to fathom it, Meinardus relates the verse to Eccl. 3.14 saying, 'God does it [meaning "everything he does"] that

38. Ludwig Siegfried Meinardus, *König Salomo. Dramatisches Oratorium nach Worten der heiligen Schrift*, op. 25; piano score: Bremen: August Fr. Cranz (no year); Online: [archive.org/details/imslp-salomo-op25-meinardus-ludwig-siegfried](http://archive.org/details/imslp-salomo-op25-meinardus-ludwig-siegfried). The libretto comprises quotations from the Old and the New Testament using the book of Psalms, 2 Samuel, 1 Kings, Chronicles, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Isaiah, Deuteronomy, Romans, Hebrews, and others; they are quoted according to the translation of Martin Luther.



humankind should fear him'. Even major implications has the apposition of Eccl. 4.1 speaking of the tears of those who suffer injustice and have no comforter. The compilation of these verses suggests that those who suffer have no comforter, *because* God does everything at his time and *because* he wants to frighten them. In other words, it is God's will and God's purpose that people suffer and fear and are not comforted, neither by him nor by others.

Thus, when Solomon concludes his monologue with Qohelet's call for rejoicing (cf. Eccl. 3.20-22), it is no happy appeal. Rather, it reveals a thoroughly fatalistic and pessimistic worldview that sees in God not only no help at all, but even the cause for suffering. No wonder that the Chorus reacts with severe criticism, quoting Ps. 52.9.<sup>39</sup>

*Siehe, das ist der Mann, der Gott nicht für seinen Trost hielt, sondern verließ sich auf seine Weisheit und großen Reichthum*

*[Behold, this is the man who considered God not as his comfort, but relied on his wisdom and great wealth.]*

When Solomon and Sulamith praise their love in the following duet, the listener is left with an uncomfortable feeling about this love. The beautiful verses from the Song of Songs seem inappropriate in the mouth of a self-righteous, arrogant king who judges God's creation as vanity. And, in fact, the very beginning of the next part of the oratorio shows how justified this uneasiness was: The part is named 'Moloch' and starts with a chorus that bemoans:

*Klaget! Klagt des Königs Fall! Er hat die Gebote Gottes verachtet. Er hängt an fremde Weiber sein Herz. Er wandelt fremden Göttern nach!*

*[Lament! Lament the king's fall! He disdained God's commandments. He gives his heart to foreign women. He follows foreign gods!]*

So, in Meinardus's oratorio, Solomon's awareness of הבל causes his fatalistic view on joy and love, leads him to marrying foreign women and finally results in sacrilege and idolatry.

Quite similar is the use of הבל in Roman Wörner's<sup>40</sup> drama *König Salomo* (1912).<sup>41</sup> Here again, Solomon, as the main character, is depicted as a Qohe-

39. Psalm 52 utters a threat against a 'mighty man' and a 'liar' (52.1-2) who loves evil more than good. The main reproaches are neglecting and ignoring God's will and self-righteousness. Hence, the quotation of this psalm by the chorus in Meinardus's oratorio equates Solomon with the mighty man and his attitude with the attitude of evildoers and sinners. His weariness about הבל is seen as an act of disregarding and defying God.

40. Roman Wörner (1863–1945) was a professor of literary studies, editor and translator. The drama *König Salomo* was published only for his friends.

41. Roman Wörner, *König Salomon. Ein Drama* (Leipzig: W. Drugulin, 1912). Online: [archive.org/stream/3284174#page/n7/mode/2up](http://archive.org/stream/3284174#page/n7/mode/2up). As in Meinardus's oratorio, the play is

let-like man, struggling with his weariness. He possesses every good, but lacks happiness. Not even the marriage with a beautiful Egyptian princess bestows any pleasure on him. To his mother's attempts to lift his spirits, he answers with a paraphrase of the 'royal fiction', esp. Eccl. 2.4-11:

*Sieh, ich bin herrlich geworden zu Jerusalem. Ich  
Tat große Dinge—und nahm zu über alle,  
Die vor mir gewesen waren. Doch ich werde  
Der Sonne nicht froh—und weiß keine Ruhe—  
Weder hier noch da.—Und alles Tun  
Ist so voll Mühe, Mutter.*

*[Behold, I became marvellous in Jerusalem. I / did great things—and  
became greater than all / who were before me. But I cannot / appreciate the  
sun—and know no rest—/ neither here nor there.—And all doing / is filled  
with so much toil, mother.]*

The vanity of his situation he deplores with the words of Eccl. 6.1:

*Doch einer, der alles hat, was seine Augen wünschen,  
Und mangelt ihm keines, das sein Herz begehrt,  
Und ist doch ihm nicht Macht gegeben,  
Desselben zu genießen,—das  
Ist eitel und eine böse Plage.*

*[But one who has everything his eyes wish for / And he lacks nothing that  
his heart desires / And still he was not given the power / to enjoy thereof—  
this / is vain and an evil disease.]*

Wörner's Solomon bemoans the vanity of life even while he is at the peak of his power and wealth. The reasons for Solomon's weariness are not explained. Rather, considering life as vanity is evaluated as an expression of a basically negative attitude and as a character trait enhanced by an abundance of power and wealth. It seems to be more than pessimism; it is judged as an unfortunate and ungrateful habit, which leads to destruction and cruelty. The first part of the play focusses on the tragic consequences of this habit describing Solomon's rebuff of his Egyptian bride-to-be, the release of the powerful demon Ashmedai and the loss of his kingdom. Then, in the second part, it deals with overcoming vanity by the experience of simplicity and true love. Solomon, expelled by Ashmedai, roams around as a beggar and falls in love with a simple, good maid.<sup>42</sup> Though this love is unrequited,

made up of various biblical texts from different books, whereas the plot itself combines 1 Kings with the books of Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs, complemented with the extra-biblical legend of the demon Ashmedai who usurps Solomon's throne and reigns in his place, forcing Solomon to live as a beggar for a year.

42. The story of Solomon falling in love with a simple maid who refuses him for the sake of a beloved shepherd relies on a specific interpretation of the Song of Songs,

it marks the turning point of the play. It incites Solomon to change his mind, to return to his duties and to regain his throne. In the end, he feels empowered to discard his weariness and to find joy in life.

הבל *as Stimulus for a Reconsideration*

The motif of a sudden onset of doubt and despair is also picked up in Siegfried Obermeier's<sup>43</sup> novel *Salomo und die Königin von Saba* (2004).<sup>44</sup> The story focuses on Bilkis Balmaka, the young queen of Sheba, and her visit to King Solomon. Before the royal encounter unfolds, however, quite elaborate reports make the readers familiar with the main protagonists and the royal courts in Sheba and Jerusalem. In King Solomon's story, the completion of the temple forms a turning point in the still young king's life. After the splendid consecration Solomon is stricken by black thoughts, doubting his God and the meaningfulness of the cult and the temple, but also his own achievements:

*Im Grunde ist alles sinnlos, dachte er, was man auch tut, wonach man strebt—was bleibt davon? Die Geschlechter kommen und gehen, nur die Erde bleibt, wie sie ist. Trotz schneller Veränderungen—so scheint mir—gibt es nichts Neues unter der Sonne. Wer da behauptet, dies oder das sei tatsächlich noch nie dagewesen, und man blickt auf die Geschichte zurück, dann wird deutlich, dass es solches irgendwann schon einmal gegeben hab. Immer wieder habe ich Menschen und ihr Tun beobachtet, erkannte, wie vergeblich es ist, und es erschien mir wie das Jagen nach dem Wind ... (p. 85).*

*[In principle everything is pointless, he thought, whatever one does, whatever one strives for—what remains? Dynasties come and go, only the earth remains the same. Despite things changing rapidly—so it seems to me—there is nothing new under the sun. Whoever claims this or that has actually never existed, when one looks to the past it soon becomes clear that such thing has been here before. I have observed people and their behaviour*

which goes back to Ibn Ezra and was very popular in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The idea of rejecting wealth and power for true love appealed to exegetes and artists alike. 'Thus this Song records the real history of a humble but virtuous woman, who, after having been espoused to a man of like humble circumstances, had been tempted in a most alluring manner to abandon him, and to transfer her affections to one of the wisest, and richest of men, but who successfully resisted all temptations, remained faithful to her espousals, and was ultimately rewarded for her virtue, enthused the renowned exegete Christian Ginsburg (1831–1914) in 1861; cf. his *The Song of Songs and Coheleth (Commonly Called the Book of Ecclesiastes)*. Translated from the original Hebrew, with a Commentary, Historical and Critical (ed. Sheldon H. Blank; The Library of Biblical Studies; New York: Ktav, 1970), p. 11. See also the works of Rubinstein and Heyse below.

43. Siegfried Obermeier was a German writer (1936–2011).

44. Siegfried Obermeier, *Salomo und die Königin von Saba* (Munich: DTV, 2004).

*repeatedly, realized how futile it is, and it seemed to me like chasing the wind ... (p. 85).]*

His dark thoughts follow Eccl. 1.9–2.18 and he also tries to fight these thoughts with references to Ecclesiastes:

*Hatte Gott ihn nicht höher gestellt als alle anderen, ihn auf allen Wegen sicher geleitet, stets seine schützende Hand über ihn gehalten? So sei fröhlich und dankbar, König Salomo—iss dein Brot und trinke deinen Wein, so ist es gottgewollt. Genieße jeden Tag mit der Frau, die du liebst, solange dieses flüchtige Leben dauert, und nimm es als Lohn für deine Mühsal (p. 86).*

*[Did God not place him above all the others, lead him safely on all paths, always hold his protective hand over him? So be cheerful and grateful, King Solomon—eat your bread and drink your wine as ordained by God. Enjoy every day with the woman you love, as long as this fleeting life lasts, and take it as a reward for your troubles (p. 86).]*

However, the image of God no longer offers an unquestioned refuge and the answers of the book of Ecclesiastes are no longer sufficient. Following the advice of a friend, Solomon tries to overcome his doubts by writing them down. The short excerpts presented from his writings are a collage of quotations, paraphrases and summaries of the book of Ecclesiastes (pp. 108-10). Through this literary reflection Solomon is able to overcome his threatening thoughts and recover his balance of mind; however, the struggle has left its mark. His encounter with his 'demons', as he calls the threatening aspects of הבל, presents a turning point in his personal development. Solomon still believes in one God, the creator and maintainer of the world, and also in the covenant between God and his people, but he has lost his belief in a personal God who cares for every individual human being. As a consequence Solomon's worldview changes and he becomes more tolerant towards foreigners and their religions, to the great displeasure of the priests. To a certain extent this novel thus continues the tradition of a catharsis as the struggles with הבל free Solomon from certain attitudes. Nevertheless, the result of the catharsis presented in this novel greatly differs from earlier receptions. Leaving behind a strict commitment to one God and showing more tolerance, even sympathy for other deities mirrors a European attitude of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. In the eyes of contemporary readers, however, the effect is the same: Solomon's struggle with הבל is a turn for the better. His more tolerant attitude makes him receptive to the different (religious) needs of his women and his people in general.

At the end of the story Solomon's literary work is mentioned once more, though it is presented from a different perspective. It is not only the result of a personal struggle, but now an educational aspect is added. Reflecting on his work Solomon declares his authorial intentions as an impulse to reflect on the

essence of life. In this way his personal struggle and experience of catharsis becomes a stimulus and guideline for others. Furthermore, the fictive context this novel imagines for the formation of the book of Ecclesiastes encourages an up-to-date reading of the biblical book. Although the quotations and summaries of the biblical texts are quite accurate, closely following the biblical text, Solomon's further thoughts and conclusions from his struggles suggest a reading that matches the worldview of the novel's cultural context. Thus Solomon and with him the book of Ecclesiastes are presented as a mirror and a role model for readers of this novel.

#### 4. *Suffering a Loss*

Like a sudden onslaught of doubt the loss of a beloved person or something invaluable, as also the experience of unrequited love, can provoke thoughts of futility and vanity. When הבל is depicted in the context of deprivation, the insight into vanity is not the start of a better future, but an outcry of the suffering human being, struggling in despair with the absurdity of life in the midst of an existential crisis.

##### *Love Lost*

In Ernst Hardt's<sup>45</sup> *König Salomo*<sup>46</sup> (1914) the young Solomon has to sustain a painful loss. His one and only love, Abishag of Shunem, is elected by King David to be his personal servant, which means that no one is to touch her even after his death. Solomon obeys broken-heartedly, while Abishag, being devoted to Solomon, kills herself. The unbearable suffering makes it impossible for Solomon to see the world as other than useless and empty.

In despair, he praises the dead more than the living (as Qohelet does in Eccl. 4.2) and, varying Eccl. 9.4 ('A living dog is better than a dead lion'), he claims

*Ein toter Bettler ist besser als ein lebender König*

*[A dead beggar is better than a living king.]*

Shocked by the sight of his dead lover and distressed by his deep loss, he exclaims:

*In dieser fand mein Bruder Fleisch, mein Vater Jugend,— ich die Sterne,  
Sabud!*

*Wir hielten Hochzeit gestern Nacht zu drein,  
Der Tod und sie und ich, dann hieß ich sie*

45. Friedrich Wilhelm Ernst Hardt (1876–1947) was a German writer, translator and director.

46. Ernst Hardt, *König Salomo. Ein Drama in drei Akten* (Leipzig: Insel-Verlag, 1915).

*Mich fliehn, und sieh, sie floh, sie floh vor mir!  
Was hab ich fortan mehr als wie das Vieh?  
Es ißt und trinkt und schläft und freut sich auch!  
Die Hunde, sagt man, sollen manchmal träumen!  
Auch das ist eitel.*

*[In her my brother found flesh, my father youth --- myself the stars, Sabud!  
We married yesterday night in a threesome, death and her and me, then I  
told her to flee from me, and behold, she fled, she fled from me! From now  
on, what do I have got more than the brute? It eats and drinks and sleeps  
and enjoys, too! The dogs are said to dream sometimes! Even that is vanity.]*

Solomon's cry of הבל is a touching expression of despair and sorrow. In the face of an unbearable loss everything fades into vanity.

In his sorrow over the death of Abishag, Solomon insists on marrying up to a thousand women as a compensation for the irreplaceable loss of his one beloved woman.<sup>47</sup> Thus, he intends to seek in the hearts of these many women from all nations if they

*einen Schimmer /Vom Licht der einen bergen, die ich heut begrub*

*[hold in themselves a glimmer of the light of the one I have buried today.]*

The drama does not reveal whether the compensation leads to the hoped-for result. At least, Solomon demonstrates a certain resoluteness that helps him to overcome his former numbness.

Inge Merkel<sup>48</sup> presents her version of King Solomon's struggles with הבל as the reflections of an old king. Her novel *Sie kam zu König Salomo* (2001)<sup>49</sup> tells the story of the queen of Sheba, who, excited by Solomon's book of Proverbs, travels to Jerusalem seeking an intellectual exchange with the famous king.<sup>50</sup> While the focus of the story lies on their conversations, the growing emotional attraction between Solomon and the queen runs through the book as a second theme.<sup>51</sup> The story presents the queen and the king clearly as present-day royal figures: their actions draw a lot of attention from the common people, they are subjected to wild rumours,

47. This ending gives an explanation for the excessive number of Solomon's wives (cf. 1 Kgs 11).

48. Inge Merkel (born 1922) is an Austrian writer.

49. Inge Merkel, *Sie kam zu König Salomo* (Salzburg: Jung & Jung, 2001).

50. The confidential conversations arising during their encounter form the structure of the novel. The themes of their dialogues are inspired by the biblical story, namely Solomon's kingship and the art of ruling, the temple and religion, Solomon's wives, but also Solomon's writings.

51. As in other novels Merkel shows her protagonists as contradictory beings, between the demands of body and mind. Cf. Gert Schneider, 'Literary Motifs of Inge Merkel's Novels: An Austrian Woman Writer with a European Mind-Set', *Modern Austrian Literature* 31.3-4 (1998), pp. 148-60 (157).

nevertheless, they are role models who set the tone for sensitive topics like falling in love at an advanced age, responsibility and social obligations, the right to a sphere of privacy, etc.

At the end of the story, some time after the queen has returned to her own country, she receives a new composition from Solomon, namely the book of Ecclesiastes. The last chapter of the novel, entitled 'Kohelet', is dedicated to the queen's reading of Solomon's book as she focuses on a few textual passages that inspire her own thoughts. The queen interprets Solomon's writing as his individual expression of misery and grief but also as a protest against the inevitable transience of human life. Simultaneously she admires Solomon's ability to transform his misery into literary reflections. Reading and reflecting Solomon's thoughts the queen first tries to put a distance between herself and the emotions the text evokes, but when she comes to the end (Eccl. 12.1-8), her efforts fail and she is deeply unsettled. Where the hidden grief suddenly comes from is not told, but different aspects of loss resonate in her reaction. It is partly the pain of separation and partly railing against the limitations of life.

Presenting the queen reading Solomon's book and reacting to it adds a level of reflection to the story. As in Obermeier's novel the book of Ecclesiastes is interpreted as an authentic expression of King Solomon's feelings and his means of overcoming the challenge of הבל through writing. In the eyes of the queen as the exemplary reader the book points to the transience and vanity of life. However, in Merkel's presentation, the curing effect holds true only for the author but does not include the reader. The grief associated with the insights inspired by Solomon's writing thus cannot be healed but only be endured.

### *Unrequited Love*

Another way to depict a heartfelt loss is unrequited love. Literary adaptations using this motif to introduce הבל present the vanity of all worldly things not as a statement but as a question. Confronted with the impression that everything in the world is הבל, Solomon searches for an alternative. The quest for something not subjected to הבל is thus closely related to the search for the greater good that can function as an anchor.

In the book of Ecclesiastes one answer to this question can be read in 9.7-9: 'Eat thy bread with joy, and drink thy wine with a merry heart and... enjoy your life with the woman whom you love'. Joy is claimed to be a gift of God, not a product of human labour. Only God-given joy overcomes vanity. However, to acknowledge this, Qohelet has to tear down his own concepts of joy and happiness. He has to admit the vanity of all his efforts to create joy on his own. The awareness of nothingness thus forms an important and necessary transitional phase in 'King Qohelet's' spiritual development and turns him into 'Qohelet the wise man'.

The answer in the artistic reception, however, is not found in a relationship to God but in true love. With this motif yet another biblical book the tradition links to Solomon comes into focus, namely the Song of Songs. Thus the image of Solomon as king, wise man and lover is unfolded.

The 'biblical stage play' by Anton Rubinstein,<sup>52</sup> *Sulamith*,<sup>53</sup> with the libretto by Julius Rodenberg<sup>54</sup> (1882–83) combines elements of the book of Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs; the latter is interpreted as a story of a love triangle. Thus Solomon unhappily loves the young Sulamith who is devoted to her beloved shepherd. When facing this unpleasant situation thoughts of vanity occur to him:

*Hab' ich durchstürmt des Lebens Ueberfluss, / Den Rausch der Leidenschaft  
und den Genuss / Um, wenn die Locke bleicht am Scheitel, / Traurig zu rufen:  
es ist Alles eitel! /*

*[Have I stormed through the abundance of life, / The rush of passion and of  
pleasure / to call out sadly, when the curl bleaches on the forehead, / every-  
thing is vain!]*

However, these dark thoughts last only for a moment and the answer to the question, is No:

*Nein—in den Eitelkeiten dieser Welt / Ist Eines noch, das ewig sich erhält;  
/ Eins, das zum Siege führt das Menschenherz: / Die wahre Liebe und der  
wahre Schmerz!*

*[No—in the vanities of this world / One thing that is eternal remains / One  
that leads the human heart to victory: / True love and true pain!]*

By connecting Solomon with both Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs, vanity can be overcome by love, but also by the pain of unrequited love.

Paul Heyse,<sup>55</sup> in his drama 'Die Weisheit Salomo's' (1857),<sup>56</sup> depicts Solomon as the author of the book of Ecclesiastes

52. Anton Grigorjewitsch Rubinstein (1829–94) was a Russian composer, pianist and conductor. His fascination for biblical (Old Testament) operas was a reaction against 'Wagnerism and anti-Semitism' and not due to religious zeal; cf. Philip S. Taylor, *Anton Rubinstein: A Life in Music* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press 2007), p. 88. He received Rodenberg's libretto of *Sulamith* in 1858, but it was only twenty-five years later that the music was completed.

53. Anton Rubinstein and Julius Rodenberg, *Sulamith. Ein biblisches Bühnenspiel in 5 Bildern. Nach dem Hohen Liede Salomonis* (Berlin: Pierer, 1883).

54. Julius Rodenberg (1831–1914) was a Jewish German writer and journalist.

55. Paul Johann Ludwig von Heyse (1830–1914) was a German author, playwright and translator. In 1910 he won the Nobel Prize for literature.

56. Paul Heyse, *Die Weisheit Salomo's. Schauspiel in fünf Akten* (Berlin: Hertz, 2nd edn, 1896).



*drin er der Erdengüter Unwerth erwägt und siebt*

*[wherein he evaluates and examines the worthlessness of worldly goods.]*

Attracted by this line of thought the Queen of Sheba comes to visit Solomon. In a long dialogue with her, Solomon expounds his thoughts, denying any possibility of discovering the meaning of life, unless in death

*Wozu wir leben? Stirb, so erfährst du's, früher nicht. So lang / im Fleisch wir wandeln, lehrt uns Tag um Tag nur eins: daß Alles eitel.*

*[What do we live for? Die, then you will know, not before. As long as / we walk in flesh, day in, day out we are taught but one thing: that everything is vain.]*

These thoughts are initiated by Solomon's philosophical reflections. It is his wisdom and intellectual curiosity that leads him to the conclusion that everything is vain, even love, which is the most exquisite vanity of all. Nevertheless, seeing everything as הבל does not lead to despair, for Heyse's Solomon is still able to invoke God as an entity beyond הבל. Accordingly Solomon points out that God's answer to the vanity of the world is an admonition to enjoy life. Insight into vanity stands at the beginning of the play and is going to be revised in the further course of it.

Whereas Solomon proves himself stronger than vanity, the Queen of Sheba is not. Out of her unrequited love towards Solomon, she comes to the insight that love is in fact vanity. For her, speaking of vanity is the expression of disappointment and sorrow, a thought that manifests her crisis. Solomon, however, gains new insights because of his unrequited love for the Shulammitte. His wisdom permits him to overcome his own sorrow. He releases his beloved Shulammitte into the arms of her lover and even gives his own royal cloak to the young bridegroom as a wedding present. He is able to learn from his suffering and gratefully acknowledges

*Was sie (das Liebespaar) uns lehrten, ist nicht köstlicher, als alle Schätze: daß nicht Alles eitel? Daß es ein Ew'ges giebt im Wandelbaren: Die Liebe, die da stärker als der Tod, die nicht der Hölle Pforten überwinden?*

*[What they (the lovers) taught us, is it not more precious than all treasures: that not everything is vain? That there is an eternal in the ever-changing: Love, which is stronger than death, which overcomes the gates of hell?]*

At the end of the play, he wishes Balkis to experience the same not-vain love as the two young lovers. He himself has been taught to share without envy the happiness of others. This, he concludes, is the culmination of wisdom.

*Losing Everything*

Without a chance of healing or overcoming the crisis, Friedrich Dürrenmatt<sup>57</sup> presents the experience of הבל in the comedy 'Die Physiker' (1962).<sup>58</sup> הבל is no longer a challenge but the ultimate result of striving after knowledge. The story shows Möbius, a brilliant scientist, who hides in a mental asylum because he fears that his scientific findings would cause great harm. In order to stay there he pretends to see and to talk to King Solomon regularly. However, after Möbius has to realize that despite all precautions his research has fallen into the wrong hands, he gives up the disguise that Solomon is the author of his scientific writings and identifies himself with Solomon:

*Ich bin Salomo. Ich bin der arme König Salomo. Einst war ich unermesslich reich, weise und gottesfürchtig. Ob meiner Macht erzitterten die Gewaltigen. Ich war ein Fürst des Friedens und der Gerechtigkeit. Aber meine Weisheit zerstörte meine Gottesfurcht, und als ich Gott nicht mehr fürchtete, zerstörte meine Weisheit meinen Reichtum. Nun sind die Städte tot, über die ich regierte, mein Reich leer, das mir anvertraut worden war, eine blauschimmernde Wüste, und irgendwo um einen kleinen, gelben, namenlosen Stern kreist, sinnlos, immerzu, die radioaktive Erde. Ich bin Salomo, ich bin Salomo, ich bin der arme König Salomo (p. 68).*

*[I am Solomon. I am the poor king Solomon. I used to be incredibly rich, wise and God-fearing. Giants trembled before my power. I was a sovereign of peace and justice. But my wisdom destroyed my fear of God and when I didn't fear God anymore, my wisdom destroyed my wealth. Now the cities I ruled are dead, my empire that was entrusted to me is empty, a glistening blue desert, and somewhere a radioactive earth is circling around a small, yellow star, pointlessly and incessantly. I am Solomon, I am Solomon, I am the poor king Solomon.]*

With these allusions to the book of Ecclesiastes and his reflections on הבל Dürrenmatt's play ends. Möbius abandons the image of the exceedingly wise king and adopts the critical perspective of Qohelet. This he applies to his own life, self-critically recalling his glory and his fall. Addressing current fears of his own time,<sup>59</sup> Dürrenmatt goes beyond the threats the

57. Friedrich Dürrenmatt (1921–90) was a Swiss author and playwright.

58. Friedrich Dürrenmatt, *Die Physiker: eine Komödie in zwei Akten* (Zurich: Arche, 1962).

59. The play was published in the middle of the Cold War. The Berlin Crisis of 1961 and the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 made it seem that the world was on the brink of another devastating war. Furthermore, the nuclear strikes on Japan during the Second World War and the known scruples of scientists like Robert Oppenheimer had shattered belief in technical progress. As Claudia Maxones shows in her MA thesis, Dürrenmatt was also interested in contemporary literature dealing with the theme of science and responsibility. Cf. Claudia Maxones, *Theatertheoretische Konzeption im dramatischen Werk Friedrich Dürrenmatts* (Diplomarbeit, University of Vienna, 2010), pp. 132-38.

book of Ecclesiastes and earlier receptions of it envisioned. In addition to Möbius's own life the existence of the earth is at stake. The traditional line of argument that one's wisdom can destroy one's fear of God and thus destroy one's own life is expanded to the whole earth and thus the order of creation. The threatening new aspect introduced in this play lies in the reinterpretation of *הבל* as a condition humankind may bring about on a cosmic level. From this point of view human possibilities have no limits and hence Möbius fears that he has not only ruined his own life but has also destroyed the world and condemned it to a meaningless circular motion around the sun. His wisdom, thus, has taken away the sense and significance of the earth, turning it into *הבל*. So all that remains for Möbius is a hopeless recognition of *הבל*.

### *5. The Never Ending Challenge of הבל: Conclusion*

The combination of the figure of King Solomon with the reflections of Qohelet has enabled a long and rich tradition of artistic receptions. The motif of a king who, although perfect at the beginning, fails in the end due to his own fault is an ideal starting point for all questions concerning the prerequisites of a successful reign, life in general and, in particular, the possibilities of human insight and wisdom.

Identifying Solomon as the person who speaks about *הבל* and struggles with thoughts on the brevity and futility of life permits artists to imagine various situations why he evaluates the world as *הבל*. Such occasions range from repentance, the experience of loss, unrequited love to struggles with dark thoughts and mere philosophical reflections. Corresponding to the different reasons provoking the insight that everything is *הבל* various ways of dealing with this realization are unfolded. Solomon does not escape unscathed, but his world view is usually severely changed. Thus the struggle with *הבל* marks a caesura in his life. With such vivid characterizations of Solomon artistic works usually try to set an example. Hence, when they present Solomon struggling with *הבל* they do not restrain themselves from evaluating his performance. The way he experiences, overcomes, succumbs or endures *הבל* is exemplary. His struggles are presented with the intention to inspire, sometimes also to teach readers and thus to create a broader impact. The royal context makes it possible to portray Solomon as a privileged man who can draw on unlimited resources and thus represents humankind at its best. Even if his struggles with *הבל* are not unique but familiar to many people, with King Solomon as the protagonist they are portrayed in an exemplary way for every reader. Furthermore, the figure of the biblical king offers the possibility of creating an exemplary king as a critique or warning, taking aim specifically at contemporary rulers or the expectations held of them.

The way artistic works reimagine the story of King Solomon and his experience of הבל reflects the cultural setting of the works. Thus, when works of art recall the motif of הבל, they do so with quite different intentions. הבל can be a healing insight that leads one out of a misguided way of life. Or, speaking of הבל serves as a warning against an apotheosis of the world and as a reminder of the essential aspects of life. Solomon becomes a paradigmatic figure who demonstrates the importance of cautiousness. Nobody and nothing is immune, everyone has to try hard not to fail. However, to recommend הבל in this way assumes that there are essential aspects of life beyond the existing realities. Works from the Baroque era balance the conception of an all embracing הבל with an image of God who is not subjected to הבל and thus offers some stability. Provided that one is able and willing to act reasonably, it is possible to realize God's good gifts.

Starting with the late eighteenth century and especially in the nineteenth century certainty about human wisdom seems to diminish. Striving for wisdom and a rational approach to life does not necessarily lead to a better life, nor to happiness or peace, nor to harmony with the divine. On the contrary, it can be an arrogant, self-damaging attitude to life that leads to crisis. Seeing the world as הבל is no longer a healing insight, but a mistaken approach without prospects. In this concept, thinking of הבל is the opposite to faith, to grateful perception of God's goodness and thus to godliness. Focusing on this point, the works seem to discredit a Solomonic wisdom. Solomon is neither the best of all men nor immune against failing, but on the contrary, the most exposed and vulnerable one. It is exactly his wisdom that leads into crisis. Wisdom means to consider everything as הבל. And this contradicts faith. And even without that, being wise, as Brecht points out, is not at all desirable.

In the late nineteenth century another, albeit related way of using הבל appears on stage. Solomon's wisdom is not entirely useless or false; rather, it enables the wisest king on earth to reflect about the nature of the world. A הבל-like world view is one possible attitude to life and Solomon considers it thoroughly. Thus, הבל becomes a subject of discussion. Nevertheless, it is not the best way of perceiving the world. In the end, Solomon even demonstrates his wisdom by refuting such a philosophy of life and by finding something that goes beyond הבל. Solomon's wisdom means the possibility of self-development and the ability to choose the better. The figure of Solomon becomes a role model, albeit not an idealized one. He has to experience crises, he has to overcome difficulties, but he is able to reflect and to attain a personal development. Thus he can serve as an example for living wisely.

From the twentieth century onwards the interpretation of הבל changes again. Although the insight into the הבל-like status of all human achievements remains the same, the image of a divine entity guaranteeing a stable point beyond הבל dissolves. It rather is subjected to הבל itself like all other

human efforts seeking for sustainable insights. Thus there is no preexisting alternative to הבל and the only way to cope with it is to endure it and, nevertheless, to enjoy life. Not all modern works go as far as totally rejecting the figure of God, but the experience of הבל significantly changes their images of the divine. Another important variation is the extension of the imagination of what human efforts might achieve. The increasing potential for destruction leaves no room for an indestructible world order. As a consequence the personal responsibility for one's actions increases, as, for example, in Dürrenmatt's comedy. Not only to perceive but to literally reduce the world to הבל appears as the ultimate threat. The image of הבל as a crisis is thus intensified. A noticeable change in the image of King Solomon and his dealing with הבל also occurs in the evaluation of the king. While Brecht still holds on to the tradition of evaluating Solomon's efforts, other works are more cautious and refrain from a distinct judgment. Evaluations are presented only as the points of view of others and thus as proposals readers may find convincing or not.

Beside all changes, however, one aspect stays the same: Dealing with הבל always includes a deconstruction of well-known, generally accepted and treasured attitudes and perspectives. In various periods, King Solomon is chosen to accept this challenge and to struggle with it in an exemplary way: as a shining example, a warning or a mirror image of readers.<sup>60</sup>

60. This article is part of the research project 'Ruler, Lover, Sage and Sceptic: Receptions of King Solomon' funded by the Austrian Science Fund.