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From Redemptive Suffering to Redemptive Reconciliation in the Authorship of Johanna Spyri

by Frederick Hale

Introduction

That Johanna Spyri (1827-1901), best known for her *Heidi* books, gained renown as one of Switzerland's most popular and widely translated authors is beyond dispute. The two companion volumes *Heidi's Lehr- und Wanderjahre* and *Heidi kann brauchen, was es gelernt hat* were published in Germany in 1880 and 1881, respectively, and have been reprinted and published in more abridgements, translations, and cultural adaptations than nearly all other works of their era. Several of Spyri's many other books also enjoyed popularity and were read not only in German, but also in various other languages on both sides of the Atlantic.

Less well known, however, are the pivotal religious dimensions of her authorship. This sobering reality is readily understandable when one is cognizant of certain facts. On the one hand, Spyri was a relatively self-sequestered person who did not seek the limelight but preferred to acquaint the public with her books rather than her personality. On the other hand, the nearly global popularity of the *Heidi* volumes across cultural lines rested partly on their narratives undergoing various abridgements and modifications, among them versions that were largely or completely sanitized of their religious dimensions to



*Johanna
Spyri*

make them more acceptable in generally non-Christian milieus, such as Japan, and in cinematic adaptations, among them the 1937 film starring Shirley Temple in the title role.

Although it is very difficult to glean more than a morsel of information about Spyri's religious views from conventional biographical sources, not least because she chose not to write an autobiography, a theologically informed analysis of her literary texts sheds much light

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on religious themes that are central in some of them. In the present article, I shall explore fundamental concerns in two of Spyri's more revealing works, namely her little known novella of 1871, *Ein Blatt auf Vrony's Grab*, and *Heidi*. It will be seen that the religious motifs in these utterly unlike books differ significantly from each other, but that in certain respects those in the debut piece foreshadow some of those that are apparent in *Heidi*. Considered together, they illuminate aspects of Spyri's religious thought as manifested in texts published with approximately a decade's separation but in both cases after she was more than forty years old.

Spyri's Underlying Christian Message

That religious motifs permeate Spyri's writing has been a truism in critical commentary on these celebrated stories. Precisely what the spiritual message flowing through them are, however, and how they function within Spyri's fictional world remain much less well understood, and patently false assertions about the matter have long burdened the secondary literature about this author.

Roots of the misconceptions lie in the nineteenth century. As early as 1896, Heinrich Wolgast (1860-1920), a teacher in Hamburg who more than nearly anyone else pioneered the study of children's literature in Germany and was possibly the first scholar to publish deprecating views of Spyri's authorship, took her to task for burdening her writing with moralistic and religious motifs. She stood head and shoulders above most other contemporary female authors of fiction for children, he allowed, and demonstrated talent in virtually everything she published. But in the final analysis, her spiritual preoccupation had led to at least a partial lowering of aesthetic standards: "*Bald ist der dichterische Saftstrom stark und frühlingsfrisch, und es gelingt, die religiösen und moralischen Gegenstände zu lebensvollen Gestalten dichterisch umzuformen, bald ist er schwach und stockend, und das Erdreich der Religion und Moral bleibt tote Masse . . .*" Less defensi-

bly, Wolgast generalized categorically that everyone in Spyri's gallery of characters could be pigeonholed according to a crassly simplistic binarism: "*Tugendbolde und Bösewichter ergeben sich als die beiden durchschlagenden Kategorien der Menschheit.*" Within this allegedly Manichean construction, moreover, the religiously inclined persons were "*ausnahmslos musterhaft und tugendsam.*" Furthermore, this critic, who nowhere evinced an adequate degree of comprehension of theological matters for making evaluations of them, insisted that in Spyri's fiction "*alle Geschehnisse haben ihre Ursachen und Wirkungen in der natürlichen Welt, aber der religiöse Sinn der Verfasserin läßt ihre Personen in allem den Finger Gottes sehen und verehren.*"¹ Wolgast adduced virtually no evidence to substantiate these categorical indictments of Spyri's allegedly crassly simplistic representation of Christian spiritual life in her expansive fictional *corpus*.

Nearly three-quarters of a century later another specialist in the realm of German children's literature, Klaus Doderer, echoed similar sentiments about the Manichean gallery of characters in *Heidi*. He acknowledged that Spyri had created a relatively broad spectrum of *personae* but, quite in accord with Wolgast, he insisted that "*bei näherer Betrachtung läßt sich jedoch erkennen, daß die Mitspieler des Romans in zwei Parteien zerfallen.*" One camp features those "*die durch die Tugend christlicher Frömmigkeit und ein Leben der Nächstenliebe und Hilfsbereitschaft ausgezeichnet sind,*" such as the two grandmothers, Clara Seseemann's wealthy father, and his friend, Dr. Classen. Doderer thought that Spyri had created merely two characters in the opposite camp, namely the severe governess Fräulein Rottenmeier and Heidi's grandfather, "Alm-Oehi." Intimately related to this alleged characterization, Doderer also briefly noted that there was another crassly Manichean dichotomy between wholesome highland and destructive urban life in *Heidi*.²

¹ Heinrich Wolgast, *Das Elend unserer Jugendliteratur* (Leipzig and Berlin: B.G. Teubner, 1905), pp. 189-190.

² Klaus Doderer, *Klassische Kinder- und Jugendbücher. Kritische Betrachtungen* (Weinheim and Basel: Beltz Verlag, 1969), pp. 124, 129-130.

With regard to the Christian dimensions of *Heidi*, the interpretive frameworks which Wolgast and Doderer proposed are untenable and misleading. Both overlook the diversity of the characters Spyri created and fail to come to grips with the fact that some of those people, as individuals and as members of groups, cannot be neatly pigeonholed into the binary categories which their interpretations require. Owing in large measure to this myopia, Wolgast and Doderer neglected much of the essential Christian message which Spyri had conveyed in a way less crass than they suggested.

What sort of religious messages did Spyri convey in her fiction? Occasionally, critics have imprecisely labelled that of *Heidi* “pietistic” without defining that term or adducing evidence to relate *Heidi* to any of the several varieties of pietism that had unfolded in several sectors of European Protestantism since the seventeenth century.³ Although Spyri appears to have had ties to pietistic trends in the Reformed Church in Switzerland, her personal spirituality in the late 1870s when she wrote *Heidi* must remain a matter of speculation because of the lack of firm evidence. The difficulty lies in the apparent impossibility of discerning enough about Spyri to reconstruct her religious perspective at any given point in her life. As Rosmarie Zeller, one of the editors of her sparse extant correspondence, has observed, Spyri actively covering her tracks by requesting people to return letters she had written so that they could be destroyed and did not believe that biographies related anything approaching undistorted impressions of their subjects.⁴ It is nevertheless generally accepted that Spyri, whose mother’s father was a Swiss Reformed pastor, grew up in a pietistic home in the village of Hirzel, near Zürich. She received confirmation instruction from a theologically conservative pietist, Antistes Füssli, in that city. Furthermore, it is known that for decades as

³ The classic though outdated historical study of Swiss Pietism is Wilhelm Hadorn, *Geschichte des Pietismus in den Schweizerischen Reformierten Kirchen* (Konstanz: Carl Hirsch, 1901).

⁴ Hans and Rosmarie Zeller (eds.), *Johanna Spyri Conrad Ferdinand Meyer Briefwechsel 1877-1897* (Kilchberg: M. Romano, 1977), p. 9.

an adult she maintained close ties with the pietistically inclined Betsy Meyer-Ulrich, the mother of the renowned poet and novelist Conrad Ferdinand Meyer, and was a frequent guest in her home.⁵ As will be seen below, in both *Ein Blatt auf Vrony's Grab* and stories she contributed to Pastor Cornelius Rudolf Vietor's *Kirchenblatt* in Bremen, Spyri incorporated intensely religious themes. After the early 1870s, however, she did not publish anything until 1878 and by then apparently had distanced herself somewhat from the pietism of her family of origin.

At any rate, the overarching spiritual perspective underlying *Heidi*, though clearly Christian, does not clearly reflect any particular genre of Christianity represented in Switzerland during the nineteenth century, apart from being obviously Protestant as seen in the references to the two pastors and the citations of Protestant hymns. Whether either Calvin or Zwingli would have recognized his theological and ecclesiastical emphases in *Heidi* is doubtful. To be sure, one finds references in the text to the absolute sovereignty of God but little else that was distinctively Calvinistic or Zwinglian. For example, double predestination, one of the fundamental doctrines of Calvinism, is not an explicit theme in *Heidi*, nor is limited atonement. One finds no reference to such distinctively Calvinistic matters as semi-theocratic relations between church and state, Calvinistic views of the sacraments, or the belief that all human works apart from Christian faith are sins. Some of these matters are simply not relevant to the plot of *Heidi*, while others are central to it.

The Nexus of *Ein Blatt auf Vrony's Grab*

Spyri's modest breakthrough as a known literary artist can be dated to 1871 when, in her early forties, she published *Ein Blatt auf Vrony's Grab* semi-pseudonymously under her initials "J.S." In many

⁵ Roswitha Fröhlich and Jürg Winckler, *Johanna Spyri. Momente einer Biographie. Ein Dialog* (Zürich: Arche, 1986), p. 59.



key respects, this fairly well-crafted novella anticipated the immeasurably more familiar tale of the Alpine girl and her grandfather. It will be argued that in her first published work of note, Spyri began to develop themes which bore much more widely harvested fruit in *Heidi*. Among them are the revelation of the divine in nature, the spiritual value of faith inculcated through the Bible and hymnody in childhood, and the centrality of forgiveness and reconciliation as a regenerative force in human life. On the other hand, it will also be seen that *Ein Blatt auf Vrony's Grab* emphasises the theme of redemptive suffering as a key to happiness regardless of one's physical state. This last-named dimension of Spyri's earliest significant work is far removed from what one finds in the immeasurably more saccharine Alpine world of *Heidi* and underscores the fact that she began her literary career writing not for children but for adults and that she did so in a painfully realistic vein.

The common thematic ground which unites these two works written nearly a decade apart is thus considerable. At the same time, however, *Ein Blatt auf Vrony's Grab* also differs from *Heidi* with regard to certain matters, including its spiritual themes. Nevertheless, the incomplete relationship between the two illuminates crucial elements which can contribute to a greater understanding of the mind and authorship of their immensely popular but notoriously enigmatic author.

A synopsis of this little-known story's sparse plot will suffice to bring its contours into focus. The first-person narrator, who remains

⁶ Several of the points in this section were previously discussed in my article "Anticipating *Heidi*? Redemptive Suffering in Johanna Spyri's *Ein Blatt auf Vrony's Grab*," *Acta Germanica*, XLVI (2018), pp. 109-119.

nameless, recounts her insouciant schooldays in a Swiss village, focusing on her friendship with a classmate, “Vrony,” who is two years her senior. Given the relative brevity of the text (slightly under 6,000 words), this eponymous character is moderately well developed. The daughter of the local sextant, she has lost her mother to unidentified causes. Nevertheless, her outward demeanour is generally cheerful, sufficiently so to make the narrator describe her as a pupil with “*wenig wissenschaftliche Bestrebungen, dagegen für alles Komische einen besonders offenen Sinn.*”⁷

Yet Vrony is not a one-dimensional manifestation of youthful exuberance in an Alpine setting. Behind the veil of good cheer she is an unrequited soul. Physical signs in her physiognomy foreshadow the subsequent turmoil in her life. “*Es war, als wenn die verschiedenen Theile gar nicht zusammengehörten,*” recalls the narrator. With her grey eyes, Vrony seemed to penetrate people whom she observed. At the same time, though, her little round nose projected such an impression of naïvete “*daß man ihr das Äußerste in dieser Richtung hätte zutrauen können, wenn nicht die schelmischen Mundwinkel von unten herauf sich wie darüber moquirt hätten*” (Spyri 1871:5). Nevertheless, behind these seemingly disjointed features, the narrator perceives something immeasurably deeper in her friend. She remembers how on sun-bathed evenings this had been manifested in a unity with nature: “*Wenn wir so da standen, sah ich auf einmal wie aus ihren Augen ein seltsam warmer Strahl der sinkenden Sonne nachglühte, und ein Hauch der Verklärung über ihr Gesicht kam . . .*” Her facial radiance makes the narrator wonder: “*Wenn Vrony ein verlornes Königskind wäre!*” (Spyri 1871:6). This theme resurfaces late in the narrative after Vrony endures years of suffering but, as one consequence of it, and in tandem with a rebirth of her childhood faith, spiritual regeneration.

⁷ J.S., *Ein Blatt auf Vrony's Grab* (Bremen: C. Hilgerloh, 1871), p. 5. All subsequent references are to this first edition.

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This curious girl's life is burdened by her relationship to her widowed father, a matter which is arguably not explored in sufficient depth. Her father is stern and demands that she assist him with his responsibilities, but the extent to which he is cruel remains unspecified. Vrony informs the narrator that she appreciates immensely any free time she has outdoors but admits that if she returns to her modest home near the church at all late, her father will beat her. Vrony must keep house in her late mother's stead and spend parts of her evenings assisting her father in weaving, a task she intensely dislikes but cannot avoid. Consequently, Vrony fears the stern parent's call which takes her away from the narrator and the beauty of the outdoors into an evening of work in their modest abode. Those moments of separation also affect the narrator: "*Schweigend trennten wir uns, wir fürchteten Beide den alten, wortlosen Küster*" (Spyri 1871:7).

Vrony's longing for happiness and removal from her present life gradually becomes evident to the narrator. While the two frolic near the village church and notice the sun set behind the distant, snow-clad Jura mountains, Vrony expresses her Edenic vision of what lies behind them:

Ich glaube dort hinten liegt ein großes, warmes Land, wo immer die Sonne scheint und schöne Gärten stehen mit rothen Blumen und goldgelben Äpfeln. Einmal habe ich das gelesen. Dort giebt es keine kleine Häuser, wie bei uns und so dunkle Stuben, wo man am Spuhlrad sitzen muß. O, ich wollte, ich könnte gleich dort hinüber fliegen über den leuchtenden Schneeberg, und ich fliege nie mehr zurück! (Spyri 1871:5-6).

At that point, Vrony's response is not at all anomalous or ambiguous when the narrator asks what she wants to be when she grows up. "*Ich will glücklich werden,*" she declares. "*Ja, ja, es ist mein größter Wunsch, ich möchte so werden, wie glückliche Menschen sind*" (Spyri 1871:11).

Having completed her primary schooling in the village, the narrator moves to western Switzerland to learn French *Grazie* and los-

es contact with her erstwhile schoolmate. After returning to the village, however, she inquires about Vrony. An elderly neighbour enlightens her to the shocking news that at age nineteen the girl had married a raucous carpenter. They had then moved to another community, though not before it became known locally that Vrony had suffered immensely at the hands of her husband. Eventually the narrator meets her again, namely while she is close to death and apparently receiving only palliative care in a medical institution which deaconesses administer. In their conversations, Vrony reveals the extent of her afflictions, which earlier nearly drove her to suicide. To the amazement of the narrator and despite her awareness that she is near death, she now has a remarkably cheerful demeanour. She relates how she had finally recovered her spiritual life and remained faithful to her violent spouse. Implied, but nowhere explicitly stated, is the possibility that she noticed the germ of his moral regeneration.

Vrony as a Reflection of the Legendary Veronica

The name of the central character which the narrator explicitly identifies as a diminutive variant of “Veronika,” was no doubt carefully chosen. Already in the sixth paragraph, the girl who bears this name is associated with the village church; she bears the nickname “*Küster-tochter Veronika*.” In an extra-Biblical hagiographic tradition, Saint Veronica observed the suffering of Jesus Christ bearing his cross towards Golgotha, offered him her veil to wipe his brow, and after receiving it again found a perfect image of the suffering Saviour imprinted thereon. In fourteenth-century Europe, this theme began to be depicted in religious art. No “Saint Veronica” was ever officially canonized by the Catholic Church, but this legendary figure was locally venerated as such with Masses celebrated in her honour. To be sure, in post-Reformation Europe, memory of this tradition was largely in Roman Catholic environments and hardly played a central rôle in the Swiss Reformed ecclesiastical life which made a profound impact on Johanna Spyri. That di-

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mension of hagiographic spirituality nevertheless seems to have had at least faint echoes in Reformed piety and readers of *Ein Blatt auf Vrony's Grab* who are aware of this can hardly overlook its onomastic significance. As will be shown below, the girl's name is intimately linked to Spyri's pivotal themes of redemptive suffering and the continued application of faith nurtured by Christian teaching. The latter is all of a piece with what one subsequently finds in *Heidi*.

Redemptive Suffering as Christian Discipleship

Within Christianity, the notion that suffering on behalf of other people and their salvation can be an essential dimension of spiritual discipline and that it is done in imitation of Christ is a venerable tradition which does not submit to succinct definition. P. Riga summarized it as follows:

Christian tradition has seen the aspect of the voluntary submission of affliction and works of self-denial also as a way of imitation of imitation Christ's own love. The Christian is in a sense the prolongation of the presence of Christ in space and time, and as such he must continue Christ's actions in his own life. Christ died for all men because He loves all men. Christians must continue this loving suffering and mortification for those who are, either potentially or in fact their brothers in Christ. The example of Christ is clear. He offered his life and sufferings for others that they might become pleasing to God. The Christian has an essential mission as a member of Christ's body to continue that work.⁸

To be sure, this notion has drawn extensive criticism in modern times. To the Spanish-American philosopher George Santayana, for ex-

⁸ P. Riga, "Suffering," *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. XIII (New York: McGraw Hill Gook Company, 1967), p. 777.

ample, the intimately associated phenomenon of pain had nothing to do with salvation. Indeed, he argued, by its very definition, pain was inimical to the desired life, and that we should “seek to initiate remedial action is a notion contrary to experience and in itself unthinkable. If pain could have cured us, we should long ago have been saved.”⁹ Nevertheless, when one reads *Ein Blatt auf Vrony’s Grab* and ponders Spyri’s construction of its central character’s willingness to sacrifice herself for her abusive husband—and to find a certain abiding joy in doing so despite her physical suffering—the graphically depicted controlling theme of this story which launched her literary career becomes clear.

The Motifs of Suffering and Joy

Spyri evocative description imprints on readers’ minds the degree to which Vrony suffers. Old Anne informs the narrator that Vrony has long been “*im Elend*” (Spyri 1871:16) and subjected to repeated beatings at the hands of her husband (Spyri 1871:19). When the narrator finally meets her hospitalized friend, she finds “*eine völlig abgematerte Gestalt, so bleich und elend, daß ich erschreck*” (Spyri 1871:20). But this horrific appearance masks an inner peace which forms much of the essence of the story.

Ever didactic, Spyri relates through the inquisitive narrator the secret of Vrony’s inner happiness despite her years of violent tribulation. The answer, which will not surprise readers who are familiar with subsequent themes in *Heidi* and other works, lies in the restoration of her *Kinderglaube*. The details of this development remain somewhat murky as the narrator re-establishes her friendship with Vrony.

Crystal-clear, however, are the physiognomic signs that she has undergone a spiritually healing transformation. The narrator describes the bed-ridden Vrony’s arms and neck as being covered with

⁹ George Santayana, *The Life of Reason or the Phases of Human Progress*, vol. I (London: Archibald Constable & Co. Ltd., 1905), p. 224.

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wounds. Notwithstanding this evidence of physical abuse, her face with its previously incongruous parts now features a “*veredelter Ausdruck*.” and her grey eyes have a “*neues mildes Licht*” in them. This fundamental physiognomic change is sufficient to attract the narrator: “*Ein Hauch stiller Größe wehlte mich an aus ihrem ganzen Wesen, der mich befremdete und doch bekannt anmuthete, als hätte ich ich immer gewußt, daß in Vrony etwas Königliches wäre . . .*” (Spyri 1871:21). The narrator initially finds it difficult to harmonize the visual contrasts before her: “*Nie habe ich ein Gesicht so voller Sonnenschein gesehen inmitten bitterer Schmerzen!*” she declares. It seems beyond comprehension—“*wo nahm dieses Menschenkind, das vor mir lag, die kraft dazu her?*” (Spyri 1871:22).

When readers consider Vrony’s face against the backdrop of the Veronica legend, however, and particularly when conscious of Spyri’s spiritual constitution, it becomes quite comprehensible. What Spyri has carefully crafted in her central character is a suffering servant motif, *i.e.* a woman who rather displaying a veil bearing the image of Jesus Christ’s face has played a part which overlaps with the passion event of the New Testament. It is on her own countenance that she radiates an image of salvation stemming from her reinvigorated faith. Her suffering has lain at the heart of her spiritual redemption.

Redeeming the Lost Sheep

An intimately related theme incorporates the parable of the lost sheep in Matthew 18 and Luke 15. In that well-known teaching about God’s concern for His wayward creatures, the Good Shepherd leaves 99 sheep behind to search for one that is lost. When that sole animal is found, shouldered, and taken back to the flock, there is more rejoicing over its recovery than for all the rest. The plight of Vrony readily lends itself to an interpretation in light of this parable, which is explicitly referenced in the story. *Mirabile dictu*, it is precisely this pericope

on which the sympathetic village pastor preaches when Vrony hesitatingly returns to church. In the meantime, he has assured her that God is seeking her and that He will also find her husband. Vrony perceives herself as the lost sheep and relates to the narrator that this realization is a key to understanding her happiness despite her extreme affliction.

Vrony's abusive, ne'er-do-well husband is an intense encapsulation of fallen humanity. The narrator initially introduces him as "*ein hochfarendes Wesen*" with "*so wilde schwarze Augen, daß sich Jeder-man vor ihm fürchtete und ihm aus dem Wege ging*" (Spyri 1871:13) with the exception of Vrony, whom he rhetorically seduced with his exotic tales of life in distant places. The subsequent description of this demon is voiced by her neighbour, the elderly Anne, who conveys to the inquisitive narrator key details but is at a loss to explain why Vrony had rejected the older woman's advice not to become seriously involved with him. When the unhappy couple and their child eventually return to a village nearby, Anne rushed to their modest home after hearing a "*Jammerschrei*" and found the bleeding Vrony attempting to flee from the grasp of her husband, from whose eyes "*kam's wie Höllenfeuer*" (Spyri 1871:17-18).

As the story concludes, this possibly—or potentially—regenerated soul, despite his history of violent sin against his long-suffering and now deceased spouse, is—at least physically—in church. Spyri relates nothing more about his spiritual state, but the message is clear: Vrony, who reflects the image of the suffering Christ, has died for his sins and, perhaps shocked by her death for which he bears responsibility, he has finally begun to respond. He, too, perhaps is a lost sheep who has been found. What his future holds, readers are left to ponder.

The Inner Struggle: To Intervene or Not to Intervene?

At first blush, *Ein Blatt auf Vrony's Grab* might seem to endorse passive suffering and, in the end, a tolerant attitude towards

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domestic violence. Such an interpretation necessitates overlooking the horrific portrayal of the latter phenomenon's consequences for the central character. Furthermore, a careful reading cannot ignore the narrator's struggle over how to respond to Vrony's suffering, a matter which Spyri developed explicitly.

After learning many details from old Anna about the physical consequences of the carpenter's abuse, the narrator finds herself wrestling with herself. Thunderstruck, she considers how she can help her childhood friend. Her own attributes, including the Gallic *Grazie* she believes she has acquired through her education in western Switzerland, her knowledge of Goethe, and her familiarity with Homer's heroic *Odyssey* all count for naught when she learns that she has sailed into uncharted waters of human suffering. "*Hätte ich auf jene Stätte des Elends mit der Odyssee in der Hand treten können und das zerschlagene Leben mit homerischer Heiterkeit aufwecken,*" she asks rhetorically. "*So verdreht war ich nicht*" (Spyri 1871:19).

Moreover, she does not even visit Vrony upon learning of her plight. Why not? Retrospectively, the narrator weighs the possibility of some negative spiritual force inhibiting her: "*Als ich an jenem Abend an der Eiche weinte, war das nicht nur um eines vorübergehenden Mitleids willen, was ich für Vrony empfand sondern weil eine dunkle Macht an mich herantrant in diesem Leiden, gegen die ich keine Wehr mehr hatte*" (Spyri 1871:19). She therefore does virtually nothing until discovering that her old schoolmate is gravely ill. Then the narrator can only regret her moral failure to intervene. The moral lesson of the story is thus foregrounded just as explicitly, though much more briefly, as the spiritual ones.

Literary, Hymnodic, and Biblical Allusions

Among the arrows in Spyri's quiver of literary devices was her penchant for embedding in her texts allusions to Goethe as well as brief excerpts from German or Swiss-German hymns and the Bible.

Collectively, they constitute a conspicuous element in *Ein Blatt auf Vrony's Grab* and underscore the themes of *Kinderglaube* and redemptive suffering.

Undoubtedly the most renowned and recognizable literary reference occurs relatively early in the novella. The narrator, now temporarily far from her childhood home, is enthralled by the beauty of nature “*an einem milden Mai-Abend*” as she observes the setting sun cast its light upon the snow of Klariden’s glowing peaks before her and hears blackbirds singing their vernal tones and the waters of the Sille, swollen by freshly melted glacial snow. In these paradisiacal surroundings, her soul is no less than “*wonnetrunken*” and echoes the song of the archangels in the Prologue in Heaven of *Faust*, though here slightly paraphrased:

“*Ja alle deine Wunderwerke
Sind herrlich wie am ersten Tag!*”
(Spyri 1871:14).

This is not only 24-carat enrapturement with nature typical of nineteenth-century literary romanticism; it also underscores a *Leitmotiv* in Spyri’s writing which would reverberate in *Heidi*, namely the unfathomable beauty and divine power of nature that stands juxtaposed with human frailty yet plays a vital rôle in regenerating and empowering people who in one way or another are broken.

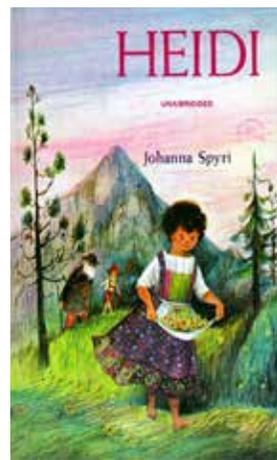
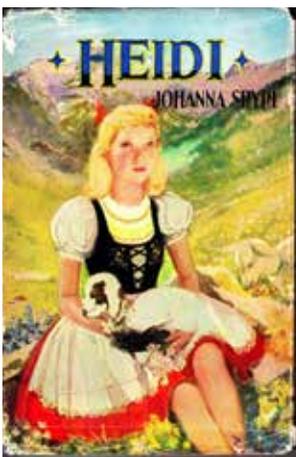
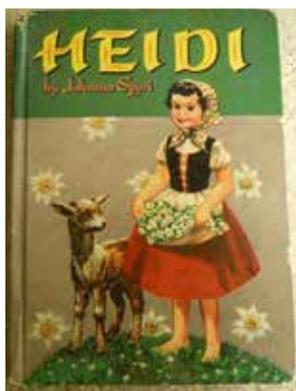
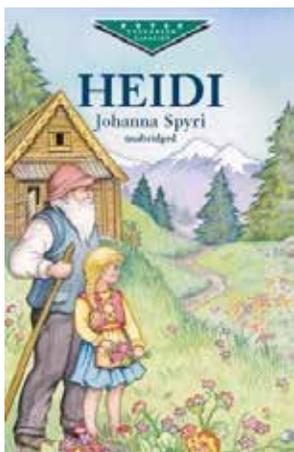
The narrator’s familiarity with Goethe extends beyond *Faust*. She quotes from the opening monologue his *Iphigenie auf Tauris* when relating her mindset on the same occasion when she recalls the above-cited lines from *Faust*: “*das Land der Griechen mit der Seele suchend*” (Spyri 1871:14). Speakers of German had used this *geflügeltes Wort* countless times in literary texts and elsewhere since the late eighteenth century. Its rhetorical function in Spyri’s construction of the narrator’s attitude story is not fully clear. Generally speaking, among German writers in the age of Goethe and beyond ancient Greek culture was perceived as a full expression of

humanitas. It is conceivable, however, that Spyri includes this morsel of Goethe to underscore that the narrator's mind before becoming reacquainted with Vrony and learning from her friend's spiritual unfolding had developed in a humanistic direction, whereas Vrony, who never had an opportunity to acquire a significant amount of secular learning, had become versed in the Bible and hymnody, and this ecclesiastical education served her well in her hour of intense spiritual and emotional need.

Apart from these echoes of Goethe, Spyri reached back into seventeenth-century Lutheran hymnody and drew on two hymns by the German theologian Paul Gerhardt as well as one by Philipp Friedrich Hiller, an eighteenth-century pietistic Lutheran pastor in Württemberg whose hymns had also been preserved in Swiss Reformed ecclesiastical music. The inclusion of these works has a distinct rhetorical function in Spyri's construction of Vrony's spiritual development. Early on, the narrator expresses her respect for the girl's ability to compose simple songs and sing them in a variety of ways. After her marital ordeal, Vrony's attachment to the sung word harmonizes with her recovery of her *Kinderglaube*. She informs the narrator that as a child she had received from her pious mother a hymnbook but only recently had become significantly more familiar with its content (Spyri 1871:31).

Spyri used an excerpt from a hymn by Johann Sebastian Bach to highlight Vrony's constancy in faith as undergirded by a well-established tradition of ecclesiastical music:

Ich laß Dich nicht, Du Hülf' in allen Nöthen!
Leg' Joch auf Joch, ich hoffe doch,
Auch wenn es scheint, als wolltest Du mich tödten.
Mach's, wie Du willst, mit mir,
Ich weiche nicht von Dir!
Verbirg auch Dein Gesicht,
Du Hülf' in allen Nöthen,
Ich laß Dich nicht! Ich laß Dich nicht!



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Though not explicitly identified in the text, this is 467 in the *Bach-Werk-Verzeichnis*, “*Ich lass’ dich nicht.*”

In addition to these segments of ecclesiastical music, Vrony readily quotes segments of the Psalms to express her faith and also, notwithstanding her affliction, to nurture the narrator. Lines from the 130th would have been familiar to many readers: “*Aus tiefer Noth schrei’ ich zu dir*” (Spyri 1871:23). Less well-known are the words she relates to the narrator from Psalm 73: “*Wenn ich nur Dich habe, so frage ich Nichts nach Himmel und Erde*” (Spyri 1871:23).

As part of her strategy of emphasizing how the two former schoolgirls have grown in different directions, there is an obvious and quite well-developed portrayal of Vrony’s reliance on the Scriptures and church music to help her cope with an abusive and seemingly impossible personal predicament. The nameless narrator, by contrast, can appeal to Goethe and Homer, but she readily acknowledges her weakness and lack of moral courage in failing to respond adequately when her friend was in dire need.

Religious Motifs in *Heidi*

Turning to the two-volume *Heidi*, is its religious outlook essentially pietism, as has been alleged? Certainly dimensions of it overlap with emphases typical of pietism. One finds a great deal of personal piety on the part of two elderly ladies, namely the grandmothers of Peter and Clara, manifested especially in prayer, devotion to the Bible, and an emphasis on hymnody and devotional materials. At a child’s level, Heidi follows in their wake, but this expression of faith does not really characterize anyone else, with the partial exception of her grandfather. Such typically pietistic elements as the *ordo salutis*, or path towards sanctification, are not part of this book for young readers.

The religious factors which are mentioned or at least clearly implicit in *Heidi* can be listed succinctly: God, church, pastors, Bible,

daily prayer, the efficacy of prayer, hymns, repentance, confession of sin, reconciliation with God and with other people, baptism, the parable of the Prodigal Son, and Heaven. On the other hand, many elements of Christianity are conspicuously absent or at least not explicitly mentioned, *e.g.* Jesus Christ, Holy Spirit, creeds, liturgy, gifts of the Spirit, original sin, absolution, cross, resurrection, atonement, communion, eschatology, God's judgement, and Hell. Occupying a middle ground—implied but not stated—are such topics as the fruits of the Spirit and God's creation of the world. It is almost as if Spyri consciously based her story on a reductive, common-denominator sort of Christianity which would be palatable to a broad range of Christian readers.

Fundamental to Spyri's presentation of the faith is her concept of God, which one can discern in *Heidi* but which is not, of course, presented in a systematic, doctrinal way apart from Frau Sesemann's teaching about prayer and providence. God is implied to be primarily transcendent and theistic. One can pray to God and, as Frau Sesemann emphasises in her detailed conversation with the disillusioned Heidi in Frankfurt, God decides whether to answer prayers according to whether the petitions therein are good for us. Accordingly, there is much implied emphasis on divine providence. We subsequently read that God's intervention in the world is largely indirect, made through the village pastor, the two grandmothers, Heidi, and other people. Communication with God is thus depicted primarily as making requests and giving thanks, but also through the hymns which are quoted in part. Though transcendent, God intervenes in the world, bestowing faith, healing and reconciliation. However, in places of the text God is immanent as well as transcendent and is especially approachable on the mountains. That is in itself a strong motif in *Heidi*. Of course, there are numerous precedents in Christianity and Judaism, and one can find much Biblical symbolism related thereto in the narrative.

The conventional Christian, theistic presentation of divinity in *Heidi* is neither pantheistic nor immanentist, despite the healing power of environment. Yet God is clearly more approachable and,

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apparently, helps people more effectively in the village and on the mountains than in Frankfurt. However, there is no strict geographic line of demarcation. After all, in Frankfurt one finds Clara's pious grandmother, and it is there Heidi learns to pray and trust God, primarily through that elderly Christian.

Spyri may have perceived a spiritual gap separating the generations in Switzerland and incorporated it in her text. Explicitly expressed Christian faith is conspicuously absent from most of the younger characters—at least those who are mentioned by name—apart from Heidi. By contrast, in general, it is older characters in *Heidi* who are more pious. Praying with grandmothers is specifically underscored. The pastor in the Dörfli is also an elderly man.

Heidi's Path to Spiritual Maturity

Heidi is above all else a Christian *Bildungsroman*, the story of its eponymous protagonist's spiritual formation and how, after coming to faith in a compassionate God (without, remarkably enough, any explicit reference to Jesus Christ though with an emphasis on his parable of the Prodigal Son), she serves as an instrument of God's message of reconciliation and healing. At the beginning of the narrative, when Heidi enters the guardianship of her grandfather, she is only five years old and, though charming and friendly to man and beast alike, she evinces no Christian influence on her early life. Only later, in Chapter Ten, is it revealed that at an even younger age she prayed with one of her grandmothers.¹⁰ There is not even a hint that she was baptized in the Swiss Reformed Church or any other denomination, though of course that was conventional practice. Alm-Oehi, at that stage, is disaffected from formal religious life and makes no spiritual impact on his granddaughter. The figure who gives her initial guidance in that

¹⁰ J. Spyri, *Heidi's Lehr- und Wanderjahre. Eine Geschichte für Kinder und auch für Solche, welche die Kinder lieb haben* (Gotha: Friedrich Andreas Perthes, 1880), p. 160. All subsequent references are to this first edition.

respect is her playmate Peter's pious, blind grandmother. The seed she apparently plants germinates in Frankfurt. It is this elderly woman's Christian spirit, expressed in her love for Heidi and her life of prayer and hymnody, which quietly influences the young girl during the two years she spends in her grandfather's care before going to Frankfurt. Heidi and the elderly man visit her often, he to assist with the maintenance of her modest house. "*Wenn mir nur der Herr Gott das Kind erhält und dem Alm-Oehi den guten Willen!*" is the old woman's prayer" (Spyri 1880:70).

No less influential in Heidi's spiritual formation is Clara's grandmother, Frau Sesemann, with whom Heidi comes into frequent contact in Frankfurt. In their first encounter, this woman establishes rapport by being friendly to the Swiss girl and imploring her to address her as "*Großmama*" (Spyri 1880:152). She also gives Heidi books which are initially unidentified but readers subsequently learn include a volume of Bible stories. Upon learning of the girl's unrelenting sadness, Frau Sesemann expresses concern in a candid conversation which Spyri uses to underscore the importance of prayer. She assures the obviously troubled Heidi: "*Denk' einmal nach, wie wohl das thun muß, wenn Einen im Herzen Etwas immerfort drückt und quält und man kann jo jeden Augenblick zum lieben Gott hingehen und ihm Alles sagen und ihm bitten, daß er helfe, wo uns sonst gar Niemand helfen kann!*" (Spyri 1880:160). This assurance marks a turning point in Heidi's life, when she takes her supplications to God, especially in regards to her intense longing to return to the Alps and her grandfather.

Subsequently, Frau Sesemann voices a more sophisticated notion of prayer, arguably in words which might soar above the heads of many children of Heidi's age. The girl, still in Frankfurt, gives up communicating with God when her prayers to return to Switzerland go unanswered. Frau Sesemann addresses the problem squarely: "*Siehst du, der liebe Gott ist für uns Alle ein guter Vater, der immer weiß, was gut für uns ist, wenn wir es gar nicht wissen. Wenn wir nun*

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aber Etwas von ihm haben wollen, das nicht gut für uns ist, so gibt er uns das nicht, sondern etwas viel Besseres, wenn wir fortfahren, so recht herzlich zu ihm zu beten, aber nicht gleich weglaufen und alles Vertrauen zu ihm verlieren.” She also broaches the matter of divine forgiveness, assuring Heidi that God will forgive her for not continuing to pray and indeed will increase her faith and trust in providence (Spyri 1880:168). The girl heeds these words, not only in Frankfurt, but also after returning to Graubünden, where the Christian faith nurtured during her time in the German city aids in the spiritual healing of her grandfather and the restoration of Clara’s mobility, as will be discussed below.

Alm-Oehi as Fictional Transfiguration of the Prodigal Son

Spyri employs the second most important character in the plot, Heidi’s grandfather, as a postfigurative type of the Prodigal Son to illustrate the necessity of repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation. The transformation the aged man undergoes under the influence of the Gospel is profound though not total. Notwithstanding the negative image he long has had in the village, Alm-Oehi invariably treats Heidi with kindness. From the day of her arrival she elicits a beneficent strain in him, and at times he does favors for Peter’s mother and blind grandmother. Yet he harbors strong resentment and hostility towards the villagers in general and is alienated from the church until Heidi returns from Frankfurt, her illustrated Bible story book in hand, and, armed with the hitherto cited message which Frau Sesemann has imparted to her, is prepared to serve as a vehicle of God’s proclamation of forgiveness and reconciliation.

Spyri artfully lays out the background for this in the way she narrates in Chapter One the man’s morally encumbered early life. Dete, who is the sister of Alm-Oehi’s late daughter-in-law, relates to one of the villagers that his family of origin had possessed “*eins der*

schönsten Bauerngüter in Domleschg” and was the elder of two sons. “Aber der Aeltere wollte Nichts thun, als den Herrn spielen und im Lande herumfahren und mit bösem Volk zu thun haben, das Niemand kannte. Den ganzen Hof hat er verspielt und verzecht . . .”. Instead of repenting at that time and being warmly welcomed home, he had remained overseas for more than an additional decade and, after the deaths of his parents and brother, returned to Domleschg with a young son only to find that *“es schlossen sich alle Thüren vor ihm und Keiner wollte mehr Etwas von ihm wissen”* (Spyri 1880:7-8).

This is far from a fully-fledged allegory of the parable of the Prodigal Son, of course, and the outcome is significantly different, but readers with a measure of familiarity with Luke 15 will none the less immediately recognise it as being inspired by that very well-known text. In the third chapter, the old man’s bitterness comes to expression when his granddaughter asks him about the croaking of a bird. *“Der höhnt die Leute aus dort unten, daß sie so Viele zusammensitzen in den Dörfern und einander böß machen,”* replies Alm-Oehi. The narrator explains, *“Der Großvater sagte diese Worte fast wild, so daß dem Heidi das Gekrächz des Raubvogels dadurch noch eindrücklicher wurde in der Erinnerung”* (Spyri 1880:48-49). The kindly village pastor attempts to help him overcome his estrangement. Calling on the elderly man in an unsuccessful effort to convince him to place his granddaughter in the local school, he tells Alm-Oehi that he lives *“allein und verbittert gegen Gott und Menschen!”* and pleads with him to move from the mountain into the village and be *“ausgesöhnt mit Gott und den Menschen.”* The old man is adamant, however, believing that *“die Menschen da unten verachten mich und ich sie auch, wir bleiben von einander, so ist’s Beiden wohl”* (Spyri 1880: 77-78).

Spyri returns to the theme of forgiveness and reconciliation in Chapter Fourteen, using Heidi’s assurance to her grandfather that if they pray diligently God would not forget them, an assertion which he initially rejects on the grounds of his experience and ongoing alienation from the villages that no one ever forgets. *“Und wenn’s einmal*

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so ist, dann ist's so; zurück kann Keiner, und wen der Herrgott vergessen hat, den hat er vergessen,” Alm-Oehi declares, clearly alluding to his own situation. Evincing spiritual maturity beyond her years, Heidi opens her well-worn Bible story book to the retelling of the Prodigal Son parable in which the young man says, upon returning home, “*Ich bin nicht mehr werth, dein Sohn zu heißen.*” That night the old man folds his hands to pray and, *mirabile dictu*, utters the words of Luke 15:18-19 (“*Vater, ich habe gesündigt gegen den Himmel und vor dir und bin nicht mehr werth, dein Sohn zu heißen*”), suggesting that he had learned them properly in his youth (Spyri 1880:229, 231).¹¹ This incident, one of the most detailed in Heidi, marks a turning point in his life, a return to God, Christian fellowship, and happiness.

It is not without precedent in Spyri’s fiction. One finds a striking parallel in *Ein Blatt auf Vrony’s Grab* a decade earlier. The terminally ill eponymous central character, a humiliated victim of spousal abuse, recounts to the first-person narrator how she had become alienated from the church early in her life but regained her spiritual vitality. The pastor in her home village had urged her to return to regular worship, and after four weeks she had overcome her inhibition. “*Alle mußten mich ansehen, dachte ich, als gehöre ich nicht dahin,*” Vrony feared. The clergyman had preached on the parable of the lost sheep, which occurs shortly after the Prodigal Son parable in Luke 15, and underscored the Good Shepherd’s tireless search for it. This had struck a chord with Vrony:

“Auf einmal hieß es in meinem Herzen: das Schaf bin ich! das gering, verlorne Schaf bin ich! Der Hirte sucht mich, ihm ist an mir gelegen: Wie eine Traumende kam ich aus der Kirche und nach Hause. Es war ein Lebensquell in meinem Herzen entsprungen. Wie ein Strom ueberfloß

¹¹ However, in the 1862 German Protestant Bible, which was widely used in Reformed churches in Switzerland, the text in question is slightly different: “*Vater, ich habe gesündigt in den Himmel und vor dir; Und bin hinfort nicht mehr werth, daß ich dein Sohn heiße.*”

der Trost meine Seele: Einem Hirten gehoere ich an, Er hat mich lieb, Er kennt mein Verlorensein, Er sucht mich, Er haelt mir die Hand entgegen!" (Spyri 1871:30-31).

Whatever Spyri's precise spiritual constitution may have been in the 1870s and early 1880s, this account, read in tandem with that concerning the Prodigal Son as a parable in which Heidi's alienated grandfather could see a type of himself, testifies boldly to Spyri's conviction that the proclamation of God's grace could be instrumental in changing the lives of people who feel isolated and cut off from the love of their fellow human beings.

Peter's Resentment, Anger, Forgiveness

Spyri employs one of the principal secondary characters, the goatherd Peter, to convey fundamental Christian lessons about the nature of sin and the centrality of forgiveness. In this instance, Heidi is not a direct conduit of the Gospel but a passive factor in the plot. When the stricken Clara visits Heidi, these two spend most of their time together, leaving virtually no time for Peter, who is clearly enamored of Heidi. In his bitter resentment, he clandestinely pushes Clara's wheelchair over a cliff. In what may well have been inspired by Genesis 50:20, in which Joseph assures his brothers that their evil-intended behavior towards him actually served a divine purpose, Spyri draws an indirect cause and effect relationship between the jealous boy's misdeed and Clara's regaining of her mobility.

As the wheelchair is no longer available, Heidi, with the reluctant aid of Peter, encourages the partially lame German girl to try to walk. After a few halting attempts, this succeeds. Shortly thereafter, the spiritually mature Frau Sesemann visits them, and Peter confesses his part in the destruction of the wheelchair. Frau Sesemann immediately uses this occasion to teach a crucial lesson and declare forgiveness. "*Sieh, wie das Böse, das du thatest, zum Besten ausfiel*

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für die, der du es zufügen wolltest. . . . So kann der liebe Gott, was Einer böse machen wollte, nur schnell in seine Hand nehmen und für den Anderen, der geschädigt werden sollte, etwas Gutes daraus machen und der Bösewicht hat das Nachsehen und den Schaden davon,” she explains. In the same homiletical conversation, when addressing Peter’s initial efforts to conceal his culpability, Frau Sesemann voices basic instruction about the divine conscience:

“Aber siehst du: wer etwas Böses thut und denkt, weiß es Keiner, der verrechnet sich immer. Der liebe Gott sieht und hört ja doch Alles, und sobald er bemerkt, daß ein Mensch seine böse That verheimlichen will, so weckt er schnell in dem Menschen das Wächterchen auf, das er schon bei seiner Geburt in ihn hineingesetzt hat und das da drinnen schlafen darf, bis der Mensch ein Unrecht thut”
(Spyri 1880:159-160).

This is Spyri at her most transparently didactic.

Clara’s Exemplifying of the Healing Power of God’s Creation

It is at least arguable that only in her construction of Clara’s healing does Spyri wander from what many theologically informed Swiss Reformed Christians would accept as conventional Christian verities. Apart from its fundamental implausibility, the incident and remarks by both Heidi and Clara arguably approach a pantheistic concept of divinity without actually reaching it. There are, admittedly, clear Biblical precedents for perceiving the hand of God in nature, and this comes to expression in *inter alia* the notion of *El Shaddai*, God of the mountains, where divinity is experienced more intimately and with greater majesty than in, for example, urban environments.

The hilly and mountainous landscape of the Biblical lands provided a wealth of imagery for writers of the Old Testament as

well as the New, and there are approximately 500 references thereto. Although many of these are merely geographically designative rather than poetic, the expressions of religious meaning and metaphors stemming from them are also common. Among these is the notion of the holy mountain, the special abode of God where people encounter the divine more directly than at lower altitudes. In much of the Old Testament this is Mount Sinai, where Moses receives the Ten Commandments. Elsewhere, Abraham has one of his special experiences on a mountain in Genesis 22, and God appears to Moses on Mount Horeb in Exodus 3. After the settlement of Israel in the Promised Land, Zion replaces Sinai as the principal dwelling place of God on earth. It takes on eschatological and other theological significance as a place to which the righteous will stream, as in Isaiah 2, rather than a remote, unpopulated one from which people are generally excluded.

Spyri certainly makes much of a general Alpine version of this attitude towards mountains. Alm-Oehi attributes Clara's recovery to "*unseres Herrgotts Sonnenschein und Almluft.*"¹² Clara, viewing the star-strewn firmament with Heidi, exclaims that "*es ist gerade, wie wenn wir auf einem hohen Wagen in den Himmel hineinfahren würden,*" and her youthful hostess offers an explanation for the twinkling of the stars which links them to divine providence: "*Weil sie droben im Himmel sehen, wie der liebe Gott Alles so gut einrichtet für die Menschen, daß sie gar keine Angst haben müssen und ganz sicher sein können, weil Alles so kommt, wie es heilsam ist*" (Spyri 1881:100-101).

The restoration of Clara's general health and the recovery of her ability to walk are attributed to several causes. Three natural ones are the mountain air which is cited repeatedly as an invigorating element, abundant sunshine which is implicitly contrasted with the darker

¹² J. Spyri, *Heidi kann brauchen, was es gelernt hat* (Gotha: Friedrich Andreas Perthes, 1881), p. 146.

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environment in Frankfurt where Clara has spent little time outdoors, and the food she consumes in the Alps, especially goat's milk. Rural victuals are described as much more palatable than those of that city (Spyri 1881:111). But Heidi's dynamic intervention is also crucial. Initially, she suggests that she could carry the older girl to a different section of the mountain pasture in order to see its flora, a proposal which Clara dismisses as unrealistic. At that point, Heidi, in a rare moment of anger, presses Peter into service and, supporting Clara between them, they assist her in taking her first steps. All of this occurs after Clara has received unidentified treatment for approximately six weeks at Ragaz (Spyri 1881:81). There is no mention of prayer for her healing, although after it is a *fait accompli* some of the others express their gratitude to God as well as to Heidi and her grandfather for their instrumental parts.

Conclusion

Previous scholars who have commented on the difficulty of knowing much about Spyri's religious beliefs may be correct in judging that the paucity of evidence outside her texts places a low ceiling on what can be ascertained. One can only wish that *e.g.* hitherto unknown correspondence, unpublished essays, or other sources will be unearthed that shed light on her spiritual convictions and their relevance to life during a time of noteworthy theological upheaval in European, including Swiss, Protestantism. Even when one closely examines what Spyri wrote in fictional works and finds obvious emphases on the themes which have been highlighted above, one cannot necessarily conclude that her own convictions are identical to or to a significant degree overlap with those of any of the characters whom she created. This *caveat* reflects a truism in literary scholarship generally.

Nevertheless, with some measure of confidence we can conclude that Spyri developed distinct themes in the two works under

consideration, and that despite their glaring differences, they also manifested overlapping spiritual ground. In both texts the sovereignty of God is underscored, as are the typically Spyrian belief that the divine is revealed partly in nature, the value of faith that is nurtured in childhood through Bible lessons and hymns, and the supreme importance of forgiveness and reconciliation as the driving force of regeneration in humanity.

In any case, an important step forward would be a critical analysis of Spyri's less well-known books. After all, *Heidi*, notwithstanding its enormous popularity, was only one of dozens of books which she wrote between the 1870s and the 1890s. In several of the others, among them *Ein Landaufenthalt von Onkel Titus* (1881) and *Cornelli wird erzogen* (1890), there are noteworthy if not particularly well-developed religious dimensions. The possible identification of consistent themes in them would make it possible to draw more extensive, if nevertheless necessarily cautious, conclusions about what motivated this highly popular author. Much mining in Spyri's *oeuvre* remains to be done. How many nuggets prospectors can expect to find is, of course, debatable, but considering the prominence of the religious elements in *Ein Blatt auf Vrony's Grab* and *Heidi*, one must suspect that considerable pay dirt waits in the remaining lode. Extracting it should be a relatively simple task.

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