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INTRODUCTION¹

The voice of Rudolf Hagelstange (b. 1912) has been a familiar one in Germany since the appearance in 1946 of his first major work, the *Venetian Credo*. This cycle of thirty-five sonnets, which had been completed a year and a half earlier and which circulated secretly before the end of the war, was written as an attack against the Third Reich. In the poems Hagelstange described the moral bankruptcy which, he felt, had made the Nazi evil possible, and he depicted man's return to the lasting values and goals of the spirit as the only means for overcoming the crisis. His sonnets, unlike many of those that flooded Germany in the postwar months, were carefully constructed and spoke with calm, artistic force. The *Credo* was soon recognized as one of the significant documents of the literary opposition to Hitler and its author as a lyric poet of great promise.

Since 1946 Hagelstange has done much to fulfill this promise. His poetry has appeared in collections as well as separately in newspapers and periodicals; and he has written literary and cultural essays, shorter prose pieces, and — most recently — a prize-winning novel. Equally far removed in his philosophical orientation from the Pandean rhapsodies of Germany's nature poets (Wilhelm Lehmann, Günther Eich, Karl Krolow) and the "nihilistic aestheticism" of Gottfried Benn and his followers, Hagelstange has devoted his attention to man, to the nature of man's being, and to the specific problems of existence in the chaotic world of today. In many ways the general attitude of his work is traditionalistic. For although he has moved away from the *Credo's* explicit call for a return to the ideals of German Classicism, he has continued to cite the validity of traditional humanitarian and Christian values in a world beset by modern problems. On the other hand, he is keenly aware of the threat that contemporary events pose for such values; and the marked optimism of his early verse has been replaced by a more skeptical appraisal of man's spiritual vigor. Where his message had earlier been openly didactic, his artistic purpose now seems to be the more modest one of describing modern experience and interpreting its significance.

¹ By kind permission of the editors of the *Germanic Review* the "Introduction" is reprinted substantially from my article in the issue of April, 1958.

We are, he claims in a figure that finds frequent expression in his work, beings placed in a nether region "between the star and dust". We have been brought into ever closer contact with the dust; and our view of the star, though its light is still visible, has become clouded.

It is with this brief sketch of Hagelstange's development and position in mind that one must approach the *Ballad of the Buried Life*. First presented to the public in a radio version, the poem in its slightly longer printed form earned for Hagelstange one of the important "German Critics' Prizes" for 1951-52; and along with the *Venetian Credo* it represents the highpoint of his creation thus far. Its story is told with imagination and moves at a pace of epic breadth and calm. And in his sensitive handling of the strongly dactylic free verse, the metric pattern in which most of the poem is written, Hagelstange demonstrates that he is a master of form and rhythm.²

The source for his *Ballad* is an Associated Press dispatch from June 17, 1951, which is reproduced at the beginning of the book. This news item provides the plot for a narrative poem told in ten cantos of varying length. More important, it provides Hagelstange with an effective symbol. For his *Ballad*, on the surface simply an imaginative recounting of the bunker experience of the trapped men, is actually an expression of the tensions and emotions and paradoxes of man's being and specifically of modern man's being.³

The ten main cantos are preceded by an introductory section that suggests the ideological background against which the story is to play: man and the things of his world are but conglomerates of dust "held in cohesion a modest space of time by that tension midway between ferment and decay". Whether with the normal speed of organic processes or in a few seconds as in war, they must again return to dust. "All is dust", so the passage begins; and it ends with an identification of the tale to follow as "the new saga of dust". The bunker experience, that is, simply represents a unique contemporary statement of this essential nature of being.

Much of the actual narrative of the *Ballad* is told in the first five cantos. After a panoramic glimpse of the German flight before advancing enemy armies, the six soldiers are introduced. Led by clerk they look

² For further brief description of the poem's form the reader is referred to page 92 of Hans Fromm's article "Die Ballade als Art und die zeitgenössische Ballade" in *Der Deutschunterricht*, VIII (1956) 84-99. Fromm's principal interest is in the ways Hagelstange's "ballad" conforms to and differs from the ballad genre, as this genre has traditionally been defined.

³ The authenticity of the AP story has been strongly questioned, and Hagelstange underlines the symbolic nature of his poem when he admits that he too doubted the veracity of the report. However, he continues, it was as "paradigm" and not as fact that the incident appealed to him.

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for the underground storage bunker where they hope to find not merely food and drink but also refuge from the senseless destruction of the last war days. Scarcely have they entered it, however, when a bomb springs the trap into which they have walked and buries them. Once candles have been found, the men, forgetting their predicament, fall upon the rich provisions and liquors piled high around them. Later, when their orgy is over, they fire cartridges to summon help and examine every possible avenue of escape. With the realization that they are entombed their earlier joy at discovering the bunker gives way to terror and despair.

In the fourth canto one of the men emerges as an individual personality. Young, awkward, acquainted with life only through books, "Benjamin" is the first to break under the strains of bunker life. His sheltered existence has not prepared him for this trial; and he is unable to resolve the contradiction between the world as it exists in his imagination and the fearful reality into which he is now thrust. Tormented by nightmares and the never-ending direct contact with the others, he seeks peace by shooting himself. Now death has entered the bunker, and the fifth canto depicts the effect death's presence has on another of the men. Sergeant Wenig has taken part in the liquidation of Jewish women and children at Saporoschje. The memory of this crime has tortured him for some time; but, seeing in it merely the execution of an order, he has been unable to admit his own culpability. Now he realizes that this is not the issue. Benjamin's suicide enables him to grasp the full significance of death for the first time, and for the first time he becomes completely aware of the fact that he has destroyed human life. This guilt, even though he was forced to assume it, he now recognizes as his personal responsibility; and his sense of justice allows only one thing. With his service pistol he kills himself, thus paying "the balance outstanding".

The sixth canto brings a lyrical pause in the narrative. Even in the preceding sections the poet has interrupted his story with metaphoric passages and philosophical asides. But here the sequence of events is almost completely abandoned, and the canto describes a dream of the carpenter Kuno. On a green meadow Kuno encounters his younger self and together the two wander off in search of "the world". The child-self picks a dandelion gone to seed; and, while the other self examines the marvelous, fragile construction of the white head, the flower is expanded into the cosmos and Kuno is swallowed up in it. Upon awakening, he tells this to the others, who discuss the vision and their own dreams with a mixture of mockery and reverent longing. The significance of the canto will be examined later; but Hagelstange himself has suggested its structural function in the story: ⁴ for the remaining men the

⁴ "Die Form als erste Entscheidung" in *Mein Gedicht ist mein Messer*, ed. Hans Bender (Heidelberg, 1955), p. 40. The present study is indebted to this description by the poet of the *Ballad's* inception and of some of its formal considerations.

actual past has lost all meaning, and only in the form of the dream are they now able to conceive of the real world of color and light and natural growth above them.

Canto VII, an even more marked pause in the narrative, contains a discussion of time and, with this, one of the important keys for understanding the *Ballad*. As far as its role in the plot development is concerned, however, it simply emphasizes further the degree to which the entombed men have been cut off from normal existence. Now that their last timepiece has stopped, time is no longer a meaningful measure for the passage of life. Outside the bunker it is an external something to be escaped or pursued, wasted or saved; for these men it is a primitive inner experience. Unable to remember a past and without hope (i.e., belief in a future), they are aware only of an eternal present. Theirs is a life reduced to its absolute temporal essence as a progression of single moments.

In the next two sections the story again moves forward. Christopher is a Catholic, and the months in the bunker have been made easier for him by his faith in a stern but just God-Father and a suffering Brother-Christ. Although he longs for rescue, he has presumed a divine purpose for his entombment; he has accepted it as God's will and has submitted to that will. Now he is paralyzed by disease and dies a slow, painful death; yet his death is not like that of Benjamin or Wenig. A mighty vortex of light is in Christopher's emaciated body; and as the other men minister to his needs, they become aware of human emotions long forgotten. This influence is short-lived, however, and the hopeless monotony of bunker life soon returns. It is broken only by two more events, the first of which is the sudden, violent death of the clerk. He has avoided the spiritual questions raised by the others and has concerned himself only with the satisfaction of his physical wants. He has sought escape in constant drunkenness and now is swept away by sickness as if by a typhoon. His end is that of an animal, and Hagestange uses only twelve lines to describe it. The second event is the burning of the last candle. Up to this point (Canto IX) the constantly burning candles have provided the men, even at times of greatest despair, with a faint symbol of the light above. Now all "earthly contours" are wiped out, and the two remaining soldiers are creatures of a primeval darkness. Only the flowing of blood through their bodies still links them to the "dark tide" of life.

In the final canto Hagestange discards the realistic narrative technique employed more or less consistently thus far. Of the surviving men, only Kuno has played a role in the story. The other has remained nameless; and now, in order to force the reader to identify himself in the closest possible manner with the bunker experience, the poet says that this last prisoner is none other than the reader himself! Thus it is the

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reader who is told here in Canto X that he has been buried, forgotten, reduced to a state of existence “by one sigh richer than the dust from which he came”. It is the reader for whom the heartbeat becomes the only perceptible proof of his continued being. And it is the reader who is then led once more into light when this beat turns into the sound of the rescuer’s spade. With the rescue and the collapse of Kuno, for whom the sudden light is too great a shock to bear, the plot of the *Ballad* ends.

The last canto is followed by a brief concluding passage in which Hagelstange returns to the ideological background of his poetry and which provides a final hint as to its deeper meaning.

From the first Hagelstange intimates that he is doing more than just telling a story. Before the narrative begins he acquaints the reader with the symbolic nature of the tale to follow, and he frequently pauses to comment on the events taking place. Yet one must guard against finding a single “moral” for the poem. Into the subject matter provided by the short AP dispatch the author has woven many themes, and his *Ballad* is a texture rich enough in motifs to stimulate the widest play of the reader’s imagination. There is an overall pattern in this texture, however; and the pertinence of the single ideas, many of which are developed briefly and then apparently dropped, becomes evident once it is perceived. The central pattern has already been suggested: for Hagelstange the bunker is a “stage of suffering” representing the earth itself, and in the ordeal of the buried soldiers he sees a fitting symbol for the drama of human existence.⁵

Upon a first reading, and especially in the initial cantos, the reader is tempted to find a more limited message in the *Ballad*. The opening lines set the beginning of the action in the German catastrophe of 1945; the six men are introduced not simply as German soldiers but as six typical German soldiers chosen at random from the fleeing army; and — more important — there are motifs that can be explained best if the poetry is seen specifically as an allegory of *German* experience in the postwar years. Like postwar Germany, the bunker is buried under rubble and cut off from the rest of the world with which it once had connection. Like many Germans, the men feel that the event which isolated them signifies a total break with the past; and the disappearance of hope from the bunker indicates their growing distrust of the future. The constant presence of suffering here, the physical hardships of winter, the psychological strains resulting from lack of privacy, the heavy toll taken by disease, and the extraordinary proximity of death all underline further

⁵ It is interesting to note in connection with this “stage” metaphor that Hagelstange first considered giving dramatic, not lyrical-narrative form to the bunker ordeal. The obvious dramatic potentialities of the fable have since been exploited by Margarete Hohoff in her play *Die Legende von Babi Doly* (Munich, [1956?]).

the similarity between the bunker situation and that of defeated Germany.

The clearest substantiation for such an interpretation is contained in the descriptions of the four deaths in the bunker. Although their episodes are not compared in any explicit way to the postwar German scene, Benjamin, Wenig, Christopher, and the clerk appear (in part) to represent attitudes that played conspicuous roles in the months after surrender. Wenig — the most striking instance, since the problem that occupies him is plainly linked to Nazism — seems to stand for the conscience of a nation as it attempts to separate innocence from guilt, to determine the precise nature of its responsibility, and to discover ways of atonement. Benjamin's struggle resembles the dilemma of German youth which, in 1945, found itself in a completely unknown, menacing world; and it is not difficult to see the reactions of an entire generation in his bewilderment, fear, resentment, and despair. The clerk's turn to drunkenness as a means for evading thought, his search for escape at any price suggest still another reaction to postwar reality. And Christopher's attitude reminds one of an idea frequently expressed by German authors in the late forties: that for him who accepts the suffering and sacrifice of the moment as part of God's plan, they represent an exercise in the difficult virtues of humility and selflessness. Because Christopher's example awakens a spark of new hope in those around him, he also seems to symbolize the positive influence exerted by religious faith in the dark postwar world.

There are a few other passages in the poem that lend support to such an interpretation: for example, the contrast at the beginning of Canto III between nature's rapid recovery from war's devastation and the soldiers' inability to effect a similar recovery. But this path does not lead much further. After the initial cantos one forgets that the six men are Germans; and the more we read of the *Ballad* the more evident it becomes that this tale of lonely, threatened, seemingly hopeless, buried life stands not just for German experience but for contemporary existence in general. Yet even this interpretation puts the emphasis in the wrong place, since statement of life's meaning contained here has timeless validity for Hagedstange. The recent years of crisis have helped to form it and the statement is, thus, a "contemporary" one; but it defines something more basic.

The most striking aspect of this definition is its apparent bleakness. The reader who is familiar with Hagedstange's writing and is, therefore, acquainted with the frequent "dust" and "star" images will realize from the opening words that the negative pole of existence will occupy the foreground here. At first the poem was actually to have been called the *Ballad of Dust*. And the theme of man as a creature made of and returning to dust — stated explicitly in the introductory lines — is suggested again and again in the narrative. The men are covered with

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dust by the explosion that cuts off their escape; they sleep on sacks of dusty meal; the rich food in the bunker becomes as tasteless as dust in their mouths; the wick of each candle finally falls to dust at their touch; and they bury their dead under flour with the words “to dust thou shalt return”.

Although it indicates the poet’s preoccupation with life’s transitoriness, this motif in and of itself need not signify a negative view of man’s being. More important is the fact that the six soldiers do not play active roles in the bunker drama but are, rather, acted upon by forces which they are largely unable to resist. Even the action that precipitates their suffering, their entry into the bunker, is a step for which the men are only apparently responsible. Hunger and the threat of annihilation drive them here; Dante’s “lasciate ogni speranza” stands as a warning above the door but is “illegible”; and the six are compared to mice caught in the trap of fate, later to mice with which the cruel “she-cat Destiny” plays. Hagelstange refers to fate elsewhere in the *Ballad*, but once the underground ordeal has begun he depicts more precise forces. Disease, physical suffering, and death are only the most obvious and most powerful of them. When the men realize that their yells and shots will not bring help, an “unfathomable silence” falls upon them; and from now on they sense the constant menace of a grave-like stillness. Soon after they are buried, they decide to keep watch over the burning candle so “that the iron-like blackness [might] not crush them completely”. Later, as the supply of candles shrinks, this force threatens ever more ominously:

In all uncertainty
this much was sure: the blunted dark,
that lay in wait
and had to triumph, would
plunge down on them and blind...

It is, of course, the phrasing of these lines (“lay in wait”, “had to triumph”, “plunge down on them”) which is most important for showing the extreme vulnerability of the men in the bunker and the superior strength of that which confronts them.

Winter, one of their inexorable foes, is described in similar language:

Like glowing lava
the cold crept, scorning their defences,
farther and deeper. They wrestled desperately
against the implacable foe...

(Note the use in both these passages of a paradoxical element — “blind” used with “dark” and “like glowing lava” used with “cold” — to suggest further the enigmatic nature of these forces). To keep warm the

men either bury one another in meal (again the dust motif) or slap their arms against their bodies; and the latter action Hagelstange depicts in a simile that clearly illustrates the manipulation of the soldiers by the force in question (here “the cold”):

They often were like
jack-in-the-boxes on the string of a
cruel witch, gnomes under a spell,
whipped into an involuntary dance.

Fear, which at first filled the bunker “slowly, as with gently flowing water,” seems to assume corporeal reality as its attack becomes more violent:

But then anxiety
suddenly stood at their backs,
squeezing the throat, numbing the lung.

And still another, though less imaginative, example of this sort of wording appears in the description of monotony:

Monotony,
the butcheress of souls,
silently did her bloody work.
The victims remained
in her power.

(It should be noted that by this time — Canto IX — Hagelstange has abandoned his flowing free verse with its elegiac undertone in favor of a more monotonous, essentially iambic cadence. This change occurs at Christopher’s death, when the two remaining men are delivered over once and for all to the “butcheress of souls”, monotony.)

Under the buffeting of such hostile forces the men in the bunker suffer a general spiritual dissolution and complete loss of self. When they come in search of food and refuge, they are typical individuals with normal desires, reactions, and emotions. At the end of the poem the survivors are scarcely distinguishable from the dead. They have been reduced to the last possible essence of being. Hagelstange’s *Ballad* is, thus, a description of human regression, and each of its episodes is a station in this dissolution.

The realization that rescue can come only from above (Canto III) is an important first step, since in recognizing this the men admit that they are no longer able to determine the course of their own lives. Here only the way of Benjamin and Wenig is left for him who demands an active part in shaping his destiny, and the suicides mark the dis-

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appearance from the bunker of this function of normal living. Something else also passes with Benjamin and Wenig: the ability to remember. They alone retain conscious ties with the actual past; and once they have been destroyed (in a sense by these very ties) all awareness of the past vanishes. More significant, the process of memory itself now ceases to take place, and Kuno's dream illustrates this. Although Kuno "remembers" his child-self, he does so in the unreal atmosphere of a dream; and afterwards he cannot recall for his companions when or where the imagined experience occurred. The world of perceivable phenomena, which man normally uses to give perspective to his own existence and from which the soldiers have been cut off by the explosion, now lacks even the subjective kind of reality afforded it by memory.

The next step in dissolution is the change that the men's conception of time undergoes when the last watch stops. Their digestion, the growth of nails and hair still offer a feeble measure of time's passage. But "past" and "future" are now meaningless terms for them, and their time sense has become that of an animal which can comprehend only the single moment of the present. The fact that the remaining four victims go into a sort of hibernation during winter further indicates their regression toward an animal state, and Christopher's dying seems to call from them the last evidences of recognizable human emotions. Now only the final station, the extinguishing of the last candle, is left. When this has happened, the two survivors have ceased to exist as individuals. They are mere creatures, lost in an "eyeless silence" and aware of each other only when their hands meet. Because they perceive the beat of their hearts and the flow of their blood, they know they still live: but this is all that separates their life from death.

Hegelstange goes to great lengths to suggest how far-reaching and how complete a thing such spiritual degeneration is. Even before the last candle has burned down he tells the reader to "forget the image of the tree-trunk, fallen — anchored a while perhaps with just one root" if he wishes to know how close the men are to the boundary between being and not-being. And then in Canto X he seeks to demonstrate the full import of this final state of bunker existence by making it a part of the reader's own experience. You must go down into the bunker alone, he says, and you need bring nothing but "your old blindness". You must let yourself fall into blackness. You must invite despair and everything else that stalks you to feed upon your heart:

Let them suck,
until there's blackness in it: blackness, cold.
It *can* not be more black nor colder than
this night of shadowless shadows.

You must forget the concept of identity, and you must forget that

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“someone above” has forgotten to wait for you. Only then, the poet says, is the reader ready to assume the role of the sixth man in the bunker:

And when you've quite forgotten, what you once
thought that you knew and only are
by one sigh richer than the dust
from which you came: then, — then —
you are like the other,

YOU ARE THE OTHER,
who with the carpenter walks through the dust.
Then you two squat there, already kindred spirits
with those four others, whom the flour's dust
took in the form in which they went.

A great deal more might be said about the process of dissolution; but here — where the symbolic narrative and what it stands for become one — the true meaning of Hagelstange's poetry is revealed. By bringing the reader into the bunker the poet indicates his belief that the reader too is cut off from a world that once had value, threatened by forces he cannot resist, and reduced to a selfless component of life's “dark tide”. Like the sixth man whose place he takes, he has been brought to the “zero point” of existence. Thus, the *Ballad's* statement of life's significance seems grim indeed. To be sure, there are a few moments in the narrative when light breaks through the bunker's darkness, when hope and positive meaning are still present. Kuno's dream, for example, signifies loss of contact with the real world, yet it also brings a fleeting vision of cosmic harmony in the lowly dandelion. Kuno is “indescribably filled with light”, though this soon passes. Spring, which follows the dark and fearful winter, stirs in the men a modest hope “for a favorable juncture of fate, for a secret plan of the timeless powers”. And in his suffering Christopher sends out such light that the candle beside him is “suctioned away by [the] invisible shining” of his soul. These evidences of light, the poet feels, must be included if the tale of buried life is to be an accurate symbol. Yet they do not halt the process of regression or seriously modify Hagelstange's bleak appraisal of earthly existence. There is no illumination whatsoever in the world of dust the reader enters.

Of course, the *Ballad* does not end with the reader's descent into the bunker. Along with Kuno he is “called out once more from dust's grim night into the light”; and it might be argued that here the zero point is overcome. This is true but only in a very special sense, for the final rescue must not be accepted at face value if Hagelstange's message is to be understood correctly. Release does not make the bunker experience any less real, and it does not negate what has already been said about life's meaning. “Oh! do not believe in rescue as you think it”, the poet

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warns the survivors as the first crack appears in the bunker wall. The glance they must now meet is not that of human rescuers, but a divine, cosmic glance. The light that now awaits them is not the daylight that illuminates man's normal existence, the daylight his eye perceives mechanically and uncomprehendingly. It is light which transcends this and which one beholds with his entire being:

Your eye,
this needle eye, has threaded days and days
like a child, embroidering a cloth or towel,
a trembling monogram,
stitch after stitch. Now however wait
this-side and that-side of your own eyes' light,
not sliced to yesterday, today, tomorrow, —
oceans of timeless light. Entire light.
The light.

This is light which comes at the instant when man recognizes that his threatened and transitory earthly life is but a part of a larger, eternal order of existence:

— the light, that there within
breaks open,
like licking flames, enkindled
against the All, that meets you
in lightning-blaze, in which both life and death
are gathered, glorified, and raised.

The rescue Hagelstange means is simply the advent of such light. It is a moment when man is liberated from the blindness he suffers as long as he sees in his temporal existence the whole truth about life. In Kuno's case it is quite literally the moment of release from mortal blindness, for he collapses when the light breaks in upon him. Unlike Kuno, the reader is restored to the sphere of everyday living, but this is little more than a necessary step for bringing the symbolic narrative to a close. There is no indication that he returns to a life which has changed for the better or that his bunker experience has given him the power to resist the forces menacing him. Indeed, he has learned that humility before them is perhaps the most realistic attitude human beings can attain. But he has penetrated to the "roots" of existence (an image used several times in the poem); and this has brought a new awareness of life's full import. He has seen how quickly he can be reduced to the dust from which he was shaped, yet he now recognizes that this process follows a law of being that is all-inclusive and eternal. His rescue, like Kuno's, is the approach of such recognition.

The short, concluding section of the *Ballad* summarizes all this, and in the poem's last lines Hagelstange states his belief that the law of being is directed, ultimately, toward a positive goal:

Thus runs the new legend, the legend of dust;
only the old is of eternal light. Long
we wait — a life-long, — to read in it.
Now the dust rises up, clouds and whirls down,
covers the dust-formed Adam, throws him
back into nothingness and lets him rest.
Then light calls, generation after generation,
the unborn, the lost that they beget
from thousand darkened silences at last
one single child of light.

Faith in a positive purpose for man's existence characterizes all of Hagelstange's writing, and the fact that the purpose is not further defined suggests that the faith is more important than the goal itself. There is some indication that the "child of light" should be seen as a Christian motif. (Indeed, it is not impossible to interpret the entire *Ballad* as a story of the pilgrimage through life's dust to a Christian salvation after death).⁶ This, however, is certainly only one possible interpretation. The "child" seems to be merely the symbol for an ultimate end that must exist, but that mortals cannot know or describe more precisely. The connotations of the word "child" — purity, the promise of future growth and strength, humility — provide hints about the nature of Hagelstange's faith. But the knowledge that the eternal cycle of life and death is directed toward a positive goal is all that matters.

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⁶ In her *Welterlebnis in deutscher Gegenwartsdichtung* (Nürnberg, [1956]), for example, Inge Meidinger-Geise calls the work a "hymn of salvation" and sees in the "eternal light" of the final section a strictly Christian symbol (p. 284). Influenced apparently by existentialist interpretation, she claims that Hagelstange's definition of life's meaning "leads either to the abyss, to dust—or to the invisible, to the hand of God;" the choice depends on the personal belief of the individual reader (p. 285).

