

Dina De Rentiis, Christoph Houswitschka (Eds.)

## Healers and Redeemers

The Reception and Transformation of their Medieval  
and Late Antique Representations in Literature, Film and Music



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WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier  
Bergstraße 27, 54295 Trier  
Postfach 4005, 54230 Trier  
Tel.: (0651) 41503  
Fax: (0651) 41504  
Internet: <http://www.wvttrier.de>  
E-Mail: [wvt@wvttrier.de](mailto:wvt@wvttrier.de)

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# Introduction

**Dina De Rentiis and Christoph Houswitschka**

Redemption can be approached from a variety of different perspectives. As a theological concept it is God who grants redemption. In literature the redeeming agent might be either religious or secular. Both understandings of redemption are reconciled in anthropological interpretations of this either cultural and individual event or process.

The hope for redemption shows the will of human beings to heal despite of serious mayhem which is brought about by the weaknesses and failures of human nature. In religious terms this implies a renewal of the relationship to God after having fallen from grace into sin. “Theological narratives of redemption therefore include the story of the individual’s fall into sin, the acceptance of salvation and forgiveness of sins, and the reconciliation of the human with God.”<sup>1</sup> In a religious context, there is no redemption without sin. This gives sin a paradoxical status.

The Christian concept of redemption is closely interwoven with that of salvation, because the latter is usually regarded as an aspect of redemption. Therefore, the knowledge of salvation is an event in the process of redemption. The more spiritual these experiences of healing and redeeming are, however, the more they may bring about sacrifices and sufferings or even the end of the world rather than an improvement in the material sense. The improvement of spiritual insight, however, might be used for various immaterial goals which are usually shared with others thus forming a community that transcends individual desires and goals.

Redemption means the annulations of the evil and an improvement to the better. This improvement is often a promised or predestined one. By receiving unknown cognitions, impulses, opportunities for action and powers that enrich the redeemed person, new ways of religion, art, philosophy or other realms of human experience are opened to the questing person. In the religious sense redemption often means an experience of liberation or some kind of promotion which is linked to a religious formative impression, sometimes to the experience of loss and sacrifice as much as of gain and reward. Neither are all experiences of redemption linked to religion nor is every religious experience also redeeming. The boundaries between religious and secular concepts might be difficult to define.

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1 Boscalion, Daniel, “Possibilities of Redemption through the Novel”, in: Andrew Hass, David Jasper and Elisabeth Jay (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of English Literature and Theology*, Oxford 2007, p. 761.

When redemption is not a religious concept, it may emerge from social experiences such as dramatic social or political changes, the forming of fellowships or the building of even larger communities. Redemption and healing might also mark crucial changes in the lives of individuals. Individuals experience these changes as confessions, conversions, personal renewals, a mystery or a process of individuation. In literature the redeemer might either have committed a mistake himself or might sacrifice oneself for those who have fallen guilty to their social responsibilities. In contrast to theology, literature takes “the same theme of brokenness and renewal and places it in the context of life on earth, thus including understandings of redemption that may stray from those theologically defined.”<sup>2</sup> Consequently, literature tells stories of redemption:

By seeing suffering as more than a means to the end of salvation and by being able to explore agents of redemption other than a divine being, literature – which keeps the form of the theological construct while altering the content – is able to explore a variety of ways in which human suffering can be redeemed.<sup>3</sup>

Redemption is not original progress, but the restoration of a condition of the world which was lost. The typological structure of redemption and healing, the idea of eschatological improvement might even be understood as comfort in death and apocalyptic annihilation. In this sense, the idea of redemption appears to belong to an attitude that does not believe in secularized versions of revolution unless it is also a restoration. Improvement in this respect is the mending of errors and flaws by the redeemer who ends up accepting the responsibility others have evaded and who might grow beyond human powers. In the absence of the necessity to refer to a religious authority, literature “is able to explore how life on earth may be redeemed and how humans can mediate their own redemption.”<sup>4</sup> In a materialistic and secularized world healing and redemption challenge the dominant world view and define the perspective of an outsider whose way to the centre is neither intended nor protected. Experiences of redemption and healing mark changes and differences that transcend truths which would have been valid in a bygone world. All values and norms might be reversed, transforming sadness in joy, and hatred in love. The power of this radical reversal of everything familiar and certain, gives the concept of redemption a utopian force that nevertheless defeats all evolutionary ideas of undetermined and uncontrollable progress.

The Redeemer is a person who either successfully fights evil or accepts being sacrificed to restore order after human failure perverted it. In literature both varieties can be found regardless of their different theological validities. According to Gregory of Nyssa, God played a deliberate trick in order to secure the release of humanity when he sent Christ to the Devil as a ransom. This in return was justified because the Devil had deceived Adam and Eve himself. It was assumed “that God was under the obli-

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2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.