

Zacharias Mbizo: The Agnesbründl (The Agnes Well) 6. The Enlightenment



"Among all the ointments and tinctures on the healing herb stall, I initially didn't even notice the small bottle on one of the back shelves. When my eyes fell on it, I could hardly believe what I read on the label: Aqua eterna ..."

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A Sentence on a Coffin

Our guided tour through the catacombs of St. Michael led us to a number of particularly well preserved ancient sarcophagi. On some of them, Death led his victims into his realm in macabre contortions; on others, carved mythical creatures could be seen sprouting from flowers or growing together with human bodies as strange hybrid beings. Still others pointed to the life of the deceased in symbolic illustrations.



No doubt: in these cases, Death – no matter how clearly it appeared as the ruler of this world – had not succeeded in completely erasing the essence of its victims. Something had remained of them, even if it was only the helpless attempt to wrest a last word from the silence.

My gaze was caught by a coffin lid showing death in an intimate embrace with a young girl. Was this a sign of the early death of the deceased?

I looked closer – and suddenly my eyes fell on an inconspicuous inscription on the edge of the coffin. It was, so much seemed clear, only a single sentence, written in the old German Suetterlin script. Apparently it had been added later – perhaps by a restorer, or by someone who had sought refuge down here some years ago.

I was not too familiar with Suetterlin script. In my youth, I had once mastered it quite well, when I had used it with a few friends as a kind of cryptography. But that was long ago.

At least I managed to decipher one of the words: "water" ... Needless to say that after that my eyes were even more fixed on the coffin.

"Do you like the coffin? Shall I have it gift-wrapped for you?" joked our guide, who had long since moved on with the rest of the group. Everyone laughed, so I too forced myself into a smile.

"Not a bad idea," I murmured absent-mindedly. Then I tried again to make sense of the signs on the coffin. And now, after I had been forced to turn away from them for a moment, their meaning suddenly shone clearly before me: "The water of life is a cesspool that seeps into the mist."

Not exactly a poetic sentence – and of course not what I had hoped for. On the other hand, these words could easily be burned into one's memory – especially in this environment, where the triumph of death is omnipresent.

So what if, I asked myself, my grandmother had once come across the same words here? Wasn't

it plausible then that she remembered them at the very hour of her death?

Did her last words therefore not allude to the "aqua eterna" at all? Did they, on the contrary, refer precisely to the experience of the absolute perishability, the inescapability of death, which had once permeated her in this place?

It felt like the cold of a winter morning hitting me in the face after a night of drinking. The water of life had lost all its magic for me.



Aqua Eterna

The rest of the tour was now completely meaningless to me. Fortunately, it ended soon after. At least it was not too late for my train! If I hurried a little, I would still catch it.

Since I had left my suitcase at the hotel, I had to go back in the direction of the Naschmarkt (Snack Market). There I got caught up in the usual hustle and bustle. The sluggish flow of people forced its rhythm on me, so I turned into an alley that wasn't actually on my way.

As a result, I walked straight towards a stall selling ointments and tinctures of all kinds. "Healing in all life situations" promised an old-fashioned sign above the sales counter.

Fate does have a sense of humour, I thought bitterly. But at least I would get the right present for my mother this way.

"Are you looking for something special?" the saleswoman asked me as I approached the stall. She was wearing an emerald green pantsuit and



a gold-plated necklace. That pointed to stiff prices.

"No, I just want to take a look around," I said, curbing her eagerness.

The doll's house dimensions of the many vials, tubes and boxes had the effect that the selection was far larger than the not quite spacious stall would have suggested. There were tinctures for sore throats and stomach aches, ointments for skin care, all kinds of scented waters and a few bottles of liqueur.

"Stomach Soother", I read, "Leg Caresser", "Lavender Love", and "Styrian Nightcap". And then I discovered, in a back row, hidden among all the other healing miracles, a small bottle labelled "Aqua Eterna"!

The Scales of Life

At first I thought my senses had played a trick on me, as I was constantly searching for the same stimulus. But there it was in black and white, no doubt about it: "Aqua Eterna". I muttered the words to myself in disbelief.

"Are you interested in our aqua eterna?" inquired the saleswoman, who had obviously been watching me carefully. "Shall I get you the bottle from the shelf?"

I had forgotten all about the woman. "I beg your pardon? Oh, yes – why not? But tell me: what is it good for, your aqua eterna?"

"Exactly for what the name says: it is used for healing all kinds of illnesses and helps to ensure a long, healthy life."

The woman carefully reached for the bottle with her well-groomed hands. Her colourfully painted fingernails twitched like the antennae of an exotic insect before my eyes.



I pursed my lips mockingly. "And why isn't the vial placed further forward, if it is the royal road, so to speak, to perfect well-being?"

The merchant smirked indulgently. "If you are looking for the aqua eterna, you will find it."

"But as a businesswoman you must have an interest in selling it," I objected. "Then why don't you draw more attention to the fantastic offer?"

"You see," the woman told me, "it's no different from raw materials. They too lie unnoticed under the earth for centuries. Then suddenly someone discovers that they can be used in a certain way, and everyone starts looking for them. Everything has its time."

The comparison didn't make sense to me. "After all, the use of raw materials is linked to special technical prerequisites. But the aqua eterna can be used by anyone without any problems. So why should it only be available to certain people at certain times?"

The woman ran her fingers over the bottle she had placed between us. "Well, aqua eterna is not an ordinary remedy. It doesn't just affect the

person who takes it, but must always be seen in the overall context of life."

"Sorry, but I don't understand that," I grumbled. The whole thing seemed a little too esoteric to me.

"But it's quite simple," the saleswoman clarified. "Whenever one life is strengthened, another life is weakened. The scales of life always remain in balance. That is an immutable law." A ray of light fell on the transparent liquid in the bottle, causing it to shimmer rainbow-coloured for a moment.

The superstitious, deterministic talk was getting on my nerves more and more. "In that case, your aqua eterna is downright dangerous," I stated in a challenging tone. "Actually, you shouldn't be selling it under these circumstances!"

The saleswoman smiled at me with unabated friendliness. "I'm just the tool," she asserted cheekily. "If you don't find the aqua eterna in my shop, you will just find it somewhere else."

My eyes fell on the precious old watch on her wrist – my train would be leaving in less than an hour! "Well then, I'll just take it for my mother," I decided spontaneously. "I can still find out about the risks and side effects later on."



"As you wish," the woman smirked. "That will be 47.75 euros."

"Keep the change," I said as she began to rummage for change with my 50-euro note in her hand.

Bad News

Just before I arrived at the hotel, my mobile rang. This time it was not my mother. A female voice inquired in a subdued tone whether I was the person my mother's family doctor had told her to call in an emergency. Breathlessly, I answered in the affirmative.

Unfortunately, the unknown woman told me, she had to inform me that my mother had suffered a thrombosis and was in intensive care now. The doctors were doing their best, but regrettably the patient's condition appeared to be very serious.

From then on, I looked at myself as if I were the main character in an uneventful, long-winded film. I saw someone pick up a suitcase at a hotel, respond monosyllabically to the questions of a taxi driver taking him to the station, and there board a train in which his eyes were lost in the twitching of an increasingly dark landscape.



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