

Beyond Telling a Story

On the Role of Narrative in and for Medieval Prayers and Devotional Texts

This article explores the role of narrative in and for medieval prayers and devotions. Challenging the assumption that such texts fall outside the scope of narratological inquiry, I show how medieval theological works typically conceptualize prayer as including a constitutive narrative element embedded within a non-narrative textual framework. Drawing on Hugh of Saint Victor's *De virtute orandi* and William of Auvergne's *Rhetorica divina*, I identify two interconnected functions that these works ascribe to narrative: the rhetorical grounding of petition and the affective-cognitive formation of the praying subject. A reading of Henry Suso's *Hundred Meditations* further demonstrates how this text employs second-person narration to stimulate immersion and enable the devotee to participate in the Passion narrative as both its narrator and, ultimately, its beneficiary. Bringing historical narratology into dialogue with medieval theories of prayer, I propose a framework for understanding narrative elements in medieval prayers and meditations as mediating between storytelling, affective engagement, and religious self-formation.

1. Introduction

Collections of written prayers and devotions constitute the most widespread type of book in the European late Middle Ages, both in manuscript and in print, and both in Latin and in the vernacular languages. Especially for the 15th century, the amount of both extant prayer books and devotional texts written around that time is enormous.¹ In general, the late Middle Ages saw a flourishing of devotional literature that was read and spread in an overarching religious context that the theologian Berndt Hamm (2024, 132–140) characterizes as ‘theology of piety’. Despite its contemporary success, this corpus of literature has, at least until recently, received little attention in literary scholarship.²

One reason for this might be that late medieval prayers and devotions cannot easily be characterized as narrative. They do not fully fall into the category of texts in which “an agent relates [...] a story” that presents a fabula in the sense of a “series of logically and chronologically related events” (Bal 1997, 5). Instead of a narrator, prayers offer an open role that their audience can occupy when reading or speaking the text, whose words do not primarily give an account of a sequence of events but discursively express specific interconnected intentions and emotions, for example praise and joy, petition and concern, intercession and compassion, or lament and contrition. Therefore, neither classical concepts that define narrativity by “the presence of a mediating authority, the narrator”

(Schmid 2003, 17) nor structuralist and semiotic models emphasizing sequential temporal and motivational structures that “represent changes of state” (Bal 1997, 18) satisfyingly describe this genre of religious writing. Furthermore, the distinction between *histoire* and *discours*, much discussed in narratology (Martínez / Scheffel 2009, 22–26), is particularly blurry when it comes to devotional literature.³ It might thus appear tempting to altogether abandon a narratological approach when studying such texts and instead apply, for example, the framework of ‘thoughtwriting’ developed for lyric poetry by Kendall Walton (2011). Like poems, prayers and devotions can be regarded as providing their audience not with stories, but rather with expressions and utterances that are to be appropriated.

Studies on medieval prayer book literature tend to adopt similar perspectives. In theology and religious studies, Christian prayer is often understood, focusing on its pious performance, as an act of turning to God (Ratschow 1984, 31). From a corresponding viewpoint of literary studies and rhetoric, prayer texts outline a special type of apostrophe (Kraß 1997, 662) that their users can voice in the form of a speech act (Thali 2010, 430–431). Written prayers and devotions thus appear as textual media that afford the devotee an act of communication that bridges the divide between immanence and transcendence (Breitenstein / Schmidt 2019, 278–279). Focusing on reception aesthetics and reader response, recent scholarship, including myself, has proposed to understand written prayers and devotions as scripts for religious practice and experience that offer their audience to enter into the role of a textual ‘I’ that is in direct dialogue with the divine (cf. Buschbeck 2019, 2024; Chlench-Priber 2020, 130–139). On a vertical level, such texts mediate between their readers and God. At the same time and on a more horizontal level, they give prompts for imagination that allow the devotee to immerse into the impressions, perspectives, and affects evoked by the textual depiction (e.g., Ryan 2001, 115–119). Sarah McNamer (2009, 12), for example, regards medieval devotions not as narratives but rather as ‘emotives’ that constitute “instruments for directly changing, building, hiding, intensifying emotions”. Finally, prayers and devotions typically express the hope and petition for a salvific effect that is prefigured by the words of the text.

At the same time, it cannot be ignored that medieval prayers and devotions typically contain narrative passages and moments, which have recently shifted into the focus of research, too.⁴ As I outline below, medieval *artes orandi* usually describe a short *narratio* as one of the defining parts of prayer. In an inverted analogy to what Mieke Bal (1997, 60–61) describes as non-narrative texts – for example, description or dialogue – embedded in narrative, this *narratio* may be understood as a narrative element embedded in a non-narrative framework.

Occasionally, prayers and devotional texts are also accompanied by narrative paratexts in the form of rubrics, exempla, or prologues. Typically, they present stories about, for example, the origin of the following religious exercise or relate miracle accounts that are meant to illustrate its salvific efficiency. As I outline below, they can be regarded as narrative commentary that explains and advertises a devotional practice informed by the text it accompanies.

With this article, I aim to shed further light on the functions and position of such narrative elements in and for medieval prayers and devotions. My argument progresses in two consecutive steps. First, I outline how two medieval theories of prayer, Hugh of Saint Victor's *De virtute orandi* and William of Auvergne's *Rhetorica divina*, conceptualize the role of narrative within this particular textual and performative framework. With different emphasis, they ascribe narration the double function of both supporting a petition uttered by the devotee and affecting them by stirring up affect as well as comprehension. Secondly, I examine the role of narrative in and for devotional texts by looking at a complex written exercise of prayer and meditation, namely Henry Suso's *Hundred Meditations on the Suffering of Christ*. Suso, I argue, drawing on recent work in historical narratology (esp. Spohn 2023), structures the narrative elements of his prayer exercise as second-person narration with Christ as the narratee, stimulating the devotee's imagination and offering them to immerse into the position of the narrator. At the same time, Suso elaborates on his way of dealing with the biblical account of the Passion of Christ in a paratextual origin story. This commentary can be read as a reflection on how to integrate narration into the framework of prayer and devotion by dividing a story into single moments or events that the devotee has to contemplate on by connecting them back into a coherent narrative. In order to better grasp the place of such narrative elements and techniques in a medieval culture of piety, historical narratology should, I suggest, read them against the backdrop of the functions of narration highlighted by contemporary theories of prayer.

2. Narrative in Medieval Theories of Prayer: Hugh of Saint Victor and William of Auvergne

A highly influential definition of prayer, which is picked up by most medieval texts on this subject, goes back to the 7th-century theologian John of Damascus. The 12th-century Latin translation of his originally Greek *Ekdosis*, better known as *De fide orthodoxa*, states: "Oratio est ascensus mentis in Deum aut eorum quae consentanea sunt postulatio a Deo" ["Prayer is an ascent of the mind to God, or a plea to God for things that are to be granted" (John of Damascus 1864, 1090 [III,24])].⁶ Effectively, this definition gives two concepts of prayer in one sentence: first, prayer as a mental movement towards what is transcendent, and secondly prayer as an act of asking God for something.

The vast body of medieval theological works on prayer can be roughly organized by which of these concepts they emphasize more strongly. The notions of prayer as either an inward disposition towards God or a specific type of utterance reappear, to mention only a few examples, in Origen and Evagrius Ponticus, in the influential *De oratione et speciebus illius* by Peter the Chanter, in the works of the Franciscan David of Augsburg and the Dominican Humbertus de Romanis as well as in Martin Luther's *Eine einfältige Weise zu beten*.⁷ The following pages

focus on how two authors who represent opposite poles of this spectrum describe the role of narrative in prayer. William of Auvergne, on the one hand, understands prayer as rhetorical speech directed at God (cf. O'Donnell 1976). Hugh of Saint Victor, on the other hand, defines it as a specific type of mental and emotional relation to the divine and states: “Nihil [...] est oratio quam mentis devotio, id est, conversio in Deum per pium et humilem affectum” [“Prayer is nothing but devotion of the mind, that is turning to God through pious and humble affect” (Hugh of Saint Victor 1997, 132)].

Toward the middle of the 13th century, the Parisian bishop William of Auvergne composed a work known as the *Rhetorica divina*.⁸ For him, prayer first of all is a petition that differs from worldly acts of asking for something primarily because of its addressee, that is God.⁹ Therefore William understands and describes the textual structure and performance of prayer in analogy to rhetorical speech, particularly to judicial oratory:¹⁰ “oratio [...] est velut oratio rhetorica, et intendo, habens similitudinem orationis rhetoricae saecularis et ad similitudinem et proportionem illius” [“prayer is like a rhetorical speech, and I mean having a likeness to worldly rhetorical speech and being in a likeness and proportion to its parts” (William of Auvergne 2013, 32–33)]. Drawing on the categories of classical rhetoric, he gives an instructive analysis of the different parts of prayer. In addition to an *exordium* that addresses and captures the benevolence of the divine audience, a petition for a specific intervention or effect, and a discussion of this petition consisting of confirmation, refutation, and conclusion, William's template for structuring prayers also stipulates a narrative textual element.¹¹

To this *narratio*, William ascribes a specific purpose: Its function is to build a fundament both for arguing for the central petition brought forward by the prayer and for refuting possible counterarguments.¹² This notion is informed by classical rhetorics that focus on forensic speech and prescribe that the “*narratio* should contain the facts of the case” (O'Donnell 1976, 328) that the rhetor argues for or against. In the *Rhetorica divina*, narrative thus plays a supporting role for building arguments which in turn serve the aim of rendering plausible a petition to God. To that end, as William illustrates by a series of examples (William of Auvergne 2013, 54–61), the narrative element of prayer can recount moments in salvation history that give precedence for the devotee's plea, give a confessional account of the devotee's sins, or provide examples of God's power. Altogether, William of Auvergne ascribes to such short narrative elements within prayer the function of providing contextualization to support a speech act of petitioning for divine grace.

Yet when William concedes that spiritual and worldly speech differ in their intention, the *Rhetorica divina* also incorporates an understanding of prayer as inward disposition into its otherwise petition-focused model. While a secular orator tries to convince the judge and audience, spiritual orators, aware of God's immovability, seek to render themselves more suitable for their petition to be granted.¹³ Prayer texts, including their narrative elements, are thus portrayed as instruments of self-influence and self-formation.

In the treatise *De virtute orandi*, written in the first half of the 12th century by the Augustinian canon regular Hugh of Saint Victor, this point is pronounced more strongly and applied specifically to the narrative element of prayer.¹⁴ Hugh, too, draws on rhetorical terminology when he develops a typology of prayer. He distinguishes between three main types of prayer, which are defined by the respective relation of narration and petition that they establish. While *supplicatio* is a humble and devout prayer without any specific petition, *postulatio* consists of a narration into which a clear petition is inserted. *Insinuatio*, finally, is the expression of will by means of narration but without directly asking for something.¹⁵

Yet as Hugh elaborates, the narrative presented in prayer is not meant to relate a story to God. Since God is omniscient and thus already knows what the praying person wants, he, unlike a human addressee, does not need to be told anything. As far as God is concerned, “*narratio necessaria non est*” [“narration is not necessary” (Hugh of Saint Victor 1997, 144)].

Instead, the narrative parts of prayer have the purpose to make the devotee understand their own request better and to stir up the devout affects that are key to Hugh’s concept of prayer (Rau / Scheel 2015, 271–273). In prayer, a person tells stories only “*ut ipse suam petitionem melius intelligat, ut et per narrationem suam admonitus, quid petat consideret, et per considerationem petitionis suae excitatus, deuotius oret*” [“so that he himself may understand his request more clearly, and so that, being reminded by his own narration, he may consider what he asks for, and, stirred up by reflecting on his petition, pray more devoutly” (Hugh of Saint Victor 1997, 144)]. Since, as mentioned above, Hugh defines prayer primarily as an inner posture of *mentis devotio*, this point is of central importance to his theory: By providing their users with a script to tell stories, prayer texts allow them to enter a cognitive as well as affective state of turning to God. According to *De virtute orandi*, narrative in prayer texts thus affords a form of self-influence that Kathrin Chlench-Priber (2020, 132) describes as ‘autocommunication.’

In short, William of Auvergne and Hugh of Saint Victor describe two inter-related functions of narrative in prayer. For William, who understands prayer primarily as an act of petition, prayer texts present a *narratio* to build arguments that support pleas to God. At the same time, the *Rhetorica divina* concedes that these arguments cannot move the immovable addressee of prayer but instead render the devotee themselves more suitable to receive what is asked for. Hugh of Saint Victor, for whom prayer primarily is a mental state of devotion, emphasizes that in prayer, narration is not meant to relate a story to God. Instead, it serves the purpose of making the devotee reflect about their own cause and to stimulate an interior state of piety. For Hugh, the argumentative function of narration that William focuses on is subordinate to such a narrative technique of self-influence.

3. Second-Person Narrative, Immersion, and Paratextual Commentary: Henry Suso's *Hundred Meditations*

These two ideas of narrative, first as fundament for petition and secondly as an instrument of self-influence, inform the use of storytelling in late medieval devotional literature to a large degree. To further investigate the modalities of narration employed for this twofold purpose, the following pages will focus on a text that combines both functions while also adding a narrative paratext that constitutes both commentary and reflection on the use of narrative elements. As I outline below, Henry Suso's *Hundred Meditations on the Suffering of Christ* afford its readers to enter the role of the narrator in a second-person narrative of the Passion with Christ serving as the narratee. Suso explains this narrative dynamic in a paratextual origin story that reflects on how to integrate and functionalize narration into the framework of a prayer exercise (Seuse 1907, 196–197, 314; Suso 1989, 207–208, 294). Considering that the use of narration by the *Hundred Meditations* fulfills the functions emphasized by William of Auvergne and Hugh of Saint Victor, a narratological analysis of this text and similar works can, I argue, profit from considering the models developed in contemporary theories of prayer.

The *Hundred Meditations* constitute the third and final section of the *Little Book of Eternal Wisdom*,¹⁶ written by the Dominican friar Suso in or near Constance around 1330. The *Little Book* was a true bestseller of its time: It is transmitted in at least 260 extant manuscripts, not even counting all of the about 330 late medieval prayerbooks and devotional miscellanies that contain only the *Hundred Meditations* as well as several hundred textual witnesses of its Latin adaptation, the *Horologium Sapientiae*.¹⁷ Different from the preceding mystical dialogue of the *Little Book*, the *Hundred Meditations* instruct a complex meditational prayer exercise in which the story of the Passion of Christ is broken down into a list of hundred points that start with the agony in the garden and end with Mary's pain at the entombment. Every five or ten points are combined into a textual subunit that is framed by a conclusory prayer referring to the preceding points.

The first ten points, for example, are concerned with Christ's agony, capture, trial, and condemnation, followed by the scourging, the crown of thorns, and the taking of the Cross. After being thought or spoken, the prologue to the *Hundred Meditations* explains, each point is to be reinforced by a *venia* (i.e., a ritual genuflection or prostration) as well as saying the Lord's Prayer, a Hail Mary, or the *Salve Regina*.¹⁸

I. Eya, Ewigú Wisheit, min herze ermanet dich, als du nah dem jungsten nachtmale uf deme berge von angsten dines zarten herzen wurd hinvliezende von dem blütigen sweize, II. Und als du wurde vientlich gevangen, strenklich gebunden und ellendklich verführet; III. Herre, als du wurde in der nacht mit herten streichen, mit verspöizenne und verbindenne diner schönen ögen lasterlich gehandelt, IV. Früje vor Cayphas versprochen und in den töd vúr schuldig ergeben, V. Von diner zarten müter mit grundlosem herzleide an gesehen. VI. Du wurd vor Pylato schamlich gestellet, valschlich gerüget, tötlich verdampnet, VII. Du, Ewigú Wisheit, wurd vor Herodes in wissen kleidern torlich verspottet, VIII. Din schöner lip wart so gar leitlich von dien ungezognen geiselschlegen zerführet und zermüstet, IX. Din zartes höpt mit spitzigen dornen

durstochen, da von din minneklichs antlûte mit blût waz verrunnen, X. Du wurd also verteilte ellendklich und schamlich mit dinem krûze us in den tût gefûret. (Seuse 1907, 315)

[1. O eternal Wisdom, my heart reminds you how, after the Last Supper, on the Mount you were drenched in bloody sweat because of the anguish of your tender heart. 2. And how you were taken captive by your enemies, roughly bound and led off in misery 3. And how, Lord, during the night you were shamefully abused with harsh blows, were spit upon and blindfolded. 4. In the morning you were falsely charged before Caiaphas and bound over for death as a guilty person. 5. Your gentle mother looked on in immense sorrow. 6. In shame you were brought before Pilate, falsely accused and condemned to death. 7. Eternal Wisdom, before Herod you appeared in white clothing and were scorned as a fool. 8. Your fair body was brutally torn open and mutilated by the frenzied lashes of the scourge. 9. Your gentle head was punctured by pointed thorns and blood ran down over your dear face. 10. You were thus condemned and with your cross led forth to death in misery and shame. (Suso 1989, 294–295)]

While praying and meditating on these points, the devotee, who adopts the speaker role of the ‘I’ laid out by the text, addresses his words to Christ, so that he recounts the story of the Passion to the very protagonist of that story. The *Hundred Meditations* thus follow the structure of the widespread ‘*memento* prayers’, which are characterized by the fact that – usually beginning with the formula *memento* or ‘I remind you’ – Christ, God, or a particular saint is told of their own past deeds (Achten 1987, 38).¹⁹

From a narratological point of view, such prayers can, as Verena Spohn (2023, 52–55) proposes, be understood as second-person narratives. Drawing on a typology of second-person fiction developed by Monika Fludernik (2011, 105–113), Spohn (2023, 130–137) distinguishes between ‘homoconative you-narratives’ and ‘homocommunicative you-narratives’ in late medieval religious texts. Both are characterized by a narrator (‘I’) who on the level of *discours* speaks to an addressee (‘you’). While in the homoconative mode only “the addressee but not the narrator participate[s] in the story” (Fludernik 1993, 224), homocommunicative you-narratives render both parties part of the *histoire* (Spohn 2013, 135–136). The difference between these two types of second-person narratives thus lies in the heterodiegetic or homodiegetic quality of the first-person speaker. The passage from Suso’s *Hundred Meditations* cited above constitutes, at least at first sight, a homoconative second-person narrative: while praying, the devotee tells the story of Christ, who is both the addressee and narratee of this passage.

In the context of late medieval prayer, such second-person narrative elements contribute to fostering a type of reader response that can be characterized as an effect of immersion (Buschbeck 2024, 72–86). Devotional texts “invite the reader to imagine a world, and to imagine it as a physical, autonomous reality” (Ryan 2001, 92). Praying and meditating on Henry Suso’s points stimulates two interrelated but distinct immersive effects on the levels of communication and story.²⁰ On the former, the devotee can enter a conversation with Christ. The text affords them to enter its ‘open I’ and consequently appropriate its words to speak to the divine addressee. On the latter, they narrate the Passion of Christ, which, as Johanna Thali argues, they must imaginatively render present, observe, and reflect on with compassion (Thali 2012, 250–253).²¹

Alois M. Haas (1993, 107) has argued that Suso presents the Passion ‘not as narrative, but as a mere list of the points that are to be meditated’. From the perspective outlined above, I understand the *Hundred Meditations* somewhat differently. For the individual points each recount an event, and their sequence links these events into an order that combines into a story. What Suso refrains from, however, is to establish explicit temporal or causal connections between the individual events. It is necessary to bear in mind, though, that we must assume a fundamental familiarity with the story of the Passion on the part of the audience of this text. Therefore, the absence of connections presents itself as a series of productive blanks (Iser 1984, 267–315), which the devotional reader is encouraged to constructively fill in while using the text for prayer and meditation. In the *Hundred Meditations*, the devotee hence is put into the position of a homoconative narrator who gives Christ an account of his own suffering and, while doing so, is encouraged to mentally connect the single moments he relates into a coherent story.

To what end, though, does Suso’s devotional exercise employ this rather complex way of narration? The ten points cited above are followed by a petitionary prayer derived from them. Reflecting the anguish of Christ on himself, the devotee asks for divine help, protection from sin, compassion with Christ and Mary, contempt of worldly goods and finally for Christlikeness in suffering.²² By thus expressing the hope that the story of the Passion that has just been presented to Christ might have a direct effect on the person who is praying, the mode of the second person-narrative shifts, at least in retrospect, from homoconative to homocommunicative. Suso’s petitions add a homodiegetic element to the relation between the devotee, who is immersed into the position of the speaker, and the story of the Passion that they have told and reimagined while praying and meditating on the preceding points.²³ This constantly shifting position of the first-person speaker vis-à-vis the *histoire* of the Passion is characteristic of the *Hundred Meditations*.

To better grasp the position of such narrative techniques in medieval devotional literature, historical narratology might take into consideration the double function of supporting pleas and exercising self-influence ascribed to narration by the theories of prayer that I have looked at in the preceding subchapter. On the one hand, the second-person narrative oscillating between homo- and heterodiegetic narrator positions provides a fundament from which the petitions following every ten or five points of meditation derive. The story told in this prayer exercise hence possesses the rhetorical function highlighted, for example, by William of Auvergne. On the other hand, compassion with Christ in his suffering constitutes an effect of imaginatively relieving the plot of the Passion by telling it to Christ. The devotee can act as a narrator who immerses into a framework of words offered by the *Hundred Meditations*. Here, narration serves the purpose emphasized by Hugh of Saint Victor: it makes the devotional reader mentally turn to the divine narratee, fosters immersion, scripts imagination, evokes affect, and renders the subjects addressed in prayer appear present to the mind of the text’s users.

This double function is further explained in a paratextual origin story that accompanies the *Hundred Meditations* and is, in a slightly more detailed version, also found in the first part of the *Little Booklet* (Seuse 1907, 196–197, 314; Suso 1989, 207–208, 294): A friar, whom we may identify with the author Henry Suso, once stood before a crucifix and lamented that he could not quite succeed in meditating on the Passion of Christ. Answering to that problem, God reveals to him the points of meditation, that is the narrative part of the *Hundred Meditations*, which make his difficulty disappear. Later, the friar himself adds the petitionary prayers, so that “ieder mensch im selber ursach vinde ze begerenne, als er denne gemüt ist” [“so that each person himself might find something to ask for according to his disposition at the time,” (Seuse 1907, 314; Suso 1989, 294)].

On the one hand, this story auratizes the *Hundred Meditations* by portraying them as the product of a visionary experience – a function of narrative paratexts that is quite common in late medieval devotional literature.²⁴ This underscores their promise of salvific efficacy and attributes the text with additional license and authority. On the other hand, the short paratext can also be understood as a reflective commentary on how stories can be adapted and rendered usable for prayer and devotion. A complex plot such as the Passion of Christ is hard to deal with in the context of a devotional exercise, exactly because its series of causally and chronologically related events cannot be contemplated as a whole and in a single moment but calls for being presented in sequential order, that is as narrative. The answer to this problem that is revealed to Suso is to break down the Passion into single events that the devotee must connect into a story by entering the position of the narrator who in a second-person narrative tells Christ of his own suffering, preparing both the substrate for a following petition and stimulating an immersive experience of contemplating the Passion in conversation with Christ.

4. Conclusion

The three authors at the center of this article constitute specific, albeit prominent, examples of 12th- to 14th-century writing in and about the genre of prayer and devotional literature. My short survey of their treatment of narrative elements within the textual framework of written prayers and meditations thus cannot claim to present a comprehensive study on the role, place, and limits of narrative in medieval literature connected to practices of piety. Nonetheless, I hope to have pointed out several cornerstones that might contribute to further developing a narratological perspective on this vast corpus of texts.

First, as the examples of Hugh of Saint Victor and William of Auvergne illustrate, medieval theological works on prayer do not conceptualize it as a narrative textual genre per se but rather identify a narrative element embedded in a non-narrative framework as one of its characteristic features. This *narratio* is ascribed a twofold function, which is emphasized differently depending on the

respective work or author. The *Rhetorica divina*, for example, highlights narrative's rhetorical purpose of supporting a petition yet acknowledges that because it cannot move the immovable God, narration in prayer instead aims at exerting influence on the person who is praying. *De virtute orandi* particularly stresses the latter point, arguing that the purpose of narrative in prayer is not to tell a story to the omniscient divinity but to emotionally affect the devotee, allowing them to turn to God in a pious state of mind. At the same time, Hugh, too, understands narrative as the point of departure for a petition: rendering it plausible by telling a story makes the devotee better understand their plea.

Second, Henry Suso's *Hundred Meditations* follow a strategy of second-person narration that affords the devotee to immerse into the role of a narrator who addresses Christ as the narratee. This dynamic is not specific to prayer exercises on the Passion – similar phenomena can be observed, for example, in late medieval and early modern prayers to saints that incorporate hagiographical accounts (Fludernik 1994, 296; Spohn 2023, 85–90) or the liturgical collect, which typically includes a short relative predication ('*qui*-clause'). As the example of Henry Suso shows, the narrating 'I' in prayer and devotional exercises can be homodiegetic, heterodiegetic, or shift between the two positions. The text's transcendent 'you', on the other hand, usually is both the addressee on the level of the *discours* and at the center of the *histoire*.

Third, to understand the role of such narrative strategies in the context of medieval cultures of piety, it seems helpful to draw on theological writers like Hugh of Saint Victor and William of Auvergne. In the *Hundred Meditations* and similar texts, narration serves the double purpose identified by these two authors: it establishes the basis for a subsequent petition and, by stimulating affect and comprehension, allows the devotee to adopt an interior disposition of turning to God. For historical narratology, medieval theories of prayer thus provide a helpful lens for investigating the role and functions of narration in devotional literature.

Finally, narrative paratexts, commonly found in this genre, often accredit spiritual exercises with visionary authority or instruct on how to read them. In the case of Henry Suso, though, the origin story of the *Hundred Meditations* also reflects on how to apply narrative in the context of prayer and meditation. To allow for thorough contemplation, Suso proposes, stories must be broken down into single events or moments that a devotee can imaginatively render present and, immersing into the text and becoming its narrator, combine back into a story.

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¹ An introduction to medieval theological discussions about prayer is given in the chapters edited by Roy Hammerling (2008). On prayer and devotion as textual genres and religious practices in the Middle Ages, cf. Buschbeck 2024, 33–58. Nigel F. Palmer (2018) gives a survey of German prayer books dating before 1400. Peter Ochsenein (1997) investigates the medieval emergence of texts for private prayer and devotion.

² In recent years, there has been an increase in scholarly interest in late medieval prayer books and devotional literature in German medieval studies, often focusing on specific manuscripts, texts, or authors (cf. Fahr 2026, Chlench-Priber 2020, Wiederkehr 2013), textual genres of prayer (cf. Buschbeck 2024, Matter 2021), or the role of devotional literature as a religious medium (cf. Breitenstein / Schmidt 2019). The ongoing COST-Network "Prayticipate: Participation through Prayer in the Late Medieval and Early Modern World" currently works on developing an interdisciplinary methodological framework for the study of this genre of religious literature.

³ In prayer texts, discursive elements such as invocation, apostrophe, plea, blessing, or petition are often inextricably intertwined with statements about a divine addressee that can be read as references to a world evoked by the text (i.e. the *histoire*). The initial words of the Lord's Prayer ("Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name") provide a good example.

⁴ In a narratological study on the use of the second-person narrative in medieval religious writing, Verena Spohn (2023, esp. 52–55, 81–90, 127–140) analyzes several examples of prayers and devotional text. Hedwig Suwelack (2022, 155–164) considers the German *Herzmahner*, a 15th-century prayer exercise adapting a Latin work by Thomas à Kempis, a 'prayer narration' that relates the story of the Passion in dialogue with Christ. Focusing on biblical and modern texts, Andreas Mauz (2009, 202–205) understands prayer at least in part as autodiegetic discourse by which a devotee relates their own story and presents a 'narration of reality'.

⁵ An overview of this genre of instructive works on prayer is given by Barbara H. Jaye in Briscoe / Jaye 1992, 77–118.

⁶ Unless I am citing from bilingual editions or indicate otherwise, all translations are my own.

⁷ I would like to thank my colleague Lukas Bickel (Zurich), who is currently writing a dissertation on the typology of medieval prayer gestures, for our discussions on these texts, which have contributed substantially to the thoughts outlined in this subchapter.

⁸ On the sources of this work and its place in William's wider oeuvre, cf. Tilliette 2005. A reliable introduction to the *Rhetorica divina* is given by the editor Roland J. Teske in William of Auvergne 2013, 1–16. O'Donnell 1976 gives a reliable English characterization and analysis of this text. Lutz 1984, 118–137, situates it in a broader Christian tradition of thinking about prayer through the lens of rhetoric that reaches back to Origen and Ambrose.

⁹ "Oratio non est nisi petitio in genere" ('Prayer is nothing but petition in its genus,' William of Auvergne 2013, 26–27).

¹⁰ As Eckart Conrad Lutz (1984, 118–137) and Ruth Wiederkehr (2013, 125–126) show, the tradition of the idea of prayer as a form of rhetorical speech directed at God reaches back to the 3rd century theologian Origen. William's *Rhetorica divina* thus should be considered much less "innovatory" (Ward 2018, 401) than scholarship sometimes assumes.

¹¹ According to William, a prayer text, just as a judiciary speech, consists of “exordium, narrationem, petitionem, confirmationem, et infirmationem, novissime vero conclusionem” [“the exordium, the narration, the petition, the confirmation, the refutation, and lastly the conclusion”] (William of Auvergne 2013, 32–33). It is indeed noteworthy that William so strongly stresses this analogy “despite an innate suspicion of rhetoric in theological circles” of his time (Ward 2018, 401).

¹² “Quoniam vero juxta artem et doctrinam rhetoricam, de ipsa narratione assumenda est semper confirmatio partis ipsius qui narrat et infirmatio partis adversarii [...]. Ex facto namque quod narratur oritur jus, et inde sumendi sunt omnes loci suasionum et argumentationum rhetoricarum, quia deprecatio est constitutio causae omnis orantis” [“Since, according to the rhetorical art and teaching concerning the narrative, the confirmation of the side of the narrator and the refutation of the side of the adversary is always to be taken from the narrative [...]. For from the action that is narrated there arises a right, and from it are to be taken all the forms of persuasion and rhetorical argumentation, because the plea is the establishment of the case of every orator”] (William of Auvergne 2013, 52–53).

¹³ “Orator vero spiritualis oratione, quam coram Deo altissimo fundit, non intendit ipsum movere, quem scit indubitanter in ultimate stabilitatis immobilissimum, sed potius semetipsum vel a malo in quo est in bonum vel a bono in melius, quod est dicere, quia intendit semetipsum facere ideoneum per orationem, ut ei concedatur quod impetrare intendit” [“The spiritual orator [...] does not intend by his speech, which he pours forth before God most high, to move him, whom he undoubtedly knows to be unmovable in the ultimate degree of stability, but rather to remove himself from the evil in which he is toward something good, or from something good toward something better, that is to say that he intends to make himself suitable by prayer so that he may be granted what he aims to obtain”] (William of Auvergne 2013, 34–35).

¹⁴ Paul Rorem (2009, 121) characterizes this small treatise, which circulated widely in the High and Late Middle Ages, as follows: “The different types of prayer, all related to our misery and to God’s mercy, are systematically itemized and classified, with an emphasis on the inner posture of opening and directing one’s affections and love toward God.” As Rau / Scheel 2015, 271–274, show, especially the central role that Hugh attributes to human affects stirred by prayer make his treatise stand out among the large body of medieval theological treatises on devotion and devotional literature. On Hugh of Saint Victor and its position within contemporary theology see van Nieuwenhove 2012, 120–136.

¹⁵ “Tres sunt species orationis: supplicatio, postulatio, insinuatio. Supplicatio est sine determinatione petitionis humilis et deuota precatio. Postulatio est determinate petitionis incerta narratio. Insinuatio est sine petitione, per solam narrationem, uoluntatis facta significatio” [“There are three kinds of prayer: supplication, petition, and insinuation. Supplication is a humble and devout prayer without a specified request. Petition is a narration into which a specified request is inserted. Insinuation is, without a request, a mere expression of the will through narration alone”] (Hugh of Saint Victor 1997, 134).

¹⁶ On Suso and his works see Haas / Ruh 1992. Since a new critical edition of Suso’s writings currently being prepared by Jens Haustein and Antje Willing (Willing 2019) has not yet been published, I cite Bihlmeyer’s Middle High German text of the *Hundred Meditations* (i.e., Seuse 1907) and add Frank Tobin’s English translation (i.e., Suso 1989) based on this edition.

¹⁷ For a – likely still incomplete – list of extant manuscripts transmitting the *Little Book of Eternal Wisdom* see Handschriftencensus (2026). The extent of this work’s transmission and its context are discussed by Antje Willing (2019, 13–14).

¹⁸ “andechtklich mit hundert venjen [...] alle tag übergan, und ze ieder venje ein Pater noster sprechen, oder ein Salve regina oder aber ein Ave Maria, da es unser vrowen an gehört” (Seuse 1907, 314) [“go over them every day with devotion accompanied by a hundred *veniae* [...]. With each *venia* he should recite an Our Father, or when the meditation has to do with our Lady, a Hail, Holy Queen or Hail Mary.”] (Suso 1989, 294).

¹⁹ John Lydgate’s *The Legend of St. Gyle*, a text whose reliance on second-person narrative is discussed by Monika Fludernik (1994, 296), draws on this genre of prayer texts, too. For further examples, see the discussion of such *memento* or, in German, *manunge* prayers by Verena Spohn (2023, 102–103) and Eckart Conrad Lutz (1984, 140–144), who uses the term “Paradigmengebet.”

²⁰ In Buschbeck 2024, I have, without focusing on narrative elements, described this double effect of reader response as a vertical dynamic of mediation that relies on discursive elements (e.g., rhetorical structures, apostrophe, figurative language) to bridge a communicative gap between immanence and transcendence, and a horizontal dynamic of mediation that stimulates phenomena of immersion into what is described in language and thus renders a textual world present to devotional readers.

²¹ Johanna Thali (2012, 252–253) shows that the German *betrachtung*, which Suso uses to describe his points of meditation, means a “Technik zur Meditation des Leidens Christi, die mitleidvolle, innere Anteilnahme stimulieren soll. Mittel dazu ist die Imagination der eigenen Anwesenheit bei der Passion: Das betrachtende Subjekt lässt in seiner Vorstellung die Protagonisten der Heilsgeschichte lebendig werden”.

²² “Ach, min einigú zûversiht, dez siest du ermanet, daz du mir vätterlich ze hilf komest in allen minen nōten. Enbinde mich von minen sūntlichen sweren banden, behüt mich vor heinlichen sūnden und of-fenbarem laster. Beschirme mich vor dez viendes valschen reten und vor ursach aller sūnden; gib mir dins lidens und diner zarten mūter leides ein herzklichs enphinden. Herr, rihte ab mir an miner jungsten hinvar erbarmerherzklich, lere mich weltlich ere versmahen und dir dienen wislich. Alle mine gebresten werden in dinen wunden verheilet, min bescheidenheit in dem sere dins hōptes vor aller anvechtunge gesterket und gezieret, und alles din liden nach minem vermugenne von mir ervolget.” (Seuse 1907, 315) [“O my only Hope, remember all this so that as a Father you might come to my aid in all my distress. Free me from the heavy bounds of my sins. Protect me from secret sins and public crimes. Guard me against the deceiving counsels of the enemy and against the occasions of all sins. Let me feel in my heart your suffering and the sorrow of your gentle Mother. Lord, judge me with mercy on my final journey, teach me to have no regard for worldly honor and to serve you in wisdom. Let my failings be healed in your wounds, my reason be strengthened against all temptations and made fair in the pain of your head. Let me conform myself, as best as I can, completely to your suffering.” (Suso 1989, 295)].

²³ Verena Spohn (2023, 135), comes to a similar conclusion in her analysis of Bruder Berthold’s *Zeitglöcklein des Lebens und Leidens Christi*: “Das ‘Ich’, das in der Erzählung agiert, hat Anteil an der Geschichte des ‘Du.’”

²⁴ Examples are discussed in Buschbeck 2025, esp. 169.