

Gunnar Decker's

HESSE
Der Wanderer und sein Schatten
Biographie

Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2012, 703 pp.

A book review by Prof. Mark Harman¹

The Janus-like qualities of Hermann Hesse were not lost on some of his more astute contemporaries. On first meeting Hesse in 1936, the publisher Peter Suhrkamp felt that the tall man before him with the heavily creased face of a gardener or a mountain climber could have emerged just as easily from a monastery in Tibet as from a literary café in Paris. Walter Benjamin detected both the "contemplation of a mystic" and the "sharp eye of an American". Although Hesse himself identified the common theme in his prolific writings "as a defense (and at times as a cry for help) of the personality, of the individual", the coexistence of such contrary traits suggests that his seemingly straightforward prose may be more textured than his detractors acknowledge.

The appearance of Gunnar Decker's remarkably comprehensive biography, in the fiftieth year after Hesse's death in Switzerland, offers a chance to assess his life and work in a considered fashion. The pendulum of popular and critical opinion about Hesse tends to swing back and forth between outright rejection and uncritical adulation. The first Hesse cult came about after his expressive rendering of adolescent turmoil in *Demian* (1919) attracted large numbers of German youths, some of whom had just come back from the trenches of the First World War and others who were adherents of the Wandervögel, a popular back-to-nature youth movement. The then forty-two-year old Hesse bridled at these enthusiastic young followers, suspecting that they had misread him. After the Second World War the perception that he was a writer who clung to a tradition of inwardness (Innerlichkeit) harking back to the German Romantics became a liability in the wake of the Nazis' misappropriation of Romantic ideals. By the early 1960s he had come to be seen as an irrelevance. After his death in August 1962, an obituary appeared in *Die Zeit* in which its then literary editor joked that there were no longer any "flower pots" to be had for singing Hesse's praises — a witty, if snide, allusion to Hesse's sometimes flowery style and to his wellknown avocation as a gardener.

¹ From the *Times Literary Supplement* TLS 5711: Mark Harman: No shell. Published: 14th of September 2012. Adapted for the internet by © HHP, 2013. Mark Harman is Professor of English and German at Elizabethtown College in Pennsylvania. His translations include Hermann Hesse's selected letters 1891-1962, *Soul of the Age*, 1991, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux (Noonday Press), 1991, 347 pp. Edited with an introduction by Theodore Ziolkowski.

Only a few years after such dismissive pronouncements the American counter-culture movement adopted Hesse as its patron saint, partly thanks to Timothy Leary's notorious claim that *Steppenwolf* was a manual for LSD trips and also, perhaps, to the delayed impact of a chapter on Hesse in Colin Wilson's book *The Outsider* (1956). By 1968, the critic Stephen Koch could place Hesse among the "standard psychedelic equipment, along with water pipes, day-glow art, the Maharishi, Jim Morrison and the I-Ching". Now things have come full circle: few American undergraduates have even heard of Hesse.

In commissioning a biography of himself from the erstwhile Zurich Dadaist Hugo Ball in 1926, Hesse claimed that such a book would only be justified if the "neurosis of an intellectual person is at the same time a symptom of the soul of the age". Whether or not one accepts Hesse's self-diagnosis as a neurotic – or, for that matter, the verdict of the British psychiatrists Eliot Slater and Martin Roth that he suffered from cyclothymia, a milder form of bipolar illness – he was certainly prone to mood swings, bouts of depression and attempts at suicide. Hesse himself looked elsewhere for explanations. Even as a middle-aged man, he could still claim that the exaggerated emphasis his devout parents had placed on morality and ethics had "ruined" his life.

Born in 1877 to Pietist parents in the picturesque Black Forest town of Calw, he grew up in what Stefan Zweig dubbed the "world of yesterday". His stubborn individuality emerged early on: when the five-year-old decided to skip school, his mother locked him in the guest room. Far from being cowed, he shot back: "This won't help you much, I can look out the window and entertain myself quite well". In his early stories he keeps returning to Calw, or rather the fictional Gerbersau. The piercing eyes of his parents, Johannes and Marie Hesse, stare out from the photographs in Decker's biography. Marie, the daughter of a missionary, was born in India, where she and her future husband would also work as missionaries.

At an early age she learned to subordinate her wishes to those of others. As a fifteen-year-old on her way to rejoin her parents in India, she fell for John Barns, a young English fellow passenger on board the Bombay. Without Marie's knowledge, her father subsequently rejected a marriage proposal he had received from Barns on the grounds that he was too much a man of the world to be acceptable as a suitor. When her mother informed Marie, she was "unutterably unhappy". However, once reconciled to the loss, she became pious with a vengeance.

That same Pietist insistence on self-sacrifice and forbearance weighed heavily on young Hermann, as he made plain to his parents: "Quite frankly, I can see and admire the sacrifices you're making, but actual love? No-!". The only way to get on with his parents, he claimed, would be to deny his humanity: "If I were a Pietist and not a human being, if I could turn all my attributes and inclinations into their exact opposite, then I might coexist harmoniously with you". His parents' religious fervour can indeed seem perverse: When he ran away from Maulbronn, the exclusive Swabian seminary he would later use as a setting in *Narcissus and Goldmund* (1930), his mother seemed more concerned about the state of his soul than about his physical well-being: "I felt most grateful when finally the feeling seized me that he

was in God's merciful hand [...] perhaps drowned in one of the lakes he admired so much [...] Any misfortune, any mere falling into the hand of God would seem more bearable than Hermann's falling into sin and shame".

Nevertheless, his parents were not quite the ogres he suggests in his early letters. His mother could express tender concern for him, and his father took delight in his six-year-old's precocity: "He seems to have a gift for everything: he observes the moon and the clouds, improvises on the harmonium, makes quite amazing pen and pencil drawings, sings very ably when he has a mind to, and he is never at a loss for rhymes". Yet in the same paragraph Johannes Hesse, who was clearly at his wits' end, considers whether he should send him away: "Humiliating though it would be to us, I am nevertheless seriously wondering if we should not put him into an institution or farm him out to strangers". Hermann's parents did indeed place him temporarily in a school for mentally retarded and emotionally disturbed children, run by a Parson Schall. Hermann calls Schall a "heartless, black-suited creature" whom he could "stick a knife in". Yet it was Schall who came up with the most apt characterization of young Hermann: "an egg without a shell".

Whenever matters came to a head Hermann would threaten suicide, as in a melodramatic letter to his father of September 14, 1892, which begins: "Dear Sir, since you're so conspicuously eager to make sacrifices, may I ask you for 7 marks, or just a revolver?" When a character called Hermann Hesse, the fictional narrator of a story entitled "A Child's Soul" — written about two years after Johannes Hesse's death in 1916 — confesses to having pyromaniacal dreams he is probably divulging childhood fantasies of the real-life Hermann Hesse: "Sometimes it seemed to me as if I were setting our house on fire [...] Or at other times the crime in my dreams was of revenge against my father, a murder, a cruel killing". Hesse was once caught setting such a fire and, as Decker suggests, he may have played a part in other suspicious blazes. Fire would in any case become a central symbol in his poetry and prose.

Most painful of all was his parents' refusal to accept him as an artist. Both were writers: Marie composed poetry and had written biographies of David Livingstone and of the Anglican martyr, Bishop James Hannington; Johannes Hesse produced books about the Pietist missions. When he sent his parents his second published volume, a collection of prose sketches entitled *An Hour Beyond Midnight* (1899), his mother found her son's sensual fantasies alarming: "Avoid the 'feverish muse' like a snake; it is the same one that crept into paradise and that would like to fill with poison every love — and poetic paradise [...] Keep yourself chaste!" When she died in 1902, he could not bring himself to attend the funeral. In later years, however, he acknowledged that it was from her that he had inherited his "passionate temperament, intense, sensation-seeking imagination, and also musical talent".

Hesse's literary beginnings were not exactly auspicious, and he himself would later disown a portion of his juvenilia. Even the publisher of *An Hour Beyond Midnight* took it upon himself to inform the twentytwo-year-old author that his lyrical prose lacked the "conscious dwelling" in the self, characteristic of mature art. Hesse's major literary breakthroughs were precipitated by personal crises such as the one he faced in 1916, when the precariousness of his first marriage to the mentally unstable photographer Maria Bernoulli, his exhausting volunteer work editing and supplying books for German

prisoners of war, the death of his father, and the illness of his youngest child pushed him close to a mental breakdown. The ensuing period of self-scrutiny helped him to move beyond the often evasive neo-Romanticism of his earliest efforts and, in a burst of creative frenzy, to write what, for all its unevenness, is his first modern novel.

Read again today, *Demian* has lost none of the psychological acuity with which it plumbs the emotions of children and adolescents. The story is meant only for those who have kept in touch with the spirit of childhood. "I realize that some people will not believe that a child of little more than ten years is capable of having such feelings. My story is not intended for them." The novel suffers from the hasty manner in which it was composed and from Hesse's uncritical, sponge-like absorption of contemporary language. In the very last sentence of the novel Sinclair addresses Demian, his recently departed friend and mentor, as "mein Führer". Although it would be anachronistic to criticize Hesse for that choice of word, it is difficult now to read the end of the novel without thinking of the meaning it would subsequently acquire. What Sinclair, who has completely absorbed Demian, really means, however, is that he can from now on dispense with his mentor since he has become his own guide.

Hesse himself was a steadfast opponent of German nationalism. His lifelong interest in the literature, philosophy and religions of Asia developed at an early age in a home where his maternal grandfather, the noted Indologist Hermann Gundert (1814-93), received a stream of visitors. They came, as Hesse would later recall, "from many lands [...] visited and honoured him, talked to him in English, French, Indian, Italian, Malayalam". It seems fitting that Hesse's "Indian" novel *Siddhartha* (1922) should have been later translated not only into Hindi and Sanskrit but also into Malayalam, Gundert having been an expert on the latter language, and the compiler of the first Malayalam-English dictionary. Hesse's ingrained cosmopolitanism also owed something to the Baltic-German world in Estonia into which his father was born and to the French-Swiss origins of his maternal grandmother, Julie Dubois.

In "*Guest at the Spa*" (1925), a pivotal essay which anticipates *Steppenwolf* (1927), Hesse applies to his biographical self a splitting technique similar to the one he uses in creating an array of fictional doubles such as Sinclair and Demian, Narcissus and Goldmund.

After confessing to the "misfortune" of contradicting himself constantly, the narrator divides himself in two: Hesse, the detached observer, reports with an anthropologist's eye on the activities of Hesse, the patient, as he goes about the rituals of spa life. Rather intriguingly, the narrator maintains that his sentences always convey a "melody and counter-melody". A companion essay, describing one of Hesse's rare visits to Germany, concludes on the following note: "Perhaps there was a humorist hidden in me somewhere". Here we find the lightness of touch which André Gide praised in him and which he found lacking in his ponderous German contemporaries. Egregiously misinterpreted in the 1960s, *Steppenwolf* is not only Hesse's most autobiographical novel, but also one of his most accomplished works. Just as Hesse resolved to kill himself on his fiftieth birthday, so too does Harry Haller, whose alliterative name echoes that of his creator.

Haller's suicidal resolve does not prevent him from pursuing erotic adventures with the young set, including his sexually ambiguous double, Hermine. As Hesse was the first to suggest and as Theodore Ziolkowski has shown, the novel's chaotic seeming structure in fact emulates the form of a musical sonata. Torn as he was between conflicting impulses, Hesse was not always convinced about the inherent value of his artistic accomplishments.

The Hesse who struggled to achieve aesthetic and philosophical detachment was obliged to contend with the covert Pietist within who longed to make the most naked confession possible. Hence his wish to insert into the volume containing *Steppenwolf* a sequence of confessional poems that chronicle his mid-life crisis far more directly than does the novel. From a biographical perspective, those "crisis" poems, together with his friends' accounts of his night-time cavorting, offer revealing glimpses of Hesse, the self-styled "beast from the steppes", as he discovers the joys of unbridled sensuality. In Zurich nightspots the middle-aged reveler finds that though he is no good at the Boston Blues he can dance a passable foxtrot. He even jokes about being a "Foxtrottel", a pun on a German word meaning idiot, for having spent thirty years worrying about the problems of humanity "without knowing what a masked ball is".

After the *Steppenwolf* years Hesse's extreme sense of duty - another legacy of Pietism - made him feel obliged to answer personally a significant portion of the letters he received each day. The award of the Nobel Prize in 1946 - the committee's citation specifically mentioned *The Glass Bead Game* (1943) - greatly increased his correspondence, which, by his own estimate, generally amounted to some 150 pages a day. At the same time, he tried to keep the hordes of admirers at bay, affixing a sign to his gate with the words: "No Visitors, please".

Decker succeeds on the whole in creating a balanced portrait of Hesse. Some may find that he is a little too indulgent towards the hot-headed young man and fails to give sufficient space to other voices. However, he is generally willing to acknowledge his subject's blemishes. For instance, he rightly highlights Hesse's callousness towards the women in his life, especially his third wife, Ninon Dolbin. Even while already living with Ninon, a highly educated and talented, if insecure, young Jewish woman, originally from Czernowitz, he insisted on calling her his "secretary" until pressure from friends such as Thomas and Katia Mann obliged him to acknowledge her as his partner. Even if Hesse's problematic relationship with his mother lurks behind his often difficult relationships with women, his high-handed treatment of Ninon makes for painful reading. Breathing fresh life into an old story, Decker draws on the supposedly lost correspondence between Hesse and his psychoanalyst Josef Lang, which was not available to Ralph Freedman and Joseph Mileck, the authors of two perceptive biographical studies, which both appeared in 1978. Hesse turned to Lang, a young psychoanalyst and disciple of Carl Jung, during the crisis that preceded the writing of *Demian*. Lang, who became a close friend and appears as the organist Pistorius in *Demian*, served as a catalyst, freeing him psychically and imaginatively.

However, the correspondence suggests that Lang was actually the junior partner. From the outset it was Hesse who took the initiative, reversing the traditional roles of therapist and client. Lang, who harbored his own creative aspirations, had difficulty keeping pace with his patient. Whereas Hesse profited from the relationship, his therapist fell into a downward spiral, which culminated in his admission to the Sonnmatt clinic where he had once practised.

In old age Hesse seems to have found a degree of peace and serenity and could often be seen gazing into the flames of his bonfire. On the afternoon of August 8, 1962, while out on a walk in the garden with Ninon, he noticed a damaged branch on a tree and hazarded a prediction: "It will hold on a while longer". That night he died of a stroke.
