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THE ORIGINAL STEPPENWOLF THE LIFE AND WORK OF HERMANN HESSE (1877 - 1962)

Abstract: - This article describes the life and work of Nobel laureate Hermann Hesse, one of the most important and worldwide bestselling German writers. With the word "Steppenwolf" - the title of a novel - Hesse coined the since then famous term for a nonconformist loner in a society. By giving biographical background information, highlighting some crucial incidents of his life and discussing his most important books the reader shall not only obtain a better understanding of Hesse himself, but also get a glimpse on German literature and culture in general, for both are inseparably connected.

Whole generations of Germans - including myself - share the experience of reading the works of Hermann Hesse as their first "serious" literary excursions. One might call it a literary initiation into the state of adulthood. Even today, in the age of Internet and computer games, this "rite de passage" survived, at least among the better educated.

This may be explained by the fact that the writings of Hermann Hesse have a lot to do with the act of individuation and rebellion. Hesse explores the spiritual search of the individual for true identity, if necessary even against the norms and restrictions of society.

But beyond belonging to the fixed inventory of German culture the Nobel laureate of 1946 is also still one of the bestselling German-speaking writers throughout the world. So it seems to be worthwhile to have a closer look on life and work of Hermann Hesse.

The early years

On July 2, 1877 Hesse was born in Calw, a small town in the Black Forest in the south part of Germany. His mother Marie Gudert was born in India, as the daughter of the Pietist missionary and Indologist Hermann Gudert. The preoccupation with Eastern philosophy and religion should become an important feature of Hesse's life, eventually culminating in the novel "Siddhartha" (1922), one of his most widely read works. The story is set in ancient India and describes the life of a Brahman's son who rebels against his father's teachings and traditions and finally finds his ultimate enlightenment.

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Hesse's parents expected him to follow the family tradition in theology. So he entered the Protestant seminary at the old and time-honoured former monastery of Maulbronn in 1891. But only half a year later he was expelled from the school, because he ran away and was brought back by the police. At that incident his character as a "Steppenwolf" (i.e. the wolf of the steppe, a symbol for the nonconformist loner in society) was shining through for the first time.

After that followed a very unhappy time for the young Hermann Hesse, in which he worked as a mechanic and a bookshop clerk. Many experiences of this period are reflected in the novel "Unterm Rad" (Beneath the wheel, 1906).

The Steppenwolf

In 1919 Hesse had his breakthrough as a writer with the Faustian tale "Demian", which is about a man who is torn between his orderly bourgeois existence and a chaotic world of sensuality. Published in the wake of World War I the story exactly captured the prevailing atmosphere of the time and was especially appreciated by the young veterans of the war who felt betrayed by politics and society.

In 1919 Hesse also moved to Montagnola in southern Switzerland. The following years were restless and troublesome and marked by a deep personal crisis. It finally led to the publication of the novel "Der Steppenwolf" in 1927. The story deals with the problem of modernity's isolated and self-isolating man. The protagonist, who calls himself a Steppenwolf (and who has the same initials as Hermann Hesse!), goes through a kind of midlife crisis. At the end he finds his way into the "Magic Theatre", which turns out to be a journey into his own psyche.

Here again Hesse shows himself as an "author of crisis" who is constantly searching for his identity. Hesse himself called the "Steppenwolf" his "most misunderstood" book. He admits that it is a story about "sickness and crisis", but he insists that it "does not lead to destruction but to final healing".

Only three years later, in 1930, "Narziss und Goldmund" was published, perhaps Hesse's most beautiful work. The story of "Narziss und Goldmund" is set in the Middle Ages. The two protagonists, who are close friends, represent the different concepts of Logos and Eros. And to reach the goal of spiritual fulfillment each of them has to follow his own specific way. It is a very romantic, old-German world, Hesse conjures up in this novel.

The Magister Ludi

But this romantic scene was very soon to be doomed, for with the 1930s we

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enter the darkest period of German history, the years of the Nazi-regime. Hermann Hesse saw himself as a writer, not a politician. This does not mean that he was unpolitical. Hesse was a convinced advocate of peace and a writer committed to the cause of humanity. For many Germans who had to flee from the Nazi-hangmen in those dark years, Hesse's house in Montagnola in Switzerland was the first safe station on their way into exile. Among his guests was also such a famous writer like Thomas Mann. Hesse always stood up for the free individual against the barbarism of totalitarian mass movements. Consequently he was attacked from both sides, the extreme right as well as the extreme left. In 1933, the year Hitler came to power, he wrote:

"Better be slain by fascists than be a fascist oneself,
better be slain by communists than be a communist oneself."

Already in 1931 Hesse began to work on what is considered his opus magnum and masterpiece, the novel "Das Glasperlenspiel" (The Game of Glas-beads), which was published in 1943 in Switzerland, because the Nazis did not allow the publication in Germany.

The story is set in the future in the imaginary province of Kastalien, where an intellectual, elitist order is dedicated to mathematics and music. The wisdom of this order is communicated through the Glasperlenspiel, a highly symbolical and abstract game with glas-beads which unites the principles of science, veneration of beauty and meditation. The head of the order is called Magister Ludi, which is Latin for "Master of the Game".

The province of Kastalien Hesse depicted in "Das Glasperlenspiel" is a kind of counter-example to the terror and barbarism of the Nazi-regime. In that way Hesse was a preserver of the moral values and the cultural tradition of Germany. And when he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1946, one year after the end of World War II, Hesse acknowledged very rightly that he got the prize in "recognition of the German language and the contribution Germany has made to culture". After receiving the Nobel Prize Hesse published no major works. On August 9, 1962, the old Steppenwolf died at the age of eighty-five.

Post Scriptum

Having in mind that this article on Hesse is written especially for the readers of ALMAS I cannot end without mentioning two more points. The first one is related to the above mentioned interest of Hermann Hesse in culture and religion of the East. This led him to write a foreword to the German translation (by the late Annemarie Schimmel) of Muhammad Iqbal's "Javidnama" in 1957. I give here an English translation (also done by Prof. Schimmel) of the complete text:

"Sir Muhammad Iqbal belongs to three kingdoms of the spirit; three kingdoms of the spirit are the sources of his mighty work: the world of India, the world of Islam, and that of occidental thought.

A Muslim of Indian descent, trained spiritually by the Koran, by the Vedanta and by Persian-Arabic mysticism, but also strongly touched by the problems of Western philosophy and conversant with Bergson and Nietzsche, leads us in ascending spirals through the provinces of his cosmos.

No longer a mystic, he has still been consecrated by Rumi. No longer a Hegelian or Bergsonian, he has still remained a speculative philosopher. The source of his strength, however, lies somewhere else, in the religious sphere, in his faith. Iqbal is a pious; is one who has devoted himself to God; but his faith is not a child's faith; it is all masculine, glowing, fighting. And his faith is not only a wrestling with God (Ringens um Gott) but also a wrestling with the world. For Iqbal's faith absolutely raises the claim of catholicity. His dream is a humanity united in the name of the service of Allah.

For the spiritual travellers to the East (Morgenlandfahrer) it is not Iqbal's comprehensive education and his desire of speculation, full of subtle nuances, that will be the most important and truly supreme aspect of his powerful genius, but rather his poetical power of loving and giving shape (Gestaltungskraft). They will venerate him because of his heart's fire and his world of images, and will love his work as the East-Western Divan."

And the second point I like to mention is the fact that during my readings in preparation for this article to my surprise I actually came across a note that Hesse's novel "Siddhartha" was translated into Sindhi as early as 1955. I take this for a nice symbol for the universality of Hesse's message of humanity.

