

WORLDWIDE RECEPTION AND INFLUENCE

By Prof. Bernhard Zeller

“With the passing of Hermann Hesse, poetry and literature in the German-speaking countries have lost one of their loudest voices,” Theodor Heuss wrote to Ninon Hesse on the death of the writer, and it was Heuss, too, who drafted the commemorative speech for the meeting of the chapter of the “Pour le mérite” order. Yet was this voice still being heard - and how far did it carry?

Following the years of his greatest successes, after the heated discussions sparked by *Das Glasperlenspiel*, there had been less talk of Hesse. Popularity, that fickle god he never much cared for, had been slipping away ever more steadily since the mid 1950s, and his literary reputation was also beginning to wane. Hesse, it could be said, had gone out of fashion. Great effort and diligence were applied to the task of demonstrating his second-class status as a writer, and it was considered progressive to speak with disdainful pity of the gardener from Montagnola, the epigone in the garden bower, the esoteric idyllist who, out of disenchantment with the way in which western culture had developed, had fled to a romantic oasis of literature. “I always felt Hesse to be your average kind of novelist writing about character development, marriage and inwardness - a typically German thing,” Gottfried Benn had written back in 1950 in a letter to Ernst Robert Curtius, and this much-cited and much-invoked judgement was shared by no small number of so-called intellectuals.

Professional critics and interpreters, yet also German literary researchers, had turned their interests away from Hesse as they began to devote their attentions to other figures and themes.

Naturally, there continued to be countless Hesse readers, a large community of readers remaining faithful to his works, and the words of respect and admiration, most especially from the community of writers and artists, had lost none of their validity, and yet the writer and poet from Montagnola was no longer on the front burner. The Hermann Hesse chapter seemed to be over. In the new realities of the literary world, a survey in a German daily revealed in 1962, Hermann Hesse quite simply failed to feature, and sales of all Hesse books published by Suhrkamp fell to an all-time low in 1965.

Hesse's fall into complete oblivion was initially prevented by a series of publications in which, with philological preciseness, unknown items from the posthumous writings, long forgotten texts published across a variety of scattered sources, together with autobiographic documents, most especially letters, were presented to the public. The writer's wide-ranging literary legacy was bequeathed by his heirs to the Hesse Stiftung, a foundation established in 1963, which in turn entrusted the Deutsches Literaturarchiv at the Schiller-Nationalmuseum in Marbach with the task of storing, sorting and evaluating the documents. This Hesse Archive set about cataloguing the literary estate and soon became the centre of new Hesse research studies.

The publications - for which we initially have Ninon Hesse to thank, and later, and most especially, Volker Michels and Heiner Hesse, and, last but not least, the efforts of publishing company Suhrkamp Verlag and its publisher and chief executive, Siegfried Unseld - significantly broadened the foundations for an objective assessment and evaluation of Hesse's literary work, yet also facilitated a characterization and decoding of his highly differentiated personality structure, and his intellectual attitudes and outlook, while also making certain - hitherto far too little known or little noticed - parts of his life and work accessible to the public for the first time.

Prosa aus dem Nachlass is the first of these volumes, published by Ninon Hesse in 1965, and containing many unknown pieces from the early period in the writer's life, the weightiest

item being the two, as then previously unpublished, versions of the fourth "life." The three historic lives of the *Glasperlenspiel* were originally to be joined by this fourth life, set in the 18th century, the age of pietism in Swabia, and featuring Josef Knecht in the role of a Württemberg theologian sharing a spiritual proximity to Bengel and Oetinger. Despite the intense studies engaged in on the part of the writer, the work remained a fragment. The all too familiar, and all too richly documented, world of that century, Hesse wrote to Rudolf Pannwitz in 1955, refuses to be incorporated into the more legendary settings of the other lives of Josef Knecht. Yet even as a fragment, one lacking the finishing touches in linguistic terms, this work remains a quite exceptional piece of living narrative prose.

It has already been noted that Hesse was one of the greatest letter writers among the leading authors of our century - and his output includes the selection of letters written in later years that was published during his lifetime. Yet the qualities his correspondence had taken on in the course of the years was not fully realized until it emerged that the number of letters addressed to him which he considered worth keeping amounted to no less than 35,000. As he was an assiduous and conscientious correspondent, generally responding to all letters he received, one thus has at least some idea of the precise scale of his epistolary oeuvre, even though it is far from having been preserved in full.

The need to communicate, to recount, to give account of oneself, to write down one's experiences, and to remain in touch with one another by letter, had long been a living tradition in the Hesse-Gundert family. As this sense of tradition was as natural to Hesse as it was in the parental home, an unusually large stock of family letters and diaries remained in Calw and, later, in Montagnola, a collection that documents Hesse's childhood and youth as reflected in his own writings and as reported in letters written by parents, relatives and friends - more intensely, more revealingly, and more vividly than was ever the case with any other writer.

Out of this wealth of source material - the thousands of letters, diary entries, reports and notes - Ninon Hesse in 1966 published a meticulously annotated selection under the title *Kindheit und Jugend vor 1900*, presenting a moving internal and external biography of the young Hesse, sketching the history of his development in difficult years, while also evoking an image of that Swabian Protestant world on which his entire literary work was, in both contradiction and dependence, to be based.

"The letters," noted the critic Rolf Michaelis, "that a perfectly sane young lad of fifteen wrote home from a mental asylum in summer of 1892 are among the most monstrous testimonies to the history of upbringing in Germany. Hesse's letters - clear and cold, incisive and convincing, take leave of childhood, serve notice on the traditional laws governing child/parent relationships in Germany, and bid farewell to the forms of routine piety in the Christian home. These letters of an orphan whose 'parents' are still alive, as Hermann put it, bear incomparable witness to German intellectual history at the end of the bourgeois century."

The documentation covers the period from 1877 to 1895. Due to the unexpectedly sudden death of Ninon Hesse in 1966, the planned second volume failed to materialize. Yet a follow-up of a kind did ensue in the coming years in the shape of the correspondence between Hesse and the young writer Helene Voigt, who later became the wife of publisher Eugen Diederichs. Yet the real sequel came with the first of the four volumes of collected letters edited by Ursula and Volker Michels in association with Heiner Hesse. Containing a total of 392 letters, the first volume charts the period from 1895 to 1921, the correspondence from this time bringing to life the intellectual development of Hesse, his path towards self-realization, and his attitude towards the world and society as mirrored in countless reflexes and refractions. (In 1985, incidentally, the second part of *Kindheit und Jugend vor 1900* was published, the editorial work here having been completed by Gerhard Kirchhoff). Major correspondence, such as that entered into with Thomas Mann or publisher and friend Peter

Suhrkamp, and later with Karl Kerényi, are essential sources opening up further perspectives on Hesse's spiritual and intellectual life, illuminating and explaining both human relations and his own personal views on issues of the day. For those seeking to understand Hesse and his writings, these letters - which the writer, when originally composing them, never imagined would one day be published - are an important key.

In the course of his life, Hermann Hesse wrote more than 3,000 reviews for over 50 German-language newspapers and periodicals. His observations of, and critical reflections on, the literary life of the day were a constant part of his activities and an essential daily task to be performed in his work as a writer - and are also an impressive demonstration of his immense diligence. The reviews, which were by no means written only with a view to providing material security, are "testimonies to level-headed humanity" (Minder), and form an indispensable part of his literary oeuvre. Hesse's ideas on writers and writing, on the duties of a writer, and his relationship to the world around him, are especially apparent in his literary reports and reviews; it is in the judgement that one sees the judge, and each report is a reflection of the reporter.

The wide variety of sources in which these works of literary criticism appeared made the task of assessing their exact scale a difficult task, one that even came close to foundering completely. The two volumes of writings on literature ("Schriften zur Literatur") - published in 1970 as the keystone concluding the new "Werkausgabe," and also appearing as a special edition in their own right - were a new discovery for many, although they contain only around a tenth of the reviews written by Hesse. This selection, which opens with Hesse's longer essays and observations on literary themes together with comments on his own works, takes in everything from Gilgamesh and Buddha's speeches through to the writings of his own day. (The reviews in the new complete works, published under the title *Die Welt im Buch*, fill five hefty tomes.)

In his review of the two new volumes in the "Werkausgabe," Werner Weber rightly emphasises the fact that the watchword when describing Hesse's literary criticism ought to be *Gelten lassen* ("Allowing and accepting"). Only rarely was Hesse motivated by radical rejection, and even more infrequently by hate; rather, it was love, and the faculty to allow and accept issuing out of this, that shaped everything he said and wrote. Accepting also means being able to let something be; concerning oneself with, and accepting only, those things that one is able to relate to. Hesse responded to literature in the same way that he responded to the world: from the meditative and musical core of his nature. His judgements of the same subject at different times are generally as constant as that same core of his being.

All of these publications based on the posthumous writings of Hesse, and which appeared in the decade after his death, promoted awareness of the influence his writings had had, significantly extended the scope of biographical knowledge about the writer, acted as a source of new elements for an evaluation of his writings, and of his intellectual, spiritual and political image of the world. In no way, however, are they unable to account for the quite incredible degree of publicity the writer has attained since the middle of the 1960s - initially, and most notably, in the USA. Some of the books named here might, in fact, well not have appeared without this very surprising turn of events.

When Hesse was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1946, he was an unknown figure in the USA. First and, for the most part, rather unsatisfactory translations had had little or no impact, and Henry Miller was in 1957 still trying - to little or no avail - to get American publishers interested in Hesse's work. The writer himself was convinced that he was neither understood nor read in the USA. And, on his death in 1962, the *New York Times* wrote that Hesse's novels remained largely inaccessible to American readers.

Yet in the mid-1960s, and virtually overnight, Hesse is in demand, advancing from the status of an inside tip to that of a top-selling author of blockbuster books, notching up previously

unimagined successes. Hesse is suddenly a boom product, becoming the most widely read and most translated European author of the past hundred years in the space of just a few years - despite the rather muted reception he was given in official literary criticism. Figures supplied by the publishers show that eight million copies of his works were sold in the USA in the period up to 1973. In 1969, monthly sales of the paperback edition of *Steppenwolf* alone stood at around 360,000, with the figure since having risen to two million. Individual editions of *Siddhartha* even topped the three million mark. Having gone virtually unnoticed before the Vietnam War, the works translated at the instigation of Henry Miller suddenly generated a response of quite staggering proportions.

Much discussed, hard to account for, and virtually deluge-like in nature, this sudden interest in Hesse does not remain limited to the USA. Sales successes almost as remarkable as those in the US are reported from Japan: six million copies. To date, Hesse's books have been translated into 49 languages, and the ripple effect continues to spread and gather momentum.

Hesse dominates the storefront windows in Australia, and 800,000 volumes of his works were sold between 1972 and 1973 in the German-speaking countries. In August 1972, *Narziss und Goldmund* topped the bestseller list in the GDR.

The fact that a writer such as Hermann Hesse who, in his day, was always at odds with the political powers-that-be, and who was a very stubborn individualist - a social outsider, in fact, who was continually breaking free of the "ties that bind," and who found it so hard to maintain links to the normalities of reality, and whose entire works were basically nothing but one big biography - the fact that such a writer should have unleashed a worldwide response of such magnitude is one of the most curious phenomena in the history of literary reception.

The vast majority of these Hesse readers are young people, and this young generation of readers does not ask for aesthetic norms, laws of composition, or linguistic structures; in the first instance, such readers are drawn by the tendencies apparent in, and the substance of, the actual writings, and they also have a very precise feeling for the honesty and the credibility of the statements made by their author. The standpoint from which they value and judge is located on the fringes of and - in part - far outside the literary domain.

With *Camenzind*, his first major novel, Hermann Hesse had gripped the youth of his day at the beginning of the [20th] century. *Demian* captured the imagination of the generation returning from the first world war, and a quarter of a century later the spiritual and intellectual discipline of Castilia, the powers of meditation and humanity, fascinated all those seeking new forms of order in the chaos of a shattered state and lost war.

Always a crucial factor shaping the willingness to accept the writings of any one author is the background in terms of human levels of experience. This wider background has, in fact, a major impact on overall reception - and all the more so among reader groups who see in literature something that might be able to help solve their problems in life, and consider the writer to be a kind of psychotherapist, as someone pointing the way, as someone who knows the right answer for all those seeking direction in life.

The American response to Hesse's works came from the America of the Vietnam War, came from a generation that was rising up against the carnage and senselessness of the war, against the omnipotence of the state, against the constant rationalization and mechanization of the world, and against the increasingly soulless nature of modern life - a generation that did not want to have its life mapped out for it by others, and dared to question the belief that the age of technology would bring nothing but progress. These young people, who saw themselves as outcasts from society, who took flight in forms of protest that later assumed a variety of very different, eccentric, strange and, in part, dangerous forms, discovered in Hesse's writings the afflictions of their own souls, their problems, dreams and yearnings, and saw in him a personality who - no longer fettered by the entrenched values and ideals of an

established society - had turned his back on the bourgeoisie and been bold enough to live the life of his own self.

Readers sensed that the focal points of their feelings, thoughts and behaviour had been expressed in compelling form in Hesse's works. It was in his criticism of civilization, his protest against anything totalitarian, his love of peace, his scepticism towards the powers-that-be, and his tenacious defence of personality and a free, personal, simple life that they found confirmation of their own ideas. To this one must add Hesse's love of the Far East, which seemed to act as a bridge towards their own conceptions, and his interest in psychoanalysis, an especially popular subject in America.

In an essay published in the *Yale Review*, Hermann Hesse and Herbert Marcuse are described as the two authors proving to be a source of particular fascination for American youth. Yet however many misunderstandings may have contributed to the influence Hesse has had on the social realignment of the USA, even critical observers no longer dispute the fact that a transformed American mentality is also likely to bear traces of this influence. While it may, in the first instance, have been more a romantic mysticism that made him the "holy man of the hippies," the idol of the new youth movement, a guru for an entire generation of teenagers even, he soon became a role model and principal witness in tougher and more searching analyses - in the ruthless criticism this movement levelled at civilization, society, and state.

One recognizes in Hesse the type of rebellious individual who is constantly making efforts to break out of society, who, as a young man, revolted and protested against the parental home and conventions, and later rose up against war and the political conditions of his day, and who taught and lived "the free realization of the individuality in each and every one of us" - consistently and uncompromisingly.

The fact that Hesse became so famous in the USA, and that his books sold in such enormous numbers, can chiefly be attributed to two men: Colin Wilson and Timothy Leary. Published in Boston in 1956, Wilson's book *The Outsider*, a series of portraits of writers, contained an admiring chapter on Hesse. The book, a bestseller that subsequently became a kind of vade-mecum for beatniks and hippies, generated curiosity about the writer, and a famous rock group soon called itself *Steppenwolf*, making the name known right across the USA once they went on tour.

Timothy Leary, the influential Harvard don, hippie apostle, writer and scholar, who demonstrated the art of mind-expanding from his country home named Castilia in the Hudson Valley, and achieved widespread, albeit dubious, fame through his experiments with drugs (although he never actually advocated indiscriminate use of LSD), declared *Steppenwolf* to be his favourite book and Hesse to be what he considered "the greatest writer world literature has produced," and as the master guide for psychedelic experiences. Hesse became the "Poet of Interior Journey" - thus the title of a study published by Leary and Metzner in *The Psychedelic Review* in 1963, in which it is stated that "...before your LSD session, you should read *Siddhartha* and *Steppenwolf*. The last part of *Steppenwolf* is an invaluable source of wisdom."

Hesse as "cult hero of the psychedelic generation" - a misunderstanding that is as colossal as it is momentous! While the Magic Theatre in *Der Steppenwolf* may display a number of similarities to modern psychedelic experiments, and have anticipated ideas of this kind, there is no evidence, either in his writings or in any other place, to suggest that Hesse himself took mind-expanding drugs or even so much as recommended that others do so. Indeed, the very thought that he would one day be elevated to the status of the representative of these new spiritual experiences, and be chosen as model and guru for the American sub- and counterculture is something he himself would have considered completely absurd. The "inward journey" is an idea Hesse saw very differently indeed - not as a flight from the world to a form of irrationality without responsibility, as avoidance of conflict by means of illusion, or

even an LSD trip, but always as an exhortation directed towards one's own person. Hesse was a moralist, and for him changing the world meant humanizing it. And this is a process that has to be both initiated and executed by the individual. Asserting and defending the personality and the independence of the individual, and the areas in which the individual has freedom of action - these are the aims. Yet there are no magic bullets enabling one to achieve this: "Each of us is something very personal and unique, and supplanting the personal conscience with a collective one is nothing short of rape and violation, and is the first step towards all forms of totalitarianism"

For the American youth movement, which - when viewed as a phenomenon in itself - represents a counterculture opposing established culture, to have chosen Hesse, of all people, as their favourite writer, to have staged readings from his works at its mass rallies, festivals and gatherings, gave him an influence that went far beyond the literary in the narrower sense of the term. The various different reasons for this, which can here be merely hinted at, and by no means definitively interpreted, are remarkably differentiated in nature.

Whatever the precise reasons may have been, this obsessive disciple-like belief, which prompted these young readers to interpret Hesse the way they saw fit, inferring from his writings what seemed best suited to their own problems, while completely ignoring essential features of Hesse, most especially his conservatism, naturally spawned quite considerable misunderstandings and misinterpretations. A decisive element in the reception of Hesse's works was, without any doubt, the uncompromising openness that was a mark of his character, and which imbued his statements with sincerity, credibility, and a high degree of authenticity. To this one must add the readily comprehensible nature of his images and world of symbols. Yet this simplicity should not be taken to mean superficiality or innocuousness. Rather, it is the hard-to-achieve art of being able to express even complex matters in clear and simple form.

The American response to Hesse will wane once again, though it is one that has since been echoed in many parts of the world, including the German-speaking countries. Peter Handke, for example, noted with astonishment that Hesse is not only a romantic idea of the Americans but "quite undisputedly a sagacious, verifiably great writer." The worldwide interest has prompted countless new and far better translations and, at the same time, renewed critical examination of, and academic interest, in Hesse's work. Hesse has become required reading and prescribed study material in colleges and seminars, and Hesse research in America - spearheaded by Theodore Ziolkoskwi - has yielded a number of major investigations of his work, including many dissertations. The American edition of his works has been complemented by the *Hesse Companion* - a work edited by Anna Otten and intended chiefly for student readers - which contains a collection of pieces on the life and influence of Hermann Hesse written by American Germanists. Yet in Japan and the Soviet Union, too, where Hesse has been pronounced a "progressive realist," he is not only read but has also become a subject of academic research interest.

A new and more factually based understanding of his work is now emerging. At the same time, however, the quite enormous distribution of his works throughout the entire world poses anew the old question about the influence literature has on the realities of life.

From: Bernhard Zeller, "*Hermann Hesse in Selbstzeugnissen und Bilddokumenten*," Rowohlt Verlag bei Hamburg, new and extended edition, 1975.