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Stopover on the Journey to the East

Written after spending February to April 1999
as Hermann Hesse Writer-In-Residence in Calw.

The postal address alone, with its auspiciously worded “c/o Kreissparkasse,” makes the quarter-of-a-year guest, whose earthly addresses are generally a little more mundane in nature, quiver with emotion each time he sees it, elevating him to a dignity and officialdom that suggests he might, suddenly and unexpectedly, have been knighted the nephew of filthily wealthy, “loadsamoney” Uncle Scrooge.

Is it not thus that the boldest of dreams commence?

From rags to -

Turning the official letter of the Sparkasse over in one’s hand in a bid to seek enlightenment, one also comes across an impressively sized oracle: the bank’s logo is shaped like a mysteriously mirrored question mark. What might this be all about?

At first, I seriously did think that the writer-in-residence’s apartment was probably located in the immediate vicinity of the bank vault, a place to which one gains access only after punching in a special numerical code - a kind of high-security facility, in other words, to which only authorized persons are admitted. And me, one of these persons?

Whatever the case, however, the intimate proximity to matters pecuniary did not deter me in the slightest. On the contrary, in fact: that was one of the reasons why I - for the very first time in my life! - actually decided to take up a residency offered to me.

Prior to then, the thought of a wretched existence eked out somewhere living as a writer in residence had been more like a respectable form of horror, a decorative motif for the late show of my nightmares.

Heavens above, I used to think so very contentedly while sitting there in my Berlin armchair, I have a warm and dry home, so why should I let myself be shunted off somewhere else?!

Before my inner eye, I saw a confused caravan of uprooted colleagues trudging through the country, rucksack over their shoulder, laptop under their arm, a farewell tear in their eye - a modern form of free board and lodging movement, a kind of mass evacuation to the countryside designed, as the saying goes, to enable one to “work at long last in peace and quiet without disturbances.” In plain language, this means being dumped in inaccessible, godforsaken regions which no normal human being would ever dare to go, being exiled to Siberian exclaves in the middle of Germany - quite possibly, in fact, to enable one to be taken out of circulation there for a certain period of time.

That would, at least, be the case if one didn’t fare quite so badly as the colleague who told me that he spent six months as writer-in-residence living in a disused level crossing keeper’s cottage. Now that did sound rather romantic, “disused” having a very promising ring about it, and “level crossing keeper’s cottage” - now that seemed attuned to the image of the profession better than almost anything else. And since one knows, of course, that an artist (“arteeest”) is very easily satisfied, and since the local Department of the Arts had assured him that the sum he was to be paid as writer-in-residence was, in any case, far lower than the cost of demolishing this derelict little cottage, it appeared that a pleasing accord, a quiet little trade-off, had been struck between the naturally conflicting interests of art and life.

And then the colleague set off to take up the residency - and what transpired? The retired crossing keeper's cottage, in its romantic, ivy-clad, nineteenth-century-sounding location was set right beside the tracks of one of Germany's busiest intercity lines.

Of this gifted colleague who, for all I know, may have been cut down in his artistic prime (his name, by the way, was ***), and of his work - once a source of the very highest of hopes - I never heard anything more at all. There was another colleague I met at a fair, expressing my wonderment at the fact that we hardly ever see one another any more in Berlin. "From residency to residency," he softly confided in me, a pained smile on his lips, suggesting I ought to know what that meant. Yet I did not in fact know, and really did not want to know all that much either. The one thing I knew was that I would never ever take up such a residency! Never. And that's definite. And a little later, as I said, I set off - no less definitely - to become writer-in-residence in Calw.

This residency, and I shall be happy to double and triple underline this fact, really is exceptionally comfortably endowed. This (#1) appealed to me (obviously!) to begin with - and (#2) also meant that it was not tarnished by the haut-gout of a charity handout.

Occasionally, one does, after all, tend to wonder about an author's relationship to money! Platonic and a little "not quite of this world." As if, so to speak, it were nothing but sheer pleasure that makes someone, living a lush life off nothing but mere air and love, decide to explore the ultimate mysteries of this world at their own expense and risk.

It is a commonly held misconception to assume that authors can imagine their evenings to be pleasurable only if - for the sheer hell of it, so to speak - they travel around the world dedicated to the task of reciting from their immortal works everywhere they go. Well, the works themselves may be immortal. For the most part, however, the authors themselves are not. In the evening, for example, authors are habitually tired. And when they flop down into the respective day's hotel bed, they are as yet unaware of what awaits them, not as yet sensing what ghostly figures will this time rise up from their squeaking, creaking place of rest to while away the night away for them.

After many a reading, the author is discreetly taken to one side as if the matter in hand were an unfortunate though nonetheless necessary business. "Excuse me for having to mention something as prosaic as money but if you could please just sign here ... " Madam, this signature - naturally, I'll be absolutely delighted. Incidentally, I did not, if that's what you mean, arrive "on the wings of psyche" but on a second-class Deutsche Bundesbahn railway ticket, open-plan carriage. And what - pray! - could, for heaven's sake, ever be so prosaic about money? On the contrary! "The poetry of the quotidian" - now, nothing at all occurs to me in that connection, though there is a poem by J. L. Borges on the poetry of money that I do recall in which he evokes "the other, secret face of the coin," immediately prompting - in front of the reader's very eyes - this round little piece of brass to be transformed, as if by magic, into a bus ride conveying him just a few stops, a cup of coffee, or a newspaper.

At the precise time when I was offered the residency, I had just finished a new novel. For some as yet unclear - though no doubt very plausible - reasons, I had this time resolved not to allow the sad hero of my book any proper home. That's just how cruel the life I dream up for my characters can sometimes be! So I send my hero off travelling and then have him, as fate would have it, spend some time residing - or perhaps one should just say living - in a flat for a writer-in-residence (!).

True to the iron watchword "Write only of the things you know nothing about" - otherwise, your imaginative powers will be limited in unacceptable fashion - I had sat down at the table and thought up the kind of impossible situations my poor hero might have found himself in. All of it pretty vivid, all of it pretty frightening stuff. Literature, I add here with admonishing finger raised, should also be about helping people to deal with the problems life throws at one.

The author's, for example. When writing, he is able to overcome unnamed fears, to survive the most fantastic of adventures, without actually having to be there in person - and all of this while enjoying the protection of "diminished risk," the term Dieter Wellershoff uses to describe this vicarious process of surrogate action one engages in while writing a novel. Yet this novel was already finished, and reality, with its abstruse occurrences and hair-raising plots, was unable to queer my pitch to any significant extent - so why not, for a bit of a lark, play out the moves once again, and to act as if?

To pre-empt things just a little, I must say that reality did not disappoint me. In large part, it followed my own description very faithfully and with an obsession to detail that could be termed little short of realistic. A few elements - the caretaker, the cat, the walks - had even been lifted direct, if not to say pretty blatantly, from my book.

As such, and this I soon noticed, the role I was playing between my own fiction and alien reality tended to be a rather passive one. What needed to be done had already been done. Basically, in other words, I had a quarter of a year off. Not a writer-in-residence but a silent-man-in-residence. A stopover on the journey to the east through the western world. It is definitely no accident but the result of a clear educational intent that the writer-in-residence's flat is stocked with an ample supply of Hesse books. And since the Karl May adventure story I took, as a precautionary measure, out of the lending library right at the beginning of my stay in the beautiful Nagold valley - the volume in question being "In the Valley of Death"! (?) - was devoured all too soon, I was thus soon busy reading works by Hesse.

Also still ringing in my ear was, no doubt, what a remarkably youthful newspaper editor from North Germany had said to me on the phone when he suddenly discovered me within the confines of a Hermann Hesse context. "Hesse? But in all honesty! Hesse's someone you can't stand either, isn't he? Totally unreadable stuff. All pretty passé these days." My hesitant, and admittedly also not very quick-witted, objections were rejected out of hand by the greenhorn. And, throughout all the other matters we had to discuss, I kept detecting an undertone in his voice suggesting that he was not at all sure whether I a) was quite right in the head or b) had been bribed by the Hesse mafia.

"Well, have fun, then ...," he said, ending the conversation with a "Seltsam, im Nebel zu wandern." (So he did, at least, know that one!)

It may well be, I conceded, that Hesse is passé. Although one does, of course, have to add right away that it is pure, undisguised megalomania to talk - today of all times! - in such a condescending tone of things being passé!

Often, Hesse is dismissed with a sympathetic smile like a youthful folly. Yet things that one once - and no matter how long ago that may have been - read with the wide, child-like eye of a world explorer retain their truthfulness even when one later dissociates oneself from them.

Youth - and that includes one's own youth - is something deserving of respect.

I now also recalled all the arguments that had been marshalled against Hesse. This intolerably cosy "gemütlichkeit". The half-timbered-like structure of his stories. - Yes, and so what?

Knulp's conversation with God, for example - isn't that something erring dangerously close on the side of kitsch? Precisely - and that's just the point: dangerously. In this particular instance, Hesse couldn't care less what literature is, or is not, allowed to do. In this feverish fantasy, the sole purpose is to enable *Knulp* to make a dignified departure from the world's stage. And that he succeeds in doing.

Things such as that move me, and that is - God knows - not the worst thing literature is capable of doing.

So there I sat - nay, stood - in the heart of Calw, and pretty high up, quite literally in the so-called "upper storey" of my mind. Which in this case means up in the attic flat, lolling over the high windowsill, which, in quite miraculous fashion, and whether one wished to or not, repeatedly put one in the classic "Goethe at the window of his apartment in Rome" pose as captured by Tischbein.

Down below, out in the world, spring was just coming into bud. My gaze ranged over to the left, where, behind the mountains, Tübingen lies. And there were two lines I had read in the Tübingen tower that I just couldn't get out of my head, the late version of a Hölderlin springtime verse that was already signed Scardanelli:

"Der Mensch vergisst die Sorgen aus dem Geiste,
Der Frühling aber blüht, und prächtig ist das Meiste ..."

["Man drives all cares far from both mind and heart,
Yet spring is in flower, and glorious for the greater part ..."]

I no longer recall what it was that I liked about these lines. It might have been the fact that forgetting is an active element here - the cares are cast out of the mind, forgotten, thrown out like accumulated jumble, just get it all out of here!? Or, perhaps, the fact that Hölderlin, in these avant-garde verses anticipating the later Wilhelm Busch, quite infallibly succumbs to a rhyming compulsion to truth. While poets in general like to crank things up a notch or two - "Everything is bad," "Nobody loves me," "We are all alone" (sic!) - Hölderlin faithfully and unerringly adheres to his linguistic genius, for he himself always knows better - it being common knowledge that "alles" ("everything") or "jedes" ("each") really do not rhyme with "Geiste" ("mind").

There is a time for each and every thing. And it was thus midday once again - high time for me to set off on my tour of inspection. That means closing the window with a hell-for-leather thud, causing the pigeons to engage in a brief, helpless flight through the centre of town, down the steps, over the Nikolaibrücke, through the railway tunnel, past the Helmut Wurster (hm-mh?) funeral home, up the "Stammheimer Steige," a few steps - and a broader vista opened up in front of me. And if one imagined that the mountains were not there, it was almost like home, in the lowland plains of North Rhine-Westphalia.

On the way, back, I saw him again.

He was sitting in the little shelter at the bus stop, in the thin sunshine. Blue nylon anorak, 13 days of stubble on his chin. He was holding on tight to a can of beer. And waiting. Waiting for a bus that is unlikely to ever come. For him, at least. A *Knulp* "wiedergänger" who had no doubt retired to the shelter for reasons of discretion because it wouldn't be quite so conspicuous in this so neatly organized town?

On rereading, I found it was precisely in the *Knulp* stories that Hesse did not - as he was so often accused of - simplistically set two worlds against each other. On the one hand, for example, starry-eyed romanticism à la Bruder Leichtfuß, on the other, the bleak complacency of daily petit bourgeois life. However, one can - on both of sides of this divide - sense something of the shy yearning for the respective opposite life, for the entire mystery of life, which refuses to be resolved in the anagram of fog that lies over the worldly vale of tears.