

Dankrede Nicholson Baker

Thank you Dr Narr. This is a truly joyful moment for me, to be standing here in this beautiful steep town of Calw in the company of my ingenious and honored translator, Eike Schoenfeld--and to be here with all of you, admirers of Hermann Hesse and friends of literature. I must warmly thank Denis Scheck and the members of the Hermann Hesse jury for seeing some good in my work, and also thank Elke Ruff for her many kindnesses during my visit here.

Whenever I finish writing a book, I feel a huge relief, a basic happiness at being done, at having worked hard at something, and then also, at times, a kind of despair and disappointment, because a book is in the end such a small thing, a little huddled pile of words arranged in a particular order. The book is published, and it gets reviewed, it appears in bookshops, and sometimes people understand it and sometimes they don't--and then it all seems to be over.

But then a glorious thing happens--the book is translated. A very intelligent, kind, hard-working person--in this case Eike Schonfeld--reads my book more closely than anyone else has read it, perhaps more closely than I have read it myself, and he takes my words and makes them his words--makes them swerve and yodel and mutter with new sounds in a whole new language. I always await Eike's letter of gently worded questions and queries--I remember that he was once, about ten years ago, puzzled by my use of the word "proverbials" to mean "testicles."

Knowing that my thoughts have been painstakingly thought through again in another language makes what I've done seem worth doing--so I am especially pleased that this award goes to a translator--who is also a friend.

I'm also very happy to receive an award that bears the name of Hermann Hesse. Hesse was an intimidating figure when I was in college in the nineteen seventies, because he was so popular. He was a mythic figure, honestly. In my college bookstore there was a special rack of Hermann Hesse books. There were the normal books, on shelves, in one part of the store, and then there was the circular wire carousel of Hesse paperbacks, with very spare cover designs, bearing mysterious titles like *The Glass Bead Game* and *Siddharta*--and I spun the slow carousel and thought, ah well, in time I will be able to read these books--but I'm not ready, they're on too high a plane for me now. So I put off reading Hesse, and I didn't learn what a complicated brave singular man he was--how he had, for example, spoken up against the First World War when it was extremely unpopular to do so.

And then, two days ago, Elke Ruff and Eike Schonfeld and I walked across the Nicholas Bridge. There were several people standing, looking down at the river, and then they moved away, but one old man didn't move--he didn't move because he was made of bronze. It was Hermann Hesse himself. He wasn't saying anything. He had one hand in his

pocket, and another holding his hat, and he was looking off somewhere. Just a pedestrian standing for a moment on a stone bridge.

Early the next morning, I sat on a bench near the bridge and read what Hermann Hesse had written about the First World War. He was especially upset that writers and journalists and artists all over Europe had taken sides and begun making hate-filled poems and songs and patriotic essays. "We writers, artists, and journalists," he said, "can it be our function to make things worse than they are?" What the war boosters and the hatemongers on both sides were doing was, he said, "wrong and grotesquely unreasonable." And he said "Precisely this world war must make us more keenly aware that love is higher than hate, understanding than anger, peace than war." And when the war was over, he wrote: "Today we stand among its ruins, still deafened by its noise, embittered by its absurdity, and sickened by the streams of blood that haunt all our dreams." Embittered by its absurdity! He was so right. And he said that nothing that he was saying was new--but it was true, and, he said, "the truth must be repeated forever in a thousand different forms."

I looked up, and there was Hermann Hesse, still standing, still holding his hat, still bearing witness to the necessity of trying to tell the truth about life. I walked towards him, up the gentle slope of arching, fountainlike cobblestones. He cast a long narrow shadow in the morning sunlight. There was still a bit of dew on one of his lapels. Tiny bits of broken glass glistened in the gaps between the stones. I stood with my back to him and looked down at the river, standing at the place that Hesse said was one of his favorite places in the world.

There were several ducks in the water with green heads, fighting the current, pushing purposefully against the river bottom with their flippered feet. The water made a hissing sound as it flowed down the stone steps of a fish ladder. There were two different colors of lichen on the bridge's parapet--one blue and one bright green. Two sleepy schoolboys ran across the bridge with their backpacks bobbing--late to school because they'd stayed up watching the soccer game.

Then I read a little bit of Siddhartha, imagining that the river he wrote about in that book was actually this river, the Nagold. Siddhartha looks around him, "as if he was seeing the world for the first time."

"Here was blue," Hesse writes, "here was yellow, here was green, the sky and the river flowed, the forest and the mountains were rigid, all of it was beautiful, all of it was mysterious and magical, and in the midst was he, Siddhartha, the awakening one, on the path to himself." Siddhartha talks to a ferryman who says that "Much can be learned from a river." One of the things a river teaches you, he said, is that "everything is coming back."

I turned and saw again a bronze man with strong ears. He seemed to be looking vaguely in the direction of the big house on the Markstrasse where he was born. I patted him on the shoulder as a friend and admirer. His shoulder was warm in the morning sun.

Thank you.