

Der Steppenwolf

H.Hesse

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Ein leichtes Leben, eine leichte Liebe, ein leichter Tod - das war nichts für mich. In this way you can summarize the self-assessment of the protagonist. We are dealing with *ein Einzelmenschen*, an out-sider, and as such the type is common enough in fiction. I learned about the book, with its catchy title, as a teenager. It was our German teacher, who professed seeing himself in the character. I must have read it first in an English translation in the early 70's, and a few years later, when I was systematically reading German, in its original. The German of Hesse is quite easy and transparent, with a natural flow that makes you turn the pages quickly. At that time I was still unused to reading German, and I recall how I read *unsterblichen* (immortal) as *unster-blichen* and it did not make any sense at all. It is interesting to find out how much one remembers of a book more than thirty years afterwards. Often the general atmosphere is what is most deeply lodged in memory, as to specific detail, what sticks, seem more often than not to be a case of pure chance. Expressions such as *nur fr verrrckte* and *nicht fr jedermann* have stayed with me for some reason. And that of course also goes for the general plot.

It is a book very suitable for teenagers, for which it is bound (or used to at least) to make quite an impression, although it was written by Hesse when he was approaching fifty and bitterly felt that his youth was for ever gone, a realization that usually strikes people at that age. Although the main character, with the somewhat incongruous name of Harry Haller is supposed to be an exceptional soul (or at least he is under that impression), obviously a surprising number of people (in addition to my German teacher) must identify with him and his plight. This might be seen as a consequence of the fact that low relative numbers translate into substantial absolute ones given the huge number of people around. Often what seems dignified in isolation becomes rather comical when in profusion. And the message, if any, is just that. Do not take yourself too seriously. Laughter is the trademark of both Mozart and Goethe, the house-gods of the highly cultivated Haller, as he finds out when encountering them in dream and illusion, hovering as they do in the cold arid air of eternity.

So what is the problem with Haller? He is intelligent, highly educated, to all appearances a successful man of letters, widely published, respected for his erudition. Yet he lives a nomadic life, going from the one rented apartment to the other, bringing his large collection of books. It does not quite square, or is that the key to his neurosis? His neurosis takes the form of a split. He is both Man and Wolf being at cross-purposes with each other. Or so he loves to explain his situation. Obviously he does not feel at home in the world. He is an out-sider, *eine Ausnahme*. He both longs for *Gemeinschaft* and is repelled by it. The world of the bourgeois, fills him with *Sehnsucht und Abscheu*. Sentimentality, he explains to himself, yet this labeling and rejection does not manage to *erwisch* his nostalgic longing, it still remains. One thing gives him comfort, beyond the temporary one supplied by drinking, and that is the resolution he has made to kill himself, just like the novelist

Adalbert Stifter, by cutting his throat with a razor. The faith that this is something he can do, whenever things go too bad. gives him the strength and fortitude to endure. That within his compass there is an emergency exit, fully within his power to use. As a last resort he has decided to kill himself at fifty.

There is an encounter with a professor, with whom he has had some pleasant interchanges in the past. The professor remembers that fondly and insists to invite him home. Haller, although having no desire to accept the invitation, cannot rise above his bourgeois civility and turn it down. The evening turns out to be a disaster. They have of course almost nothing to talk about. The professor is an avid reader of the war-mongering press, of which Haller is a sworn enemy. What particularly irks Haller is a portrait of Goethe, having pride of place. That those small-minded people should admire Goethe as well, is an affront to him. He finds, or thinks he finds, that the artists rendering is sentimental and untrue. *Ein Verleugnis*. At the end of the evening he cannot resist speaking his mind. Devastated he roams the streets of the town feeling it impossible to return to his lodging and the razor. He must kill himself, but the act of so doing fills him with loathing. He is trapped. Desperate he seeks refuge in a restaurant. He spots a young woman and sits down with her, begging her to take care of him. She does so willingly, sensing that here is a man who needs to obey. He is from then on obliged to obey all her commands. He willingly does so, feeling strangely attracted to this adrogonous apparition, which brings up memories of a child-hood friend. As she finds out that he cannot dance, he is being told that he has to learn, but that she is willing to act as his teacher.

So this old man, his youth for ever gone, is still capable of enjoying the company of young beautiful women? A new life opens up for him, as Hermine, as she is appropriately called in deference to Hermann, the old friend, is set to teach him the pleasures of a superficial life. Of course, she assures him, she too has depth, she too understands what is irking him. They are soul-mates deep down, but she has found another way to cope with life. She lives on men, she is good at making them fall in love with her. She does not want to live on him, but she will make him fall in love with her. He is not in love yet, only intrigued and infatuated. But when he has fallen in love with her, he is to perform her last command, which is, as he readily senses, to kill her. But that is in the future. Meanwhile he learns the foxtrot and is taken to a dive, in which her friend Pablo, the saxophonist is playing. As the two are friends, he tries to engage in conversation with this strikingly handsome young Latinamerican man. But they have nothing to talk about, all the musical theories that Haller seems to develop are of total indifference to Pablo. To him music is music, nothing cerebral about it. You do not think about music, you play it. His duty is to play it well. It does not have to be something classical and enduring, even the hit of today is feed for his mill. Pablo is of course everything that Haller despises about the superficiality of modern life, yet the man exerts a strange fascination for him. But of course he is falling in love with Hermine, and everything connected to her will take on significance. But while things are cooking with Hermine she makes him a present of a young nubile wench, who will share his bed on occasion. Of course it is not an exclusive affair, lesbian relationships with Hermine are hinted at, allowing her so to speak to eavesdrop on him. In a way the relationship is hardly distinguishable from that of a purchased one, she is indeed (as is Hermine?) a high-class prostitute, drawn to her vacation by choice,

claimed by necessity.

The climax is approaching. A masked ball, in which Haller is supposed to take part, and for which all those dancing lessons have prepared the way. He goes there reluctantly, only egged on by the thought of Hermine. He comes in late, and as predicted he feels totally out of it. He is but a disinterested spectator. He does not recognise either his love-lady nor Hermine, and eventually decides to leave, only to find that he has lost his ticket for the wardrobe. Another man gives him his, which instead of being a numbered one, turns out to give an indication of Hermine's whereabouts. She is apparently to be *in der Hlle*, a small room in the basement where the band is dressed up as devils. He goes there, finds by the bar a strikingly handsome young man, who again reminds him of Herman. The reader of course knows that it is Hermine in male drag. Now for the first time he starts dancing, after having shared a few fortifying drinks with his companion. He and Hermine, whom he finally has recognized, vie with each other as to what ladies they can attract. Pablo is there of course, playing his devilish saxophone. Haller experiences what he has never done before, the dissolution of his ego in the dionysiac abandon of a party, something most other people have been privy to, but supposedly never Haller. The party goes on until dawn, and by that time all his sexual longing and excitement has been focused on just one woman - Hermine. She has brought about her promise and prediction.

The finale? Not quite yet. Only three of them are left, Pablo, Hermine and Haller. Pablo, formerly so taciturn and inept away from his musical instrument, now takes on a more forceful and commanding rôle, namely that of a theatre manager. He will take his two protégés to his magic theatre. The masked ball of course, strained our credulity, would such a wild thing ever take place in such a small city, in which Haller to all indications now resides? In many ways it is somewhat reminiscent of a similar scene in Bulgakov's 'The Master and Marguerita', but that was supposed to take place in Moscow, a city big enough to have sizable underground by arithmetical considerations alone. But what about the magic theatre and all the going ons? Does this happen solely in the imagination of Haller, drugged as he is before being taken there? Once they are there, the two lovers are separated, and Haller has the pleasure to sample the various attractions by himself. It is like a tivolì, but the attractions are far more engaging and vivid. In one, he is taken on a car hunt by his old friend Gustav, a doctor of theology, but with a lust for blood and more breathing space. When all is said and done, the only sensible thing is to *reduzieren* as he puts it. They sit up in a tree taking aim at cars, shooting the chauffeurs and watching with delight as the cars overturn and smash. One young woman is rescued from a wreck and taken up to their arboreal hiding place. It is all like a dream of course, save it is more vividly participatory than a dream. In another attraction Haller gets to sleep with all the girls and women who have ever, be it so briefly, caught his fancy. He also meets Mozart, who complains that there are far too many instruments in the music of a Brahms and Wagner. What a waste of material. *Was für eine Vergeudung!* In the end, he finds the final door, and a knife in his hand. He opens and sees Pablo and Hermine, embracing each other naked, obviously resting after a most satisfying intercourse. Under her breast there is a red mark, where Pablo's strong teeth have taken a love bite. Haller goes for it right away and thrusts his knife deep inside, and she quickly bleeds to death, stiffening into a corpse. *Warum* Pablo asks, *Warum hast Du das getan?* Haller has overstepped the line between

illusion and reality, letting one bleed into the other. Haller feels no remorse, although he was never allowed to consummate his passion for Hermine, nor does he feel, in spite of Pablos urging any *Eifersucht*. He had been told to obey her commands, including her last and ultimate one. Or was that ever her idea really? Maybe it was just a thought of his she had reflected back? But what is the reader to make of it all? What is fiction and dream, and what is reality? Rather ironic questions to ask about a piece of fiction. The book begun with a foreword, in which Haller was introduced to the reader from the outside, and before the relentless text begun, shorn of any partition into comfortable chapter chunks, but there is no afterword really, except of course what was incorporated in the foreword.

What to make of the book? Autobiographical? Of course not in details, but in general tenor? Hesse had been psychoanalyzed in the Jungian tradition some ten years before, part of this by his almost complete contemporary¹. The divided self, not just into two warring components, but literally thousands, clearly is inspired by Jungian psychology, as is the explicit connection between artistic ability and destiny on one hand and apartness and identity turmoil on the other. As Hesse was writing the book his second wife left him (he had left his first wife, who had turned schizophrenic and been confined to an asylum). No doubt some of the wild life depicted was also the experience of Hesse, as his dipping into the fashions of the age, so anathema to anyone devoted to classical *Bildung* and restraint. Obviously, the book had a very definite therapeutic effect on him, but to exactly what extent, we will of course never know.

Is the book worth rereading? As an exercise in German reading it is excellent. The language is simple yet smooth and beautiful, and as already noted, you just flow along, being taken on a ride (Thomas Mann remarks on the blurb, that the book has taught him once more the pleasure of reading) forgetting that it is written in a foreign language. That is always gratifying. Between my first encounter with it, and my second, almost forty years have elapsed. It is hardly to be expected that with such a pacing, I will find the opportunity to read it again in the future. It is always sad to know that you are doing something for the last time. Such a realization tempts you to contradict prophecy just out of spite.

Finally, has the book ever been filmed? Surely it must have been. It would lend itself exceedingly well to a cinematic adaptation. If that has never been done, that alone would tempt me to delve into it again.

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¹ C.G.Jung 1875-1961, H.Hesse 1877-1962