

## Peter Camenzind

*H.Hesse*

January 1- 9, 2017

This is an early work of Hesse. In fact his first published novel. Published in 1904 when he was 27, and written a few years earlier. It was hence a very youthful work, and not surprisingly a very immature one, to which he later in life would take exception, although it did of course meet with initial success and launched him on his literary career, so he has in fact much to thank it for.

As I wrote a youthful work, and youth is the time when you take your life very seriously. Life ahead of you stretches interminably, and as such it becomes almost a burden, so heavily do you feel the responsibility for it. Life being immense also means that death becomes so to. An exotic and ominous possibility, capable of in one stroke annihilating the vastness of life.

It is in the genre of what the Germans calls a 'Bildungsroman' meaning one in which the hero through the vicissitudes of life changes and comes to insight. He grows up in a small village in Switzerland, between mountains and lake. His ancestors are all peasant and he is the first one to break out of this endless cycle tied to the soil. He develops a love, nay a passion for the mountains, and growing up strong he excels in daring and climbing. Eventually he leaves for Zuerich, and for the first time in his life he makes a friend, a musician, who introduces him to a circle of intellectual and artistic people and he becomes a critic and a contributor to papers, successful enough to live by his wits and make a modest living. He also is introduced to women, all of them very beautiful and artistic. Tragedy strikes, his best friend dies in a trivial accident, showing how brittle life is, even in youth, how it hangs by a thin thread, so easily cut and severed. Later he makes court to a beautiful artist, only to find out that she is already attached to another man, a married man. He himself has just been a side-kick. He is devastated and leaves for Basel. He earns his living as a man of letters, a 'Schriftsteller', but his real destiny is to become a poet he is being told, and he believes it. A poet whose mission is to bring to the world the silent passions of nature, to give it a voice. He never really gets around to it. In Basel he lives the life of an 'Einzelgänger' a 'Sonderling', in short a recluse, shying away from society except when drinking in bars, because like his father he is an alcoholic. He breaks out of his isolation from refined society only intermittently, but by virtue of his position as a writer, he is able to frequent the salon of a professor. There he meets Elizabeth and eventually falls in love with her, yet reluctant to make himself explicit. He once encounters her at an art exhibit being transfixed by a cloud in a painting. He understands that she understands. That she too has the same sensitivity towards nature as he has, that she shares his innermost sympathies. In short that she is a soul mate. When young you believe in soul mates, in the same way as you believe in salvation and delivery. That your loneliness will be relieved, that the missing half will be found. However, feeling the moment being precious, not to say sacred, he does not disturb her, but leaves unnoticed. When he after a long absence from town returns and seeks her out he discovers that she is already taken,

that he has let the opportunity slip by. She seems not to have suspected anything, she is still very friendly, almost intimate, as if there would be a secret bond between them, that they would share things that no others could share. Still she is happily engaged, soon to be married and to mother. He refuses to play the part of Werther. He goes away to Italy finding some peace in a small village, being courted by a widow, savoring her attention with pride, yet in the end feeling restless. He returns to Basel, gives up refined society altogether, gets to be friendly with a carpenter, starts to associate with his family, including a girl of five, the apple of the carpenter's eye, but who will soon die out of some undisclosed disease. Then there is the crippled brother of the wife who is dumped on the little family after the death of their mother, Boppi by name. Now the narration becomes almost painfully sentimental. He strikes up a friendship with the cripple, brings him home, nurses him, finally learning the meaning of true selfless service. The cripple dies of course, his heart weak. Then finally the narrator returns to his roots, to his widowed father in his home village, realizing that this is where he really belongs. His sojourn in the big wide world was just an episode, now he is to resume his real life, back where he started. A typical theme in this kind of novels. And so we leave him, taking up the role of being an innkeeper shelving his ambitions, denouncing his dream of destiny as a poet of nature. He is supposed finally to be if not happy at least content.

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