

Demian

H.Hesse

April 8-10, 2020

This is a book which should speak directly to the adolescent mind, although that mind does not necessarily realize it does. It is an experience of growing up, which not everyone may share, but some of us may do. It is the experience of being a *Sonderlinge* and coming to terms with it, as man is a social animal, not being of the herd is painful and bitter in its loneliness.

Sinclair is the alter ego of the author, and it is safe to assume that what he writes has strong autobiographical roots. This is true for all authors, at least all true authors; because if you do not write out of personal experience you are just making things up, and who is really interested in what is made up?

We are now becoming privy to an early experience of the young man who stands for the author. He recognizes two worlds, one light and one dark. The light world is that of his home, his loving parents and his sisters. Here there reigns contentment and security which can easily be confused with happiness. But the light world is not everything there is, there is also a darker world outside, a world that exerts a strange fascination as well as whetting our curiosity. What happens if we negate this or assume that? Questions almost irresistible to the inquisitive mind. But one can learn the ways of life without getting caught in them, as my ex-wife once said, but Sinclair gets caught in them. A thoughtless act of bravado, bragging about an imaginary act, gets him in the claws of a slightly elder boy, who cunningly blackmails him. A period of anguish follows, our protagonist feels abandoned, turned out of the paradise of which he once had had his unquestioned possession. He had tasted the fruit of forbidden knowledge, tasted it by his own tongue, not just read about it from other tongues. To his rescue comes a slightly older boy who appears out of nowhere in his school. This boy by name of Max Demian, befriends him and uncannily exerts out of him his terrible secret, and then proceeds to rid him of his tormentor. After that they become friends, although the friendship is unbalanced. Demian is a few years older, but the difference in chronological age is trivial, what matters is that he possess a maturity and understanding way beyond that of his years, and becomes to Sinclair a mentor. One day after both having attended the class in preparation for final confirmation into the church (in spite of the rumors that Demian is a Jew), Demian explains to his disciple an alternative interpretation of the story of Cain and Abel, in which Cain is the hero. This shocks Sinclair, but makes him thinking and puts him in the state of vertigo unthinkable thoughts may induce. The mark of Cain, Demian explains, is not something bad, on the contrary, it is a mark of distinction.

They lose contact and Sinclair moves to another school where he he is seduced to join the bad guys, go drinking and leading a life of dissolution and debauchery. But one thing he stays clear of, in spite of his curiosity, is the association with women. His carnal desire has been awoken, and this is what separates the child from the adult, but he prefers to channel into the chaster furrows, into the celebration of an ideal love, *die ewige weibliche*.

He even discovers an icon for his longing, a young woman who attracts him profoundly. He is too shy (or reasonable) to try and approach her, he does not know her name, but christens her appropriately Beatrice. The exalted thoughts of her, all the fantasies he weaves around her, make him forego his life of debauchery, and he becomes once again a good student, although not a brilliant one, earning the respect and appreciation of his teachers, having previously been so close to expulsion. Then he finds by chance a mentor by name of Pistorius.

Pistorius is a former theologian who supports himself by being a church organist. One evening Sinclair drifts by that very church and is arrested by the music being played inside. He sits down on the pavement and listens. From then on he does that regularly and one evening he sees the organist exiting from the church and he discreetly shadows him and finds him eventually by a table in an inn. He approaches him, but the organist is suspicious assuming him to be one of those silly people who professes to love music. But when Sinclair explains that what attracts him to music is its lack of morality, he becomes a bit more intrigued and friendlier, and when Sinclair mentions the name of Abraxas, a bond of friendship is sealed right there on the spot. 'How do you know about Abraxas?' the organist asks excitedly and with consternation? '*eine Zufall*' Sinclair explains evasively. '*Es gibt kein Zufall*' retorts the organist disconcertedly. And then it all starts.

They meet regularly at the place of the organist Pistorius, still living with his parents, in a room filled with books. Sometimes they say almost nothing to each other only staring into the fire. At other times Pistorius tells him about Gnosticism, the ancient heresy, the God by name of Abraxas. The world consists both of the light and the dark, of the good and the evil. A God who is wholly good, like the Jehovah, only has dominion of one part of the world, the light one, and must contend with an opponent, a devil, and thus not aspire to omnipotence. Only a God who is both good and evil, light and dark, can be said to be a true God. One may compare with a drawing. An image that is just white is but a blank paper, an image which is just black, is another blank if black. A drawing must contain both black and white, as in a good story, there needs to be conflict, both good and evil. In Art this is not a problem, in Art we may admire a villain, finding him the most interesting character. Life is different, than there is an element of morality which is absent in Art, or at least in its direct aspects. But is Life really that different from Art. Would Life be endurable if there would only be good or only evil?

Then Pistoriuos tells him about archetypes and the collective unconsciousness, without using those technical terms explicitly. Instead he talks about the difficulty about to distinguish between what is you and what is others. That in you there are thoughts and desires that are not your private ones but belongs to all mankind. That in you there is all of the wishes and wisdom of mankind at large. That everything you think and create has already been thought and created. That a single individual would in principle have access to all the wisdom of Man and recreate it. This does tie in beautifully with the insight of Plato that all knowledge is a matter of remembering. You have known it through your access to the collective mind of mankind, and the act of learning it, is just a matter of recalling it.

Now the idea of a collective unconsciousness of Jung is often seen as mere speculation at best and silly mysticism as worst, yet I think it has much to commend itself. It acts as

a very strong poetic force in psychology endowing it with a grandeur that is lamentable lacking say in a Skinnerian approach. Simple examples of it are obvious. Such as the sexual instincts, which would play such an important part in 20th century psychology. Those clearly are instincts that are not personal but shared and as such also to a large extent independent of the personal will. One may also think of mathematical insights in that way, be they usually inaccessible to most people, or logical reasoning which enjoys such a solid consensus.

Eventually their friendship goes aground and the special relationship disappears, although mutual friendliness remains. It is inevitable because the disciple has gone beyond the mentor and left him behind, being on his own, and having nothing more to learn from him. A fleeting thought, a careless word, and the other is hurt to the quick. An arrow that hits its target, the heart of the matter, engenders no opposition only resignation. Sinclair regrets his carelessness, he had not meant to shoot an arrow so precisely on the mark, but the arrow shot itself. The truth is that Pictorius has been caught in an antiquarian obsession with old religions dreaming impossibly about founding a new one. This is but a pointless digression to Sinclair who wants to move on. His mentor understands that better than his disciple himself but cannot do anything but resign to his fate.

When he finishes school he goes on to the university not really knowing what he wants to study and what he wants to become. He drifts into classes on philosophy but is put off by the ordinariness of the lectures and that of the attending students. He is now a potential mentor himself and is approached by a young man, whose attention he finds irksome, he is not yet ready to mentor on his own. Instead he meets up with Demian, is introduced to his mother with whom he falls in love. What now ensues is a depiction of an idyllic life and rest with people having such profound mutual understanding¹.

The book which is saturated with recollection of dreams, true to the spirit of the romantic psychology of the time, ends on a dreamlike note, namely *der Krieg* which gives to everything a conclusion. He and Demian both are drafted, the latter as an officer. Both are wounded, and both, surprise, surprise, end up next to each other in a field hospital. A few last words are interchanged and in the morning the bed of Demian is occupied by a stranger. Was it a dream or not?

Jung and Hesse knew each other. In fact Hesse had previously to the writing of the book been in treatment by a Jungian psychologist. He had obviously caught on a lot of it, some of which he tries to convey in his novel, making it almost into a tract rather than a story. It has been said that the whole short novel is an attempt to depict the process of individuation. Of an individual attempting to become an individual, meaning being differentiated from the mass of mankind. This is an attempt that is *nicht für Jedermann* to quote a later novel of his - *Steppenwolf*. It is a painful process that most people do not really undergo, only, to quote Demian, those who have the mark of Cain on their temples. Not everyone who attempts succeeds. Many become overwhelmed by the encounters with the archetypes and go insane. In fact the process of individuation is fraught with danger and apprehensions of approaching insanity.

Yes dreams are important. Sinclair is led to say to his would be disciple

¹ It reminds me a little bit of the Austrian writer Stifters *Der Nachsommer*, which I painfully plowed through almost forty years ago.

Ich weiß von Geistern zwar gar nichts, ich lebe in meinen Träumen, und das hast du gespürt. Die anderen Leute leben auch in Träumen, aber nicht in ihrer eigenen, das ist der Unterschied.

In fact the meaning of life, at least the ones who want to individuate, is nothing but to look for your Schicksal, what nowadays has been debased to 'finding yourself'.

With the war, cynical insights such as

Früher hatte ich viel darüber nachgedacht, warum so äußert selten ein Mensch für ein Ideal zu leben vermöge. Jetzt sah ich, daß viele, ja alle Menschen fähig sind, für ein ideal zu sterben.

Yes living is much harder than dying. Few can do the former, everyone can do the latter.

April 11, 2020 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se