

Die Nürnberger Reise

H.Hesse

December 30-31, 2016

This is a short book reporting on a trip Hesse did through his Native Swabia in the fall of 1925 at the age of forty eight, although he gives the impression of being much older. A resident of Switzerland since the Great War, a citizen of the same since a year, he is newly estranged from his second wife, and thus lives the indulgent life of a solitary. Hesse characterizes himself as a 'Müssiggänger' namely one who deliberately wastes his time, incessantly procrastinating and indulging himself. He lacks the admirable discipline of a responsible member of society, a discipline also to be found among certain artists, who take their calls seriously and are at their desks even when they have no desire to be so. He himself can only work when he is in the mood, but when that blessed state descends on him, he can work with an unprecedented frenzy, forgetting everything else. But those moods are elusive, beyond his control, but it means that he is reluctant to travel, to leave his abode, because what would happen would he be seized with such a mood when absent from his working desk? What frustration! Thus he regularly declines invitations to lecture or to give recitals of his poems, by writing a few polite words making up some excuse. But this time it is different, he decides to accept an invitation to go to Nürnberg, after all he has for many years promised to visit an old childhood friend in Blaubeuren, and he is suddenly seized with a desire to revisit that scene from his childhood by the recollection of the *schöne Lau* a figure in one of the poems of Mörike. When Hesse travels, he wants to do it in style, meaning not getting from A to B in the shortest and quickest way, because he loathes the notion of efficiency and is aghast at the notion of changing time into money, which so much pervades the way of modern life, and to which his whole attitude of life and style thereof is a deliberate rejection, not to say affront. Should one travel one should do it slowly savoring the places through which one passes. Thus he packs a big chest of clothes and a smaller valise and sets off in stages through a journey that will take him weeks. In addition to Nürnberg he has also accepted to talk at Ulm and Augsburg.

He first sets off from his residence in Tessin to Zürich, where he has friends. He stays there a couple of days and walks around in the big city avoiding the sights but instead concentrating on the small back streets with their small shops and bars and other fascinating items of a big city. He is in particular intrigued by the signs of proprietors, one may learn a lot from them as to the composition of the populace, whether Protestant, Catholic or Jewish. From Zürich he goes on to Baden, where he stays for some time, taking baths consulting doctors and reading his mail, which seems to be an onerous and time consuming duty filled with requests he needs to dispense with. He then seems to return home in disgust, it is not always so easy to follow his digressions, before heading for Nürnberg in earnest. His re-encounter with Swabia is a delight, and in Tuttlingen he has almost an epiphany walking the town at night encountering a full Moon. But the magic is gone the next morning. In Blaubeuren he meets up with an school-friend who is now a professor. Both have aged, gray hairs sprouting, but to each other they are still the young

teenage boys they once were. In a monastery he is looking for the small pond *die schöne Lau* swam in according to Mörike, and he is surprised that his friend does not know of the story. He himself has learned geography not by study but through poems. It turns out that the small pond has been covered by cement, but there is one manhole through which they can glimpse the dark water below, once the lid has been moved aside. He then goes on to Ulm, Augsburg and eventually Nürnberg to give his lectures. Hesse is fascinated by the old Medieval centers of the towns and cities, centers which before the bombings of the Second World War still remained intact in a Germany materially unravaged by the First. He deplores the modern additions that surround the picturesque centers, modern life being so alien to his temperament. What has modern life to offer? Modern architecture at its best is but a faded copy of the past, and when it comes to literature there is nothing that promises anything good, everything is in disarray and confused and with little prospects of attaining maturity, and only that which freely admits this sorry state of affairs, has any redeeming features in his view. The classical poets and man of letters, like Goethe, Hölderin, Kleist, hold his admiration, just as the classical composers, constituting a world complete in itself, to which he repeatedly returns with longing and satisfaction. In short the life and attitude of the bourgeois burgher he professes to despise. One is reminded of his protagonist in *Steppenwolf* a book which was written at the same time (both were published in 1927) and depicts a mood very close to that of Hesse's during his present travels.

Giving lectures and declaiming poems is something he dreads, seized with *Lampenfieber* (the terror of the stage). It is all meaningless of course, he has nothing in common with those audiences, they leave him indifferent (in spite of the dread?), they do not understand him, it is all part of an empty ritual, a going through the motions of culture. What does he have to say? And as to poems, they are of the past, and mean very little to him now. In fact one gets the impression that Hesse is weary of writing, he rather be a painter, and painting he does with the innocent passion of an amateur. But anyway he persists, he does not leave the lecture hall then and there. Why does he persist? It is vanity, he admits. Everyone is vain, in particular artists, and he may not be particularly vain, but vain he is nevertheless. It is vanity that forces him to make a good impression, not to let down expectations. And then, somewhat surprisingly, it is Love that finally pops him up. This may seem paradoxical in view of the contempt for the audience he has just expressed. But an audience is a mass, and in the audience there may be individuals. Individuals who really want to listen to him, who may understand him, and who may actually get something valuable out of the whole spectacle. It is this kind of individual he loves and does not want to disappoint. There may be only one such individual, but that is enough, he does not want to disappoint that individual. Thus he looks for friends in the audience, and if there are none, he looks for the friendly and sympathetic face, and henceforth he concentrates all his attention, all his delivery to that very face, ignoring the rest¹.

Finally his duties having been performed, and finding the city of Nürnberg a dis-

¹ Interestingly this is what Brandt also claimed he did in all his speeches, concentrating his attention to just one member of the audience, and thus achieving the effect that he spoke to everyone individually. It would be farfetched to assume that Brandt got it from Hesse, most likely he never read the book, but it is clearly something many lecturing people have independently come up with. On a somewhat different

appointment, the old city center being strangled by the surrounding developments, he hurriedly flees to München, where he enjoys the company of friends (of whom this supposedly solitary and asocial individual possesses a plentitude) especially that of Thomas Mann, although tactfully he discloses nothing personal of the encounter, which to the modern prying reader is a disappointment.

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take, Wittgenstein is said to have appreciated a friendly Negro face in his seminar, demanding nothing more of him than his friendly presence.