

Peter Camenzind (1904)

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Peter is a farmer's son. He is part of nature. His teachers are the sun, the lake, the trees,² the rocks. Trees, for example, live out the secret of their seed and are not concerned about anything else despite the odds of the environment. Peter wants to follow their example: he wants to obey his own inner law. When life is regulated by the laws of nature, it is *ahistorical*, all seems to speak the language of God who exemplifies the unity behind the world of phenomena.³

Peter leaves the village to study in the city and become a writer. He is lured into social life and discovers to his surprise how seemingly unnatural people are, how they are bent on pursuing material gain, and how most of them are obsessed with technology, in his view "rubbish". Gradually, Peter Camenzind feels that he has a mission which is to lead men back to "God-Nature".

We are reminded of Goethe's concept of *Gott-Natur*⁴, of Hindu and Christian *mysticism*, of Jung's *collective unconscious*⁵, and the Romantics' *union of opposites*⁶. Peter is a Romantic poet, he is an aesthetic individualist who seeks the infinite in the finite. He is also convinced that all true art is rooted in a religious impulse.⁷

Peter wants to write transcendental poetry. Facing real life around him, he senses magic "thread-like premonitions", longings, dreams, and the sensation of awakening.⁸ Isn't this proof of a second, higher life - a higher reality? Novalis⁹ had expressed the same feelings. Peter thinks that only the poet can feel what nature can be for man, and only the poet can reveal the secrets disclosed to him by nature's divine power. At night in his window he ponders: lake, mountains, stars - they all wanted me to express their beauty and suffering.¹⁰ Peter's goal is to "help mute nature" find expression in poetry.¹¹

With this goal in mind, Peter feels frustrated as a poet. In real life, he is unlucky in his love affairs. Women for him are strange, beautiful, and mysterious creatures who are closer to God than men. His attitude reminds us of a boy's feelings for his beloved mother. Peter is unfortunate in his friendships too.¹² In moments of loneliness he contemplates suicide, but he finds temporary relief by getting drunk.

¹ Early lecture series at the University of California, Santa Barbara, please refer to previous lectures for sources, references, earlier footnotes and links. GG

² cf. PC (*Hermann Hesse. Peter Camenzind*, Translation by © M.Roloff.; New York, Noonday, 1969) 3,114,123,147.

³ PC 11.

⁴ <https://www.google.com/search?q=goethe+god+and+nature&biw=1366&bih=589&tbm=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X&ved=0ahUKewjnyuvL07nKAhUmsYMKHTJDD8IQsAQIMw>

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Collective_unconscious

⁶ <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/3322876-the-chemist-saw-the-union-of-opposites-under-the-sym>

⁷ PC 38

⁸ PC 43

⁹ <https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Novalis>

¹⁰ PC 101f

¹¹ PC 268 (I)

¹² WA-1 86

Peter Camenzind venerates St. Francis of Assisi, the childlike saint¹³. In St. Francis' spirit of universal love and service, Peter takes care of a cripple whom he loves like a brother. The cripple dies. Peter returns to his native village. He has discovered the joy of helping others, so he takes up a life of service to the community.

Hesse, the author, accepts from both St. Francis and Novalis the ideal of love and service. Throughout his work we can follow this ideal of the artist-saint as it takes various forms. As late as 1950 Hesse wrote: I am a poet; I seek and profess. I have the task of serving truth and sincerity (and the beautiful is part of truth; it is one of the forms under which truth appears). I have a mission: I must help those who also search to understand and endure life.¹⁴

In *Peter Camenzind* we find another of Hesse's central themes: the moment of "awakening" when a deep insight comes in a flash of inspiration. In this "awakening" intelligence and intuition is blended before - as Hesse says - a "suddenly opened inward eye"¹⁵ This event always marks the climax of the lives of the leading figures in Hesse's novels. The world is revealed transfigured. This new and sudden awareness is experienced with childlike wonder and happiness. For Peter Camenzind the occasion is his mother's death. It causes him to take stock of his existence and to realize that he wants to learn, to see, to experience the fullness of life. The world is whole in all its magnificence for a fleeting moment. When Hesse describes such visions, he does so with a care and reverence which shows how central and dear to him the experience is.

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Even in recent history *Peter Camenzind* is considered a very readable book.¹⁶ It establishes the prototype of the characteristic lyrical style of novel¹⁷, but it gives little indication of the torment and profundity to be found in later works.¹⁸

It describes Peter's return to nature, not primarily as a Romantic neo-Rousseauistic¹⁹ pose but in the spirit of a fresh healthy and self-confident ruralism; such a thing had been missing in contemporary literature since the age of Biedermeier²⁰. At this point Hesse tried to find himself a home in his writing.

After *Peter Camenzind* was published and proved to be a success, Hesse married Maria Bernoulli in 1904, a sensitive introverted and devoted musician nine years older than himself and the member of a Patrician family of mathematicians and scholars. They settled in Gaienhofen on the German shore of the Hõri peninsula on Lake Constance - as is discussed later.²¹ For the first three years the couple lived in a farmhouse/barn which Maria herself had located and which offered little amenities. In those years, there was a wide-spread desire among young people to escape from the crowded cities to the simple rustic

¹³ https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Francis_of_Assisi

¹⁴ WA VII 773

¹⁵ WA I 251

¹⁶ <https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/2162171-peter-camenzind>

¹⁷ cf. Ralph Freedman, *The Lyrical Novel: Studies in Hermann Hesse, Andre Gide and Virginia Woolf*, Princeton University Press, 1963, 283 pp.

¹⁸ B 18

¹⁹ <http://www.sparknotes.com/philosophy/rousseau/themes.html>

²⁰ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biedermeier>

²¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gaienhofen>

life. The couple had three sons. But the years of Gaienhofen should turn out to be the beginning of a long and difficult period for Hesse.

In this new book *Peter Camenzind* Hesse created a vigorous figure beyond decadence, rooted in nature and the myths of nature. Nothing - we were told later - is more holy, nothing a better model in nature and for man than a beautiful strong tree, an esoteric model for the striving for self-perfection, and hence in a sense androgynous.²² Trees also came to denote the mother, the source of the self. Trees are never described objectively but acquire by way of projection human characteristics, or else are seen as explicitly or tacitly symbolic of the universal features of naturally evolving existence.

This narrative is a straightforward story of the countryman who tries to make good in city life - and even among the intelligentsia - but who in the end is driven home to the country. This is, of course, the reverse of the longing so obsessive in German literature since Heinrich von Kleist of the tormented Romantic striving to break out from the entanglements of his own conflicts.²³

Without and within, nature and the soul, these pairs are the same. This is the essence of Romantic mysticism. The entire tradition of German Romantic subjectivism was expressed many years after *Peter Camenzind* in Emil Sinclair's words in *Demian* (1919): "for mountain and stream, tree and leaf, root and flower, all forms of nature lie prefigured within us, derive from the soul."²⁴

In some respects love of nature is a surrogate for love of man, and it discloses also the desire to express a love which cannot possibly be rejected, not a love for any particular, or even finite object, but for the infinite. So Peter finds that art in all ages has striven in all ages to provide a language "for the silent yearning after the divine."²⁵

Love of God is love of nature, love of nature is love of soul, love of soul is love of self, all these are one: thus what appears at first sight a moving outward, is - at least equally - a narcissistic turning inward, or a kind of maternal regression.²⁶

And still another aspect of the novel *Peter Camenzind* is a sharp attack upon the alleged corruption of civilization, the purpose being that Peter struggles to understand what it is that separates people from nature - it is above else their hypocrisy, their pose, their love of masks, ultimately their self-betrayal. The barrier is a "slippery jelly of lies".²⁷

Each person feels the urgent need to act a role without first knowing his/her own real nature, slips into a false personality, a process already known in young children "who always consciously or unconsciously prefer to act out a role rather than disclosing themselves in a wholly instinctive and undisguised way."²⁸

Similar to this passage in *Peter Camenzind* is the poem "An Autumn Hike", in which we find that "the role- and mask-wearing human being is shocked [...] at the gaze of all natural-

²² B 19

²³ <http://www.heinrich-von-kleist.org/en/heinrich-von-kleist/>

²⁴ III 198f; B 17

²⁵ I 310; B 17

²⁶ B 17

²⁷ I 331; B 17

²⁸ I 331; B 17

grown things" because - unlike trees - men are no longer part of natural growth. They do not as they should live out of the *secret of their seed*.²⁹

This self-exclusion of "normal other people" from the experience of nature contrasted with Peter's strong impulse to integrate himself with nature and myth, and this is the central arch of the book's satirical aspect, but also - to some extent - describes the full problematics of Peter, the outsider. One should remember that the source of a neurosis never lies in others but in one's own self. Should this book not have dealt in detail with the complex issue of "outsiderdom" with at least the hope of offering some kind of cure?³⁰

The aesthetic life in general comes in for more direct attack than is found in Hermann Lauscher. Peter observes the various substitutes for a God whose disappearance secretly worries all these people. "Fundamentally the whole waltz of comedy was amusing and absurd."³¹

As *satire* this book lacks both particularity and originality, and - merely as decriptive writing - it also lacks the cacaphonic realism which the demimonde later in Steppenwolf (1927) exhibits. Hesse's young life experience is still inadequate for such an appointed task and there is much in Peter Camenzind which is conspicuously second-hand. One should notice the description of life in Paris, a city Hesse had never visited, or the account of cultural studies in which Hesse was still a novice. Hesse's imagination had often failed, although we learned a great deal.³² The temperance societies in Basel were mentioned. This exposure merely shows him human weakness, conflicts and corruptions, which in his view dog all reformist movements, idealistic as they may be. One night he thinks: 'We wild ones are better people after all'. We do notice clearly a forerunner of Harry Haller, the Steppenwolf, the tippler.³³ Potential social reforms mean little to him, as does the social life of the time. He lacks the necessary levity, and youthfully he finds the 'hypocrisy' of occasional social conversations about literature and art desolatingly painful.³⁴ Peter's melancholic attitude - conceded from the beginning - is really the axis along which the psychological development of this figure turns. He certainly inherited a certain native intelligence, but also a gloomy disposition and then a resulting tendency toward melancholia.³⁵

Peter's own father did not drink and was certainly not a peasant, but he had a strong sense of duty and obligation combined with his own melancholic mood. Peter Camenzind's emotional state was based on the dichotomy between the high goal he felt he was born to reach - that of helping mute nature (mountains, sky, stars above) find expression in poetry - and the fact that he had somehow evaded this task and - in effect - not reached his goal.³⁶

From a psychiatrist's point of view this sense of failure might have been a warning for a condition but not yet alarming. Therapy might have involved an effort to bring Peter to deal directly and concretely with the reality of the world and mankind surrounding him. He - in life and fiction - is led intuitively to actually accept and pursue the company he was in - for example his great love: Elisabeth, an unfortunately unapproachable pastor's daughter.

²⁹ B 18

³⁰ B 19

³¹ I 282; B 20

³² B 20

³³ I 298; B 20

³⁴ I 303; B 20

³⁵ I 235; B 21

³⁶ I 268; B 21

"To talk of love, in this all my life I have remained a little boy".³⁷ The adulation of women led again to a renewed perplexing ambiguity. The relationship could on one hand be based on the normal feeling of direct attraction to and intimacy with a real person – and on the other hand the lofty perception of the innate beauty of such a relationship which can be as sacred and pure as experiencing one's harmony with nature, the stars and blue mountain-tops, which are sacred and far from us and seem nearer to God. This is an attitude of perpetual genuflection.³⁸ "My role as solemn as that of the worshipping priest turned all too easily into the painfully comic one of the fooled fool."³⁹

Peter's innocent affair with Rösi Girtanner for whom he risked his life collecting the cherished Edelweiss flower in the mountains and then to leave them at her doorsteps without speaking to her, had something both sad and happy about it, even poetic, but the affair can be somewhat cruelly summed up as quichotic. In meeting Elisabeth again he cannot help himself and he reveals to her his subsequent shame and annoyance, "intimate memories and a whole section of my inner life".⁴⁰ His condition he describes with ironic distancing as a comic transformation. "I, the lonely eccentric, had turned overnight into a lovesick swain dreaming of married happiness and the establishment of my own home".⁴¹

The irony on display here is consciously double. At the time of writing *Peter Camenzind* young Hesse himself already held his ardent aspiration within his grasp. Elisabeth, who had remained aloof and unattainable "like a cloud in the sky",⁴² and who then married another man. Hesse had then experienced quite a similar, but - in a way - sader fortune with Helene Voigt with whom he had shared not only a personal but also literary interest and who also married another man. Hesse - one might suspect on the rebound - married the photographer and pianist Maria Bernoulli and followed her to rural Gaienhofen, as we mentioned earlier. In the book the leading figure Peter is thrown back upon himself again and again, his sense of inadequacy, love-sickness pursues him even as late as toward the novel's end.

In all of Hesses major novels, the real and fictitious love relationships are an introit or else are played in counterpoint - figuratively speaking - to the theme of strong friend-pairs. The story-level man-woman relationships are comingled with the primary theme of psychological duality of characters. Relationships where the author/protagonists are split into separate figures in the novels, male or female, representing aspects of the author's complex layered personality. This phenomenon points in the direction of the author's increasing introspection and introversion, with sexuality as only a contemporary trigger and pretext. The author sees within himself femininity and masculinity not in social terms, but as expression of the duality of existence where one could not exist without the other.

As Peter sees it, nature initially means far more to him than do humans. As Hesse recalls in 1917 in his essay *On the soul*: "In my youth I had a closer and more intimate relationship with landscapes and works of art than with people. Indeed I dreamed for years of a poem in which only air, earth, water, trees, mountains, or animals appeared and no people." Hesse at that time was in the process of rediscovering his appreciation of and interest in the art of painting.

³⁷ I 242; B 22

³⁸ B 22

³⁹ I 242; B 22

⁴⁰ I 306f B 22

⁴¹ I 314

⁴² B 20

Peter Camenzind dreams of just such a universal *nature poem* and hopes one day as a poet to speak the language of the forests and rivers, and he aspires "in a great poem to bring close to contemporary people the generous mute life of nature, to make it dear to them."⁴³ This did not negate a certain didactic intent he admitted when he said: "I also wanted to teach people to find springs of joy and streams of life in the fraternal love of nature." The sound of the wind and treetops, rushing of the mountain streams, the soft coursing of great rivers, all this he knows is the language of God and to understand it is to find one's way back again to paradise. It is not surprising that he wrote: "St. Francis of Assisi is remembered in this more maturely, and yet in a much more childlike way. This was when I understood him completely for the first time. He calls all the forces and phenomena of nature his beloved brothers and sisters." Without and within, nature and the soul, these pairs are the same.

As we said: Hesse was tied closely and openly to the Romantic tradition, even though – as Otto Basler noted – Romanticism meant not an era or movement to him, but an innate attitude of mind.⁴⁴ In the early works, Hesse wished to express the multiplicity of impressions in a loose form, but soon his expression became more controlled as he struggled for form. He sought the reconciliation of the polarities of life, the "two-voicedness of the melody of life"⁴⁵ and had to restrain himself and work at his craft.. His friend and biographer Hugo Ball called him "the last of the knights of Romanticism." It should be noted by the reader that Hesse soon became immersed in currents of thinking which took him beyond his initial Romanticism (Novalis, Hölderlin, Jean Paul, Eichendorff, ETA Hoffmann). Hesse himself soon took a dim view of his early prose, successful as it had become. He even called it sick and incomprehensible - however, he referred only to its decadent Romantic excesses at the time. In the early works, Hesse wished to express the multiplicity of impressions in a loose form, but soon his expression becomes more restrained as he struggled for form.

⁴³ B 22

⁴⁴ cf. Hugo Ball, 1947, p.281.

⁴⁵ IV, 115