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*The Aesthetics of Confession: Hermann
Hesse's "Crisis" Poems in the
Context of the "Steppenwolf" Period*

For at least a year now I have been in the worst crisis of my life, and I still hope even now that it will not pass, but break my neck instead, because I am sick of life to the point of throwing up.
Hesse in a letter of 1926

I

What is possible, for poetry, today? The question is so formidable that it seems forever to defer a palpable answer, one that would be in any sense definitively or philosophically considered. Shrinking back from such an overwhelming vista, I turn to Hermann Hesse's radically self-confronting poetry of the twenties, which raises fundamental aesthetic issues that have only found a tortured resonance in the American poetic scene of the sixties and seventies, in the work of some of the leading confessional poets, such as the later Lowell, Plath, Berryman, and a host of others of whose work it is yet too early to say whether it is merely trendy and epigonal, or whether it carries a genuine poetic charge that can ground a future poetry. Hesse's hard-won ideal, during his forties, of an unflinching autobiographical art—*Kunst als Bekenntnis*—can fructify in a concrete and perhaps exemplary fashion our meditation on the possibilities of poetry today, a stark poetry of the here and now that doesn't cower in the face of chaos in the borrowed robes of a timid formalism, but gives chaos itself a veritable voice and shape.

II

In the poem-cycle, *Crisis: Pages from a Diary (Krisis: Ein Stück Tagebuch)* published by Fischer in a limited edition of 1150 copies in April 1928, Hesse's confessional aesthetic of the twenties finds its most acute, forthright realization in a lyrical mode that is as coura-

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geous (as Heinrich Wiegand praised it in his review in *Kulturwille*¹) as it seems to be unmediated by an artistic persona. This lack of a recognizable mask is the difference between *Crisis* and *Steppenwolf*, so that the critic is tempted to label the former *life* and the latter *art*, as Ralph Freedman does when he notes that *Crisis* is not, like *Steppenwolf*, “filtered through a transforming process of the literary imagination.”² But the apparent absence of an aesthetically distancing filter is not necessarily a defect once we are willing to grant Hesse the freedom of his own premises in the poem-journal. What Freedman sees in the balance as a minus I credit as a plus of authenticity in the abrasive self-encounter of *Crisis*, which is an unvarnished life-study—although there is a good deal of mediation by way of form and style, as I will try to show—so that the stark verse-diary is to be valued in its own right, to quote its author, as “the frankest poet’s confession since Heine.”³ I do not want to take the perverse tack of arguing that *Crisis* is better than the novel, but rather to examine it on its own ground in relationship to the *Steppenwolf* years as a whole, instead of reducing it to the status of raw material for the fictional frame of *Steppenwolf*, a line of reasoning by which the poems are swallowed up by the novel.

Hesse did not wish the lyrics to be thus liquidated, but to guarantee their independent existence as a cycle. In a letter of 1928 he explains the fact of a limited edition as a strategic move to preserve the poems’ integrity: “I found no other way to assure the existence of this poem-cycle so that it cannot be lost any more, and to protect it at the same time from the popular craving for fashion and sensation.”⁴ He was almost embarrassed by the sensational success of *Steppenwolf*, and he wanted *Crisis* to be available only to the happy few who could appreciate its genuine meaning and intention beneath the shocking surface. He didn’t want this intimate little tome to fall into *too* many wrong hands, because to state the paradox as succinctly as possible, his turn to a confessional aesthetics contained within it a strong reservation

¹ 1928 n.d., reprinted in *Materialen zu Hermann Hesses 'Der Steppenwolf'*, ed. Volker Michels (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972), pp. 306-309. Throughout this paper all translations of material quoted from *Materialen* are mine.

² “*Person and Persona: The Magic Mirrors of Steppenwolf*,” in *Hesse: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Theodore Ziolkowski (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1973), p. 165.

³ Letter of October 1928, *Materialen*, p. 134.

⁴ *Materialen*, p. 134.

about the ultimate value of confession as art: to be published in a large edition, "these poems are not objective enough . . . are too much confession and momentary notice."⁵ And at the same time, he felt that the only thing that mattered to him as an artist was confession, in a variety of forms, and whatever its ultimate worth. Contrasting himself with the "aesthetically irreproachable poets," Hesse announces the ironic credo of the *Steppenwolf* period, confession at any cost: "As far as I am concerned, I don't count in that regard any more; I have already abandoned the aesthetic ambition years ago and write not poetry (Dichtung) but confession (Bekenntnis), in the same way that someone who is drowning or who has been poisoned does not concern himself with the cut of his hair or the modulation of his voice, but simply screams out."⁶ And *Crisis* is the purest expression of Hesse's aesthetics of the scream, decades before that ungodly sound began to make itself heard in American poetry, and at first in the Beat poets, especially Allen Ginsberg.

With the publication in 1975 of Ralph Manheim's spirited, free-wheeling translation into English of *Crisis*, the English-speaking reader has now for the first time available to him (with the exception of the letters, and some fragments and journal entries) all the texts of Hesse's troubled but protean *Steppenwolf* phase—or to use his favorite word here, *incarnation*—which opens with the 1922 fragment, "From the Journal of One Who Has Been Derailed" ("Aus dem Tagebuch Eines Entgleisten"), a pre-study, as Hesse describes it, to the novel,⁷ and which closes in 1928 with the Kafka-influenced short-story, "Concerning the Steppenwolf." The major works that lie between these boundaries—*A Guest at the Spa* (1924), *Steppenwolf* (1927), *The Journey to Nuremberg* (1927), and, of course, *Crisis*—reflect the complex psychography of Hesse as Steppenwolf and outsider (he repeatedly uses the English word in his letters) suffering from a severely divided self or "schizomania" as Harry Haller has it, from suicidal despair concerning the fate of the poet in the modern world, and finally, from an uncontrollable oscillation or "pendulation" (to use Ziolkowski's term⁸) between the worlds of *Geist* (mind/spirit) and *Natur*

⁵ Letter of June 1928, *Materialen*, pp. 131-132.

⁶ Letter of October 1926 to Heinrich Wiegand, *Materialen*, p. 97.

⁷ Quoted by Volker Michels in *Materialen*, p. 39.

⁸ In his discussion of the light and dark worlds of *Demian* in *Hermann Hesse: A Study in Theme and Structure* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1965), p. 96.

(senses/instincts), which is also a conflict between the masculine and feminine sides of Hesse's psyche. The multifarious self-division which afflicted Hesse was such that no degree of magical thinking could help him to a synthesis, not even "that airy bridge," humor, "the old mediator between the ideal and the real," the "crystal that grows only in deep and enduring pain."⁹ For even humor, of which he asked so much in the twenties, and which he tried to cultivate in works that are essentially unfunny, save for some sublimely grotesque moments in *Steppenwolf*, is a compromising mediation, and thus a bridge back to the bourgeois structure of values that he struggled to reject and that he recognized as a mode founded on the lukewarm middle, safe from all extremes where *Geist* and *Natur* act out their pure destinies. The striving for humor in *Journey to Nuremberg* and *Guest at the Spa* is indeed so heavy-handed, mawkish and hypochondriacally self-indulgent that only Hesse's desperate wish for some kind of bridge away from the abyss can even begin to account for the genesis of these strange works. But in *Crisis* and *Steppenwolf*, so different in form and content, yet so intimately bound up in a symbiotic relationship, his ambivalence is bodied forth in a laughter that in the former is at times purely nihilistic, and that in the latter points altogether beyond the bourgeois dilemma to the crystallized indifference of the Immortals, a goal which the novel can only adumbrate, and that is provisionally reached in *Journey to the East* and *The Glass Bead Game* with a resolution of the masculine/feminine split by way of mortifying *Natur* or the Eternal Mother. I say provisional, because the *magna mater* refuses to let herself be killed off, as we can see when Josef Knecht, the Magister Ludi, obeying the self-willed call of awakening or "Stufen," leaves the Castalian realm of a senescent *Geist* to plunge into the mountain lake at dawn, the amniotic fluid at the beginning of things, the maternal *Urquelle* that is at one and the same time the death-dealer and the baptismal font of life of the spirit grown weary of itself.

III

The sexual leap into the lap of the eternal feminine, the return to the maternal matrix also constitutes the primary psychological gesture and *Bildungs*-program of the confession that is *Crisis*. The poem-cycle mir-

* *Journey to Nuremberg*, in *Autobiographical Writings*, ed. T. Ziolkowski, trans. Denver Lidley (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1971), pp. 206, 178.

rors the psychomachia in Hesse's life cycle between eros and intellect, with eros—for this is what the forty-eight year-old writer has come to—as the appointed, necessary good. Extreme simplicity of style and content in *Crisis* masks the authentic complexity of a self that is absurdly yet courageously seeking to achieve some measure of reintegration through mortification and self-surrender of the intellect. The first surrender, however, is that of the purgation or voiding of confession itself, the will to truth concerning who one is, no matter how repulsive or unflattering that truth may be. Confession as exhibition: in Rousseau the act is literal, as the exhibition of confession is partly a confession of self-exhibition; in *Crisis* it is a venture to expose those areas of the self that have been most repressed because they are most unpalatable and infamous to a bourgeois sense of what life and art ought to be.

How far does Hesse carry this self-exposure in *Crisis*? Not quite far enough to suit his punctilious standards for frankness, because he feels constantly constrained by conventions of prurience that a middle-class reading public imposes on its authors. His postscript to the collection is a curiously hedging document, being both offensive and defensive, affronting and apologetic. Hesse wants to keep his audience's sympathy in the very act of cutting away the ground of sympathy on which a middle-class audience can stand, and the poet ends up in a sense shadow-boxing with the philistine censor in himself. His psychic need is to explain so as to mollify: the poems reflect the fear of ageing and death of a man close to fifty, and not merely by way of a violent reassertion of too-long stifled instincts, but as a crisis-stage of middle age when the spirit grows weary of itself and yearns to abdicate to nature and chaos. The task is literally a life-saving counter-swerve from Hesse as Saint Siddhartha, and a turn to unsuccessfully sublimated impulses that have been either silenced altogether or prettified in his earlier works, and that are now allowed to come to voice under the moral aegis of *Aufrichtigkeit*: *Crisis* as therapy, and hopefully a more effective one than the expensive thermal cures in Baden. Although Hesse is more than willing to engage in vigorous sessions of self-hatred, he is still dependent on the love of his audience, which itself is a synecdoche or psychic trope for the first audience of man-as-actor:

Once a man takes honesty as his ideal, he cannot confine himself to showing the pleasant and reasonable side of his

nature. The other side is there. I must even admit that my honesty in this respect is flawed, for I have omitted from this book a number of poems publication of which would have been too damaging to my self-esteem.

Dear friends, I attach no importance to your judgment. But I set great store by your love. Continue to love me, even if you do not approve of my poems.¹⁰

The hidden addressee is Hesse's mother, now long-dead, and the plea re-enacts the plea of Hermann Hesse the self-willed child, adolescent, and fledgling author, whose disturbing acts and words were in a sense always a repeated, extreme testing of that infinite lode of mother-love—the prayer of the child in all of us, forever poignant: love me even if you do not approve of me.

The opening lyric of *Crisis* offers both a dedication and a program as the poet surrenders himself, turns or returns to the "Urmutter" to find in her embrace both salvation and the ecstatic release of eros fulfilled, an ultimate letting-go. Here, as later at the conclusion of *Narcissus and Goldmund*, the man re-enters the Eden of childhood in a sexual embrace with the eternal mother, to be consummated in and consumed by her kiss—Hesse's own myth of the Romantic *Liebestod*, via the family romance. The sensuous recovery of the original ground of being is an ambiguous rite of passage—life-giving and suicidal—because adult intellect and selfhood are surrendered, but a primal unity is regained through the incestuous death-swoon. The double-dealing character of this embrace which kills and renews is further enhanced by the fact that inherent in the reunion is not a return pure and simple, since it contains also a wish to violate the mother. There can be no innocent entry into the shadow realm of origins by the adult poet, and even though the explicit recognition of the sexual union as a violation of the mother as well as of the self is only implicit in "Dedication" (*Hingabe*, which also means a giving-of-oneself), a number of other lyrics make quite explicit the ferocity of the erotic urge in terms of violence against the self as well as the other.

Thus self-murder and the crime of passion are two leading, linked wish-images of *Crisis*. The poet's craving for death finds various expressions, from naked assertions of the wish itself, to grotesque fantasies of killing the enemy in his own breast ("In Vain," p. 55), being

¹⁰ *Crisis: Pages from a Diary*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1975), "Postscript to My Friends," pp. 119-121.

crucified ("Intimations," p. 95), or run over, fate of fates, by the car of a Catholic baker ("The Drunken Poet," p. 105). Correspondingly, the sadistic urge to murder the beloved, which figures also as the high or low point of *Steppenwolf's* Magic Theatre sequence with the stabbing of the sleeping Hermine, is given a prominent place in the poetry, as the speaker thinks of strangling his nubile young partners after intercourse ("Poet's Death Song," p. 5) or even in the moment of passion ("The Debauchee," p. 87), and as he confesses to having stabbed to death his beloved, Erika Maria Ruth ("With These Hands," p. 115)—in fact, Hesse's second, much-younger wife, whose marriage to him was short-lived and ill-sorted, and ended, not in murder, but in the divorce courts.

Lest this catalogue of passionate misdeeds should prove too revolting, let me quickly add that it is presented for the most part through a high-gloss veneer of grotesque and sardonic humor, as a sort of farcical confessional fantasia. The intended effect of the humor is to stylize and distance such shocking imaginings; yet the humor, because of its biting, sardonic edge, is not exactly comforting or reassuring as the author holds the mirror up to the psychopathology of his everyday life. Like Baudelaire, Hesse is still (perversely) as much of a moralist as a nihilist or sensualist here, because in some measure he is working to get the reader—*mon semblable, mon frère*—to face up to the hidden monsters in his own breast. *Crisis* as a comic catharsis moves from fantastic confession to a purgation of the sick soul of the modern European insofar as Hesse feels that the psychic derangement of the artist holds a larger meaning for the society in which he lives: "the neurosis of a man of spirit is simultaneously a symptom of the soul of the time."¹¹

Hesse in his *Steppenwolf* incarnation was acutely aware that one of the chief afflictions of middle-class culture is its denial or sentimental euphemizing of the instinctual basis of human life, to which the artist in pursuit of *Geist* is also particularly susceptible. The insight, of course, is almost a commonplace in the advanced circles of the twenties, when coming in the wake of Freud, such major artists as D. H. Lawrence made it over into the substance of their best-known works, and Hesse himself only came to it belatedly after undergoing psychoanalysis. But he felt it with a peculiar force, not merely because it helped him to cast off once and for all the last vestiges of the Protestant-Pietist mentality on which his childhood and youth were fed, and

¹¹ Letter of October 1926 to Hugo Ball, *Materialien*, p. 97.

against which he struggled from early adolescence on, but especially because it helped him to redefine the aesthetic principle, or the relationship between life and art, experience and poetry. In an essay on Hölderlin written near the beginning of the *Steppenwolf* period, he posits that the poet's mental collapse was rooted in an unsuccessful sublimation of ordinary instincts: "He cultivated in himself a spirituality that did violence to his nature."¹² Behind Hesse's self-conscious dedication to the realm of the mother and of the senses we may discern his insight about Hölderlin as a representative cautionary figure impelling him, by way of negative example, to hazard in poetry the journey (as he puts it in the *Crisis* Epilogue) into "nature, chaos, and animal instinct" and to come to voice "this darker, perhaps deeper half of life" (p. 119) that he knows now had either been silenced or dressed up in borrowed finery in his earlier works. As Wiegand wrote in his 1928 review, here "nothing is beautified or silenced which governs most unspiritually below the navel." Wiegand praises this as a courageous act, and observes further how rare it is for an older writer to make such a disconcerting departure from his earlier works: "Radical youth doesn't signify much, as every sort of history will show. Revolutionary age is dangerous. Rebellious youth: normal. Revolutionizing age: deranged (verrückt)."¹³ Although the reviewer's remark is apt because in the course of ageing most artists seem to pursue a path of retrenchment into and a further refinement of their most representative modes, there are always major exceptions, in art as well as life, as the famous example of the older Tolstoy, who raged in old age like a Russian Lear of the steppes, will show. But a glance at the decades supervening since Wiegand's comments may intimate to us that Hesse's way here may not be merely a brave divagation, but may prove to have been exemplary as far as the development of at least some major modern writers is concerned. Did not Yeats, roughly half a decade after *Crisis*, turn his back on the mosaic-like ideal of perfection of Byzantium, the artifice of eternity, to return full-force to "the fury and the mire of of human veins," and proceed to amaze his public in the thirties with the erotic wisdom of the incorrigible Crazy Jane, that "Fair and foul are near of kin,/And fair needs foul." And what of Lowell's breakthrough, in middle age, to a personal idiom and a vigorous poetic

¹² "On Hölderlin" (1924), in *My Belief: Essays on Life and Art*, ed. T. Ziolkowski, trans. D. Lidley (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1974), p. 128.

¹³ *Materialien*, p. 306.

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confession after the studied, opaque formalism and the mannered impersonality of his much-praised verse in the modernist vein?

IV

What enables a major writer to take a radical departure in mid-career? I have already touched upon Hesse's psychoanalysis as an important element, one that I would like to consider now in a little more detail in relation to his artistic development from the end of World War I to the *Steppenwolf* years. In Hesse's case, the turn in later middle age to a piquant confessional aesthetic can be seen in a sense as a delayed reaction to his earlier reading of the works of Freud, Jung and Stekel, and to the extended sessions with the Jungian analyst, Josef B. Lang, during the distressing situation of the war years when his literary and personal life fell into ruins because of his outspoken opposition to the war, the mental breakdown of his wife and the subsequent dissolution of his family. In a 1918 essay on "Artists and Psychoanalysis" (for which he received a polite acknowledgement from Freud), he lists as one of the major benefits of analysis for the artist that it demands a "truthfulness toward oneself to which we are not accustomed," and adds, revealingly, that such honesty "at the very outset of analysis is a powerful, indeed a monstrous experience, a shock that reaches to the root of one's being."¹⁴ The initial result of this extensive shock is that it made it possible for Hesse to emerge at the end of the war as a new writer—literally so, pseudonymized as Emil Sinclair—with *Demian*, the novel that came, under great pressure and rather pell-mell, out of his experience of analysis, and that curiously enough caught the mood of a new post-war generation with a heady welter of Jungian symbolism. The hypnotic appeal of *Demian*, attested to by Thomas Mann, among other German intellectuals, is that the young men returned from the front were no longer enamored of public rhetoric and collective solutions, but willing to hearken to the inner voice, especially in the prophetic mystification and *clair-obscur* of a novel that was sufficiently compelling yet confusing to accommodate the private fantasies of a large number of readers. However, *Demian*, despite all of its psychic storms and stress, did not reach far enough for Hesse, at least from the perspective of a decade later: its author was unable to deal forthrightly with the strong erotic drives that

¹⁴ *My Belief*, p. 49.

stirred darkly in his imagination, especially in relation to mother figures, and which he rendered harmless through idealizing (Beatrice) and mythic (Frau Eva) character archetypes. When in 1919 Hesse settled down in Montagnola to the life of an ascetic recluse, the prolonged contemplation of his own psyche resulted in fictions whose "incarnations" begin to approximate more closely the erotic and anarchic currents that ran beneath the surface. *Siddhartha* (1919-1922), his semi-autobiographical saint's life by way of Indian romance is strongly idealizing and idyllic, but at least the romantic asceticism of Siddhartha as Samana is counterbalanced by his entry into the world of the senses and passion in the liaison with the courtesan Kamala. But the delectable love-goddess is largely a poeticized Indian paradise-dream; ultimately remote from Hesse's inner experience. Only in the contemporaneous *Klingsor's Last Summer* and *Klein and Wagner* (1920) does Hesse begin to focus more frankly—and shockingly—on the true character of his passionate drives with the portraits under a Southern sun of the painter Klingsor during his last summer of erotic, Dionysian intoxication, and Klein, the petty bureaucrat who takes the daring step (thus the name symbolism) of breaking with his marriage and career to plunge into the demi-monde of crime and sensuality. And in the remarkable (and neglected) short-story, *A Child's Soul*, Hesse for the first time faces explicitly the Oedipal stresses of his childhood without cloaking or distorting them with romantic Jungian archetypes. Hesse's frank version of the Freudian family romance here takes us to the threshold of—and makes possible—the new, exacting, and largely unromantic confessional aesthetic that he elaborates during the twenties, and that for my purposes here can be typified by his statement in 1928 on the artist's vocation: "[he] doesn't have the job of forging an idiom for any generally accepted world-view, but to express as forcefully . . . as possible his own, unique fashion of living and experiencing."¹⁵ This is Hesse's personalist creed, to be contrasted with the modernist accent on impersonality prevailing in European and especially Anglo-American poetry. The monstrous shock attendant upon undergoing psychoanalysis had transformed Hesse as a writer by way of a belated but fundamental insight in his forties into the basis of his instinctual life; thus toward the end of the *Steppenwolf* phase it is so grounded in his artistic outlook that he is now able to redefine the aesthetic prin-

¹⁵ Letter of February 1928 to Cuno Amiet, *Materialen*, p. 126.

ciple itself in generic terms that reach far beyond the modernist impersonality theories that were to dominate English and American poetics for several decades more.

In addition to Hesse's earlier encounter with psychoanalysis, there is at work as well in his changed aesthetic outlook the nihilism and spiritual acedia that afflicted him enormously during the *Steppenwolf* years. The mood of suicidal despair, nausea, and disgust at oneself and one's world is of course a normative characteristic of the literature that emerged after World War II, and many leading modernists gave compelling expression to it during the twenties and thirties—indeed, the literature of despair has been with us so insistently since that for a major contemporary writer the virtues of a genuinely-founded cheerfulness might be something of a new discovery. Harry Haller's consoling resolve (which was Hesse's own, as the letters show) to have an accident with his razor at the age of fifty if he can't get out from under the burden of life-in-death has been acted out in actual life by many poets since. Hesse was particularly burdened by a sense of the worthlessness of modern literature, and the futility of artistic creation and of any higher spiritual or intellectual striving in a world where the commercial values of the market place, having pre-empted other faiths, brand all such pursuits as pitiable delusions. In such a world the artist is a wolf of the steppes, an outsider come to it from another plane of being who can only watch in stunned despair as he realizes that all he holds dear has no legitimate currency in this hard, material realm. Perhaps at such a time the serious writer too is a fallen creature; his work at worst pointless, at best problematic. "I don't think anything of the whole of today's German literature, my own, naturally, included" is the refrain that echoes through the correspondence of the *Steppenwolf* decade, and that reaches its low point in an epistle of 1926 with the querulous plaint:

It doesn't go well . . . I can't escape this filthy mess any more. The inner resistance is lacking, the will to health and to keeping on. I'm fed up, and feel the increasing paralysis of my powers bitterly. It started during the war, with the collapse, with fatherland, public morality, etc., then came the collapse of the family, the increasing loneliness (my second wife hasn't been to Montagnola in two years), then slowly came the most difficult: the insight into the worthlessness of my intellectual and literary labors. That is to say, I believe I don't underestimate the relative worth of my talent and my

mental world as measured against the contemporary average—but the time is pursuing other goals, and the collapse of the spirit in favor of other life-values renders the work and striving of someone like us a pure illusion—we might just as well be blowing soap-bubbles.¹⁶

The feelings here voiced privately and informally are part of the spiritual malaise that tortured the best minds between the two great wars, and Hesse's sense of the collapse of the norms of the spirit is the troubled chorus of modern European-man-thinking, running the gamut from Kafka's poignantly absurd hunger-artist to Valery's magisterially prophetic assertion in a 1935 essay that

a disorder to which no end could be imagined was observable on every hand. We find it around us and within us, in our daily habits, in our manners, in the newspapers, in our pleasures, and even in our knowledge. Interruption, incoherence, surprise are the ordinary conditions of our life.¹⁷

Nihilism and despair, however, are double-edged emotions, for they can be as creative and fructifying as destructive and sterile. The task of the true artist, as Keats knew in the "Ode on Melancholy," is to make his despair a source of productive energy, and to wrest creation from the destructive element in which he has perforce to immerse himself. Thus, paradoxically, it is Hesse's very despair that enables him to make a fundamental break with the epigonal Romantic vein in which he had been mostly content to work as a poet up to the end of World War I. It has been noted how formally innovative his sonata in prose, *Steppenwolf*, is, and how it can stand beside such experimental modernist masterpieces as *The Wasteland*, *Ulysses*, and *The Counterfeiters*. But it has not been acknowledged that *Crisis* in its own way parallels the novel in its departure from the poetic molds that had hitherto been adequate to Hesse. In the case of the poem-cycle as well as that of the prose-fiction, the reader is faced, not with a complete break with the heritage of German Romanticism of which Hesse was probably the major literary exponent, but with a substantive transposition of basically Romantic themes and modes into a modern idiom, setting and

¹⁶ Letters of March and August 1926 to Ludwig Finckh and Georg Reinhart, *Materialen*, pp. 70, 95.

¹⁷ "The Outlook for Intelligence," *The Collected Works of Paul Valery*, Vol. 10, trans. Denise Folliot and Jackson Mathews (New York: Bollingen, 1962), 130.

mood where Romantic nostalgia gives way to surreal and grotesque evocations of present and future. In *Steppenwolf* and *Crisis*, twentieth-century Romanticism (if there is such a hybrid), rather than imitating the moribund and decadent later nineteenth-century versions that were popular in Hesse's youth and that frequently passed for the original article, affronts the chaotic modern world with a vision that for the first time creates a genuinely contemporary Romantic perspective on that world. Hesse does not merely translate the sensibility of the preceding century with the refurbished props of an updated setting, nor, conversely, does he reject that great tradition from Goethe to Hölderlin with which he feels most at home as a writer, in the way Pound and Eliot tried to turn their backs on the English Romantics. Hesse knew that what you reject too overtly will come back to haunt you in its cruder forms which you will not be able to recognize or control. His procedure is to assimilate and subsequently transform and restructure a literary inheritance to come to terms with the unprecedented demands of an age of accelerating change and confounding discontinuity. How could a serious writer, after the double-shock of psychoanalysis and World War I, do anything else? Drawing upon the past (and not merely by way of cleverly fragmented, parodistic allusions, like the author of *The Wasteland*) to meet the creative demands of the present, Hesse's novel and poem-collection perhaps also funnel into the future, whereas—and by now this is a question to be asked—some of the masterpieces of Anglo-American modernism that try to reject the nineteenth century out of hand may end up as the half-forgotten period pieces in some hypothetical museum of literature.

The exacting truth-standards arising out of Hesse's psychoanalytic sounding of the self, then, juggled aside both his self-love and the timidity or artistic inhibition imposed by conventional canons of respectability, and he was able to etch a new kind of self-portrait in *Crisis*, one that by a principle of psychic symmetry or aesthetic complementarity counters the ideal of Hesse as Saint Siddhartha. The artist as saint or sinner: the polarity isn't particularly novel, but Hesse's nihilistic basking in his new-found profligacy in the name of *Aufrichtigkeit* allows him to win for his art a new range of material and expression, thus revitalizing it sufficiently for him to be able to propel himself at the end of the *Steppenwolf* period to the threshold of the *Spätwerk*, the assured mastery of *The Glass Bead Game* with which his career culminates, where confession is dissolved back into a type of cosmic

allegory of the evolution of consciousness throughout the different phases of history. But could the fictional biographies of that wondrous meditation, from the Rainmaker to the Magister Ludi, have been possible without the autobiographical experimentation in prose and verse of the twenties? And conversely, isn't the serene spirituality of the final phase in a sense earned and legitimated by Hesse's earlier *Crisis* incarnation? We might go further: whatever forms of spirituality are yet to be developed in the art of our late Western culture, they must surely have come to terms in a substantial way with the grotesque realities engaged in *Crisis*; if not, then they will ring as hollow as the chants of young Hare Krishna followers on a Brooklyn sidewalk.

V

Integrity of spirit won through nihilism and despair—that is the essential achievement of *Crisis*, one forced by the alembic of both laughter and tears. The poem-cycle seeks to front the terrible chaos lurking behind the glittering facades of modern European urban life between the wars; to inoculate the self against its elegant corruption in the process of partaking of its anarchic pleasures and pains with anacreontic gusto. To get some sort of genuine purchase on these submerged patterns of chaos, Hesse makes a bold break with the Romantic convention of the lyric poem as euphonious song, to let jangling dissonances come to the fore. He had adhered rather automatically and unswervingly to the *Lied* tradition from his first volume of poems on, *Romantische Lieder* (1899), but in *Crisis* he largely breaks with his favorite mode to project the disordered perception of a contemporary *poète maudit* who has run amok in a labyrinth of automobiles, call-girls, and jazz bars. This world has a rhythm of its own, one whose fevered, Dionysian pulsations cannot be formally rendered in the *Lied* tradition of latter-day Romanticism, with its languid, liquid and melancholy vocables more suited to a faint-hearted pathetic fallacy than to the frenzied swirl of the street and night-life of a modern city. So Hesse turns to a different set of stylistic strategies to convey the contemporary hurly-burly that he sees in and around him at certain demonic moments in Zürich. Perhaps the most challenging question about the ultimate poetic worth of *Crisis* is, to what extent do Hesse's formal resources adequately engage and capture in language the burden of disordered experience that he bears witness to in these poems? A larger but related issue here is, how far can poetry open its doors to

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chaos without being blown to smithereens? Can form figure forth the formless, or does chaos in fact possess a form of its own, an inner demon that can be vowelled in the poet's voice, and ordered, Prospero-like? Perhaps the question is false and chimerical, like asking if unicorns can dance on water. But it needs to be asked, nevertheless, at a time when poetry and science are reemerging in the half-glimpsed idea that both the inner and the outer world, the psyche and the cosmos, are possibly the crystallized disjecta of a primal and unbounded chaos.

The answer to the question concerning the value of the *Crisis* poems as art is that they are finally only a qualified success, because—to jump the gun on a conclusion which must be supported by further discussion—although Hesse makes a considerable departure from his previous poetic practice, he does not make enough of a clean break because he still cannot relinquish the trappings of a formal stylistic armor in hazarding the forces of chaos. This armor reveals him in a sensational new guise as a modern knight errant willing to break a lance or two against the refractory surfaces of urban life, but the armor is nevertheless too self-protective to provide a genuine opening or clearing for an unprejudiced jousting with chaos. As Faust needs the protection of Mephisto to be able to partake of the infernal festivities on the Brocken on Walpurgisnight, so Hesse turns to a set of traditional rhetorical devices that will serve as a passport to guarantee his safe passage through the quotidian inferno of modern life that is *Crisis*. The poems succeed because of the risks they take, and they fail as well because these risks are always too limited and calculated: Hesse's illuminations are guided so as not to end in a premature terminal silence, like Rimbaud's. Further, Hesse can elude our criticism as well as his own by the nihilistic disclaimer, the poetic vanishing point that literary success and failure, and the question of value, are simply meaningless in the cultural situation out of which he is writing.

It is something of a truism that poets don't so much create forms as they inherit them, and the degree of formal originality they possess manifests itself in their ability to bond or adapt the inherited forms to the exigencies and demands of the context in which they find themselves, which will always be both relatively unique and relatively timeless. Hesse too, in *Crisis*, rejects one aspect of his Romantic legacy, the *Lied* tradition, to explore another and a "lower" mode of the lyric, that of *Galgenhumor* and *Knüttelvers* (gallows humor and doggerel), with which he was familiar from his study of Villon and

Goethe, among others, and which he adapts with wit and bravado to deal with contemporary material. The bawdy persona of these satiric poems represents them as impromptu, improvised trifles, to be taken in not so much as art but as a kind of documentation of momentary moods, impulses, and experiences. At times both mood and mode are not that far removed from Byron's improvisational high-jinks in *Don Juan* ("I write this reeling,/Having got drunk exceedingly today,/So that I seem to stand upon the ceiling"), including the fact that some of Hesse's stanzas too are presented under the guise of having been composed under the influence ("To John the Baptist from Hermann the Schnappsist"). The alcoholic apologetics help the poet to disarm impending critical strictures, to treat material not normally admitted into the temple of serious poetry because of the rules of decorum, and to present a seemingly disordered, tippler's perspective that is in fact as carefully organized and controlled as the doggerel rhyme and meter chosen to convey it.

Thus in *Crisis* Hesse breaks for once with the elevated Romantic lyrical vein in which he had worked as a prolific but largely second-rate poet, to turn with verve and vigor to a satiric mode, that albeit in its constituent formal elements just as traditional as his epigonal Romantic songs, nevertheless represents an abrasive encounter with modernity that makes these poems in truth more serious than his intentionally "serious" poems. Both in style and content they force an opening for disorder and confusion to enter the stage, and to be engaged by Hermann-the-Schnappsist, the satiric self for whom the unfunny issue is that of the survival of self and poetry. Tempered in the crucible of his (heroic) despair, these crisis lyrics are, in the form of gallows humor and doggerel, articulate screams, cacophonous litanies that take to their logical extreme the confessional aesthetics of the *Steppenwolf* period. The sardonic collection may be seen as the *avant garde* of a highly creative, deranged, and suicidal decade in Hesse's life, for it is a calculated slap at the bourgeois friends, readers and critics who wanted to embalm Hesse as a venerable Great Writer, and who characterized his new works as "irresponsible derailments," insisting that the author of *Siddhartha* owed it to himself to maintain a more dignified public posture. As if Hesse could care less. Like the wolf in the short story that closes the *Steppenwolf* phase, Hesse wanted to bite the childish hand that was trying to feed him chocolate through the bars of his cage. He wasn't so much interested in the sweets to be

had from his audience as in the survival of his troubled *daimon*, no matter what the cost.

VI

Hesse's self-willed rebellion against respectability and convention in *Crisis* proceeds simultaneously on the sexual, social and literary planes. The revolt of the forty-eight year old poet as *enfant terrible* is enacted under the auspices of Dionysian intoxication, fueled by wine, whisky and cognac, which serve also as the necessary sensual dissolvents of decades of inhibition or repression of libidinous impulses. The active surrender to the realm of the eternal feminine, the career of the flaming senses, is moreover a flight from the idyllic self-isolation of the mountain-retreat at Montagnola—the contemplative seat of the cool *Geist* which with its perpetually regulated rhythms holds the fear of death in abeyance—to the flickering and irregular contortions of urban night life, where Hesse hopes to have one last romp before capitulating to the onset of old age. The erotic crossing from the realm of spirit to that of instinct is ironically a movement from country to town in the concerted effort to recapture there the lost *Natur* of childhood, to recover its wholeness in the fractured angularities of revelling. From the midst of this self-renewal Hesse could write in a lighter moment that

one does everything in life, or most of it, on account of women. If I struggled the greater part of my life, and thought up systems to defend myself against them, I now do just the opposite. If I strove for wisdom in my younger years, I now take pains to be childish for once. And it succeeds, not always, but often enough, and gives me pleasure.¹⁸

The Goethe tradition is never far from Hesse's art, for his excursion in organizing a latter-day innocence is in a sense akin to Faust's rejuvenation in the Witch's Kitchen scene, where he is privileged with a burning vision of female pulchritude and drinks off a flaming potion that will make him a lady killer. So too Hesse's entry into the world of the senses in *Crisis* is replete with animal icons and beast images (dog, wolf, pig), as well as the associated Faustian violation of innocence, as Hesse (in a blasphemous poem ultimately not included in the volume, "The Man of Fifty Years") imagines himself stripping down

¹⁸ "Verbummelter Tag," in *Materialen*, p. 71.

a young girl "instead of reading a tome by Goethe" at least one time before—"in God's name"—the arrival of death.¹⁹ Faust's Walpurgisnight adventure is also replicated in the shorthand of fragmentary references to the revels of a masked ball (one which Hesse actually attended, and which is expanded in *Steppenwolf* into the surreal, hallucinatory Magic Theater sequence). But in *Crisis* there is no epiphanic uplift by way of Pablo-Mozart and the golden track of the Immortals; what remains is the galling frustration of the fallow dawn, when the hung-over partier can only curse Lola, the flirtatious wife who fanned his lust all night long only to disappear at party's end into her husband's marriage-hearse, a "Fiat car," with the parting shot, "go to the devil" ("Morning After the Masked Ball," p. 99).

And so Hesse's pocket Brocken-bestiary in the style of the roaring twenties—jazz, booze, the foxtrot and the onestep—ends in a failure reflected back to him in the sordid mirror of self-hatred the morning after. The repeated, linked invocations of the myths of the Prodigal Son and of Don Juan, noted by Mark Boulby,²⁰ finally fail to fulfill the poet in a childhood paradise dream of sensual gratification, an achieved epithalamion of the innocent senses fully consummated. The attempted *Bildungs*-program of a self-abandon in eros culminates in nausea and a feeling of the ridiculous, grotesque nature of the attempt. The result is a type of catharsis not envisioned at the outset, for the lust to cram the empty self and to incorporate the female ends in a purgatorial voiding of that self. The dedicatory surrender or *Hingabe* to the "dark one, primal mother of all desire" undergoes an ironic inversion in the closing poem's sarcastic farewell to female arms, and the numb dread of the unavoidable end betokens the return of *Geist*, whose resources will have to make that stark thought supportable:

The End

The flame that lured me through the pain
Of frantic pleasure has flickered and gone out.
My rigid fingers scream with gout,
And suddenly I'm in the wilderness again.
Recoiling from the shards of luckless revels,
Glutted, exhausted, disappointed, I,

¹⁹ *Materialen*, pp. 197-198.

²⁰ *Hermann Hesse: His Mind and Art* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1967), p. 169.

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Steppenwolf, have packed my bag. I'm going
Back to my native steppe to die.
Goodbye to sparkling, smiling masquerades,
Ladies too lovely, too ingratiating.
Behind the suddenly fallen curtain,
I know the old familiar dread is waiting.
Slowly I go to greet the enemy.
Harried by anguish, with laborious breath
And pounding, apprehensive heart,
I wait, wait, wait for death.

Am Ende

Plötzlich ist verzuckt das Flackerlicht,
Das mich lockte durch so viele Lüste,
In den starren Fingern schreit die Gicht,
Plötzlich steh ich wieder in der Wüste,
Steppenwolf, und speie auf die Scherben
Der verglühten Feste ohne Glück,
Packe meinen Koffer, fahr zurück
In die Steppe, denn es gilt zu sterben.
Lebe wohl, vergnügte Bilderwelt,
Maskenballe, allzu süsse Frauen;
Hinterm Vorhang, der nun klirrend fällt,
Weiss ich warten das gewohnte Grauen.
Langsam geh dem Feinde ich entgegen,
Eng und enger schnürt mich ein die Not.
Das erschrockne Herz mit harten Schlägen
Wartet, wartet, wartet auf den Tod.

The foundering at the finish of the erotic dream is, however, not an unwelcome result, but a necessary defeat that Hesse pursued with clear-eyed passion. From start to finish, the poem's "desperate and vain effort to drown the corrosive, cauterizing intellect in sensuous experience" ²¹ was a willed, ironically belated but coherent struggle to live out his long-pent-up sexual impulses in an all-encompassing symbolic incarnation of Hermann Hesse the Profligate. What we have in *Crisis* is not so much wish-fulfillment as a type of creative self-healing, a restoration of psychic equilibrium brought about by the purging of a hypertrophied intellect through modern Don-Juanism, the necessary context of which is the *Aufhebung* of that incarnation once its task is done and the spirit can re-emerge sublimed and freed for new tasks.

²¹ Boulby, *Hermann Hesse*, p. 167.

The failure is thus fated, one which can no longer be put off or elided. Hesse's *amor fati* makes it the occasion of a strenuous self-creation, which allows him to go on and complete the novel, *Steppenwolf*, and to proceed to a different self-fictionalizing altogether in the serene *Spätwerk*, beginning in *Journey to the East* (1932). To rekindle his creative energies at the conflagration of a short-term failure in willful dissipation is the most intriguing strategy of *Crisis* that should be viewed as one more facet of Hesse's lynx-like and roguish personality. Thus it should not surprise us that in a prose fragment written four years before *Crisis*, he already foresaw in foreshortened form the whole Don Juan cycle to come, only to dismiss contemptuously this "current incarnation": "Put an end to yourself, mannikin, you belong to the old iron."²² Nor should it amaze us, finally, that at the beginning of the next decade, Hesse turns his back on the acute confessional aesthetics that had served as the seedbed of his creative drives during the problematic *Steppenwolf* years, and begins to speak with Castalian calm of the poetic ideal of impersonality, of "the disparition of all that is personal and accidental in the secret of form"²³—a fitting epitaph to the powerful, troubling self-*imago* which by the 1930's was no longer current, but already moribund in Hesse's imagination.

VII

If there is a genuine failure in *Crisis*, it is to be found, as signalled earlier, in Hesse's inability or refusal to go far enough in engaging the disintegrative forces governing our mass culture. Although his poetry comes closer here than anywhere else to the real language of men—an early reviewer stressed how he "forges from everyday speech, the monologue and the letter a flexible, life-like idiom of much grace"²⁴—his entry into the destructive element is too calculated, stylized and formally defensive, what with its easy and witty elegance; its ready reliance on rhyme, meter, formulaic colloquial blasphemy and cursing. The quasi Mephistophelean cleverness and bawdy negations ultimately prevent *Crisis* from being the major poetry it might have become, given a less programmed, more open-ended confrontation with chaos.

²² "From the Journal of One Who Has Been Derailed" (1922), *Materialen*, pp. 199-203.

²³ "Mozart's Operas" (1932), *Materialen*, pp. 136-137.

²⁴ Hans Böhm, *Der Kunstwart*, 44 (1930-31), 803-805, my translation.

Even Hesse's chosen goal of erotic dissipation is rendered with rather conventional shock-tactics; lust is still too traditionally poetic, and there is little actual body language or erotic imagery beyond the obligatory breast, belly, hair and eyes. Hesse's *rendezvous* with sex is too willed and intellectual, and he stops where a contemporary of his like D. H. Lawrence will really get started. So also his stance *pour épater les bourgeois* is limited because his revolt against the middle-class assumes a middle-class framework to validate it, and reveals Hesse's dilemma to be that of the hypochondriac guest at the spa, who fulminates against bourgeois complacency safely ensconced in a luxury hotel, or of Harry Haller, who launches his attacks on Philistinism under the araucaria, the ruling icon of the bourgeois temple in which he dwells while living off his stocks and bonds. Similarly, the dramatic persona of *Crisis*, Hesse's alter ego, is no social outcast challenging the corrupt prerogatives of a privileged class; he is on the contrary a man of means, entering the playground of eros with the aid of smart clothes, liquor, and dance steps, and even the gay doings of the masked ball are only a *Fasching*-equivalent of genuine Bacchic ecstasy. In a sense the profligate here is only the other side of middle-class conformity, so that Hesse finds himself caught up in an unfruitful dialectic of respectability/debauchery that in the frame posited by the poems permits no synthesis or higher resolution. One of the deeper ironies of *Crisis* is that the demonic embodiment of worldly complacency, the Catholic baker with his expensive automobile that the poet would like to be run over by, could by a *volte-face* become the double or twin of the poet, or of the Harry Haller who engages in an absurd hunt after automobiles in the Magic Theater.

Consequently the sardonic humor—the laughter of despair—betokens the irresolvable bind the author finds himself in, which he is able to rise above only when he turns to the writing of the second half of *Steppenwolf*, where the warfare of the two selves (Faust's "zwei Seelen") opens into a vision of the infinite plurality of selves in a cosmic expansion of individuality that fans out to include the Immortals. There Hesse achieves a larger synthesis that assimilates but transcends the saint/sinner, blessing/cursing split in the surreal transformations of the Magic Theater. Whereas the laughter in *Crisis* is destructive of both the self and the other, in the last third of *Steppenwolf* it is corrosive only to move toward a greater construction. If in the poems Hesse doesn't get far beyond the problematics of the child (the

Prodigal Son, Don Juan), in the novel the child is reborn and integrated with old-age wisdom, which is joyful and gay, culminating in the laughter of the Immortals—indifferent in the best sense, but not nihilistic.

So Hesse, in *Crisis*, fails to go far enough in terms of either content or form. He does not hazard enough; he opens the door to chaos only a crack, to play, armed to the teeth, with a few disconcerting embodiments of the living dark, before the door is forced shut again with a verse-*Knüttel*. How easy it is to pass such a judgment in the secure warmth of one's study; how convenient to ponder chaos, keeping it at arm's length with pen, paper, typewriter, whatnot. Does any poet ever go far enough? Harry Haller's resolve was to have an accident with his razor on his fiftieth birthday: perhaps that is going too far, and not disorderly enough. Maybe too the failure the reader sees in the author is really his own as his critical specter is reflected back to him in a reductive ratio. But perhaps it is more important to raise questions than to find answers, those paltry birds that drop stillborn from the branches of one's best thoughts. And on that note I round back to my question at the outset: what is possible for poetry today? Or to recast it somewhat, is it possible for a poetry of crisis to find an authentic voice for chaos, a language that syllables the cosmic dark, that sounds into the black holes of space without being sucked in, that renders the configurations of disharmony? And does chaos possess an inner form that may be captured in a language that will not be mere gibberish, a mad cipher or inane howl? Is such a poetry possible, or is the very idea of it a terminal delusion? The reader can only raise the question; it is for the true poets to conjure the devil of chaos in utterance, bind him in speech, deliver his form, whatever that might turn out to be.

In the closing decades of our millennial century, it may be the only thing worth trying in poetry, even if only failure attends the poet's speaking-out-of the critical disarray of our multiverse. In this venture, the Hesse of *Crisis* may serve as a kind of Elder Brother, who in the twenties clearly heard the crack of doom, and tried to record some of its sound waves in an astonishing verse diary.

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