

Hermann Hesse
„An Hour Behind Midnight“ (1899)
and „Hermann Lauscher“ (1901)

A close reading of Mark Boulby's book *Hermann Hesse*, 1961¹
by Gunther Gottschalk

Hesse's early writing is copious, his vocabulary is ornate (*An Hour Beyond Midnight*, 1899; *The Posthumous Papers* and *Poems of Hermann Lauscher*, 1901). The first one is a collection of tales and vignettes in which Hesse withdraws into an imaginary world. A noble youth is driven by boundless longing (cf. Goethe: *Werther*²; Novalis: *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*³). He is unable to accept present-day reality and dreams of far-away islands, mysterious temples, beautiful castles, and dark cypress groves: in all of these we find colors, scents, melodies, and lovely maidens. The tales are written in a Romantic confessional style utilizing many clichés, full of sentimentality and poses. In *Hermann Lauscher* [-> Hermann and the Listener] Hesse introduces a confessor who is also an observer. As in *An Hour Beyond Midnight*, the protagonist is a poet. In *Lauscher*, however, the poet is able to look back upon himself. In *Hermann Lauscher* he sees himself as a keen observer who seeks rational truth while of course being a Romantic. This split (subjective and objective modes) creates two personalities: Hermann and the Listener.

This phenomenon evidently became a trademark - not only in Hesse's early Neo-Romantic but also in his more mature works - and reflects a fundamental psychological process within the author in which he attempted to illustrate and clarify his inner experiences, for instance by projecting them into external fictional figures and that in conflicted situations: resolution pending.

On its first page *An Hour Beyond Midnight* presents a *Narcissus* image which later runs through Hesse's work: "In the dark green still water of the inlet my mirror image lay."⁴ The young wanderer then finds a pool in which are reflected the first dreams of his youth, and staring at this reflection he strives to recall his own features of the past. Similarly *Goldmund*⁵ - thirty years later - is to contemplate the transience of the self - and there are several intermediaries who were to do the same thing.⁶

As Hesse himself nostalgically clung to memories of his own childhood - as exemplified by *Lauscher* - the "lost world of innocence" is already seen as gradually retreating to an insufferable distance. "There is nothing" he tells us "more wonderful and more incomprehensible, and nothing that becomes more foreign to us and that we lose more completely than the soul of the child at play." The reader will notice the significance of the word "*play*". *Lauscher* says, Childhood, is like a treasure which slips out of playing hands and falls over the rim of a deep well. The deep magic well (i.e. *Märchenbrunnen*) is a symbol for the depth of one's self.

¹ http://www.amazon.com/Herman-Hesse-His-Mind-Art/dp/B00EY81EEK/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Sorrows_of_Young_Werther

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heinrich_von_Ofterdingen

⁴ Boulby, 11; henceforth "B" plus page.

⁵ *Narcissus and Goldmund*, 1930 - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Narcissus_and_Goldmund

⁶ B 12

The "call of childhood" resonates through Hesse's early writing and even much later it continued to remain an intense and active function in his art. It reflects the genuine frustration of adolescent yearning. Like others who suffer this particular corruption of the vital instincts (Hoffmannsthal's Claudio, 1913)⁷ Hermann Lauscher longs in vain for his great passion. Like Peter Camenzind he makes the mistake of constantly waiting for life to begin.⁸

The Romantic theme of the transience of youth is without freshness, it is however Hesse's own. And oddly enough, the poet complains he has sacrificed his life to his muse, and that he is old before his time.

Much later - during a period of extreme personal crisis - Hesse wrote *Fragment of a Diary* [1918] and considered the value of "bending, listening over the edge of the streams and the gorges which one has within oneself". - The lost treasures of youth have become an innermost stream and gorge, mostly covered up by the debris of life experiences and therefore has become virtually inaccessible. This is a direction of mind which - in due course - helped make Hesse receptive to the doctrine and techniques of *psychoanalysis*.

Hesse's style of writing in *Hermann Lauscher* already prefigures that of *An Hour beyond Midnight*, a volume of tales and vignettes. Hermann Lauscher has no will at all, he does, however, have irony, although about this too he is ironical: "irony - we have little of that and yet strangely I often long for it - to dissolve my whole deliberate style and blow it away into the blue like a pretty soap bubble - to transform everything into surface - to reserve for oneself all the unspoken things with sophisticated awareness as a mystery we wield - that, I know, very well is Romanticism."

This process is something of a key to his style of writing and even to his later novels.⁹ As a late decadent Romantic, Lauscher suffers from obsessive intellectualization of the mode of experiencing which is inherited from countless literary forebears.¹⁰

Hugo Ball¹¹, perhaps rather prematurely, called Hesse the *Last Knight of Romanticism*, as it were: its rear-guard.¹² Otto Basler¹³ said that Romanticism meant not an era or a movement but an innate attitude of mind.¹⁴ In Hesse's own account, Hermann Lauscher represents an effort to conquer a piece of world and reality for oneself to escape the perils of partly retiring, partly sliding into arrogant isolation.¹⁵ The irony consists of the *depersonalization*, the attempt at times to de-poetize, hence to humanize Lauscher, and above all the technique of the *literary double*. Lauscher relates: "I had a long talk with Hesse, who of course nagged and teased me again, until I became rude."¹⁶

All these devices represent a rather pathetic attempt to find a way beyond the impasse of the decadent literature of the time to which Hesse's young mind had been particularly

⁷ Hugo von Hoffmannsthal, *"Der Tor und der Tod"*, 1893. Cf. https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Der_Tor_und_der_Tod

⁸ BW 8

⁹ B 4

¹⁰ B 4

¹¹ <http://www.britannica.com/biography/Hugo-Ball>

¹² B 4

¹³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Otto_Basler

¹⁴ Hugo Ball 1947 p. 281

¹⁵ Hermann Hesse, *Werkausgabe*, Bd.1, S.8; henceforth WA.

¹⁶ WA I-9

exposed. Equally, however, they must be said to reveal the fundamental structure of that mind: the split of the personality, the unmistakable turn to *introversion*.¹⁷

Later, in Hesse's *Peter Camenzind*, we have essentially a reflective work. A hero - recounting his experiences - distances himself from them, mulls them over, extracts lessons from them (with which he does not fail to instruct the reader) and uses them as a starting point for generalizations and a somewhat stilted commentary upon life. "Wisdom is one of hindsight."¹⁸ "At that time, of course, I was not aware of all this," he tells us from the author's vantage point. He reiterates his earlier ignorance, hence overcome: "My life still lacked its own keynote. I did not know that I was suffering from a longing which knows no bounds and no fulfillment in love or rest."¹⁹

His selfknowledge - when he painfully achieves it - acquires for him the quality of dogma. With such dogma he frequently addresses the reader in a didactic style: "if you do not want to listen to me and my poor words then go unto those in whom suffering has been overcome and transfigured by a love free of all desire."²⁰

This movement from the direct communication of recalled experiences to detachment from them and eventually to a didactic commentary upon them is one of the most essential features of Hermann Hesses writing: memory and reflection are aspects of that duality which is the framework of his art.²¹

This tendency, of course, is present as early as in *Hermann Lauscher*. It is a device of the fictional biographer to distance himself from the unhappy scapegoat of his own adolescence.²² We notice in *Hermann Lauscher* the irony of the diligently polished formal perfection which Lauscher's own (fictional) poetic works exhibit and the lack of it in the fate of the leading fictional character himself as he is characterized as being at the beginning the "dangerous path of self-observation and confession".²³ Lauscher relates: "I had a long talk with Hesse, who of course nagged and teased me again, until I became rude."²⁴ Thus the book contains the two fundamental elements of critical self-observation and lyrical self-disclosure.²⁵

One might say that Hesse eventually found his way to some degree of serenity by going inward through the door of his split self - but at the time of *Lauscher* he was far from ready to turn in this direction, the impulse was rather to flee the innate situation altogether by a turning-outward.²⁶ *Peter Camenzind* was to be the next, the decisive step on this way to escape toward the external world, "a step which almost overemphasized the healthy, the natural, and the naive - and in which I actually found a kind of liberation."²⁷

There are other motifs and allusions in Hesse's early works which are the germs of vaster things to come (e.g. occultism, theosophism, the experience of fate, the connection

⁹ B 10

¹⁸ *Beneath the Wheel*, 2, henceforth BW.

¹⁹ WA, I-281

²⁰ WA, I-311; B 2

²¹ B 3

²² B 3

²³ Preface, 5th ed. B 3

²⁴ Werkausgabe, I 214

²⁵ B 3

²⁶ B 13

²⁷ B 14

between the aesthetic life and the religious.²⁸ The cult of beauty can provide experiences which are as lofty as those of the martyrs and saints.²⁹

When *Lauscher* was published (50 copies sold), Hesse was pleased to imagine that with this work he had left behind him forever his poetry and his youth. Toward the end of his journal, Lauscher himself seemed to begin feeling the stirrings of repressed life within him. He overcame his dearest memories and his childhood. Like Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*,³⁰ the figure of Lauscher has to die, as it were to free his author for more and one hopes for better things, but a gene is left behind which dictates the structure of all the rest of Hesse's work: a divided self, dark and light, passionate and ironical, experiencing and observing, dreaming and analytical, listening to the inarticulate subterranean dreams of childhood with the ear of the critical objective mind. Indeed for this reason the title of the book may have been chosen: Lauscher (*listener*).³¹

When Hesse turned his back on *Hermann Lauscher* (or perhaps only half his back) he takes this inheritance with him into what was planned as the novel of escape, of a renewed extraversion: *Peter Camenzind*.

²⁸ B 15

²⁹ B 16

³⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Sorrows_of_Young_Werther, 1774

³¹ B 17