

Demian

by
Joseph Mileck

Two years into World War I, pressures on Hermann Hesse began to build up to the breaking point. His father Johannes with whom he had maintained a precarious relationship especially during his youth, had died in 1916. His son Martin was seriously ill with what was described as meningitis. The melancholia of his wife Maria had, over the years, developed into serious depression and required hospitalization. Hesse himself, because of his ever-growing opposition to the war, had found himself deserted by many friends and readers and was exposed to vitriolic attacks in the patriotic German press.¹

Hesse became increasingly isolated. His sons were under the care of friends, and he himself lived alone with a housekeeper in the large, deserted house on Melchenbühlweg in the suburbs of Berne, Switzerland. In July 1916 Hesse had to seek help at the Sonnmatt Sanatorium near Lucerne. His doctor was a young psychiatrist, a disciple of Carl Gustav Jung, who, as Jung, owed much of his psychoanalytic background to the teachings of Sigmund Freud. Jung describes Dr. Joseph Lang as an interesting man, a brilliant diagnostician, who had wide-ranging cultural interests and who had been introduced by Jung to the study of the beliefs of the ancient sects of the Gnostics.² Carl Gustav Jung was instrumental in the discovery of the scrolls of Nag Hammadi in Egypt which give, for the first time, direct evidence of the beliefs of the gnostics.

Hesse met with Dr. Lang in over sixty sessions which Lang recorded in his diary. The diary, most of which was apparently destroyed by the family of Lang after his death, apparently bore vivid testimony to the animated conversations to which, according to Hugo Ball, Hesse may have contributed even more than Lang. Ziolkowski attributes to Lang the role of a catalyst and believes that Lang's importance for Hesse's writing cannot be overestimated. Much of the material in *Demian* seems to have its origin either directly or indirectly from the year that Hesse spent in close contact with the psychoanalyst.³

¹ cf. the literature on his correspondence with Romain Rolland

² The term gnosticism is used nowadays as a catch-all phrase for a number of religious movements in late antiquity which derive from the imagery of oriental, cosmological myths. Some of these sects are part of the early Christian church and are largely known through condemnations by the patriarchs of the church. The basic concept of gnosticism is that of the soul which has fallen into the lower, material world which has not been created by the highest, but by a lower god. It is depicted as an active, evil force. Matter is hostile to God and must be overcome (cf. Dualism). The material world contains islands of transcendental illumination which have to be saved. The force of light sends emissaries which seek out the islands of light, gather them, and return them to their origin. The savior, above all, is Christ who is followed by "pneumatic" natures, that is, by those who are imbued by the light or the spirit. Others may stay behind in the sensual, material world, or may only reach the stage of "faith" instead of true knowledge. The souls move upward away from the material world through a number successive stages, each of which is ruled by a demon.

³ Theodore Ziolkowski, *The Novels of Hermann Hesse. A Study in Theme and Structure*, Princeton, 1965, p.126.

The encounter with psychoanalysis proved to be "an encounter with real powers".⁴ In November 1916 Hesse was released from the sanatorium as being totally recovered. He had undergone what he felt to be his rebirth as a new man and artist. He continued to maintain close ties with Dr. Joseph Lang for the rest of his life. Lang appeared as a figure in *Demian* and also in Hesse's later prose and poetry in transparent disguise.

Hesse had been advised by his analyst to renew his interest in drawing and painting and soon began to roam through the countryside with easel and watercolors. He also began to write *Demian* in 1917, a book in which he recorded the process of his own rebirth. In *Demian* we find much material from analytical psychology. Although it presents faithfully the various stages of self-discovery, Hesse later emphasized that as an artist he had taken an independent, creative approach to what Jung himself came to consider a sample case history of the process of psychological therapy. As a piece of literature, the book was based on intuition rather than analysis. He felt that Freud and Jung only confirmed the poet's intuitive understanding of the subconscious.⁵ Even although Jung himself later expressed his conviction, that much of Hesse's work beginning with *Demian* was based on insights which he himself directly or indirectly through Dr. Lang had communicated to Hesse, whether Hesse was aware of it or not, one is tempted to point out the continuity of themes which make *Demian* only the part of a chain beginning with Hesse's earliest publications. At the time when Hesse wrote about Hans Giebenrath in *Beneath the Wheel*, he had had very little opportunity to read either Freud or Jung. Hesse believed that the artist must relentlessly pursue the inward way, he must establish his identity, he cannot utilize the easy solution of conformity, his fate is loneliness. Like the analyst, the poet must "listen to the hidden sources" and he must face up to himself.

In 1919 *Demian: The Story of Emil Sinclair's Youth* appeared under the pseudonym Emil Sinclair. Hesse had chosen to write under a pseudonym for a variety of reasons. First of all, the name of Emil Sinclair which was based on Hölderlin's friend Isaac von Sinclair, expressed his desire to break with his own past. In periods of depression Hesse had taken a dim view of his own writings and professed to have abandoned the search for recognition as an author and poet. In 1922 he wrote:

My attempt to have my person disappear behind my work has been publicized and foiled by journalists in the case of *Demian* despite my most serious efforts.⁶

⁴ VII, 143.

⁵ cf. "Artists and Psychoanalysis". *My Belief*, New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1974, pp.46-51.

⁶ Letter to Hans Reinhart, February 1922. *Hermann Hesse: Gesammelte Briefe*, II, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1979, p.11.2

Secondly, since Hesse had maintained his reputation as a pre-war author and had received much negative feedback because of his opposition to the war, the pseudonym seemed to guarantee him a degree of privacy.⁷ On January 3, 1917 Hesse wrote to his friend, the painter Hans Sturzenegger:

Ich z.B. bin mir seit langem darüber klar, daß meine Stellungnahme (auch meiner amtlichen Tätigkeit) mich eines Tages zum Bruch mit Heimat, Stellung, Familie, Namen etc. führen kann, und ich bin entschlossen, es darauf ankommen zu lassen.⁸

Last not least, Hesse sought to avoid alienating a new generation of potential readers who might have felt that he, a member of the older generation, had nothing to contribute toward a resolution of their post-war plight. The book, sure enough, was written in a new style, it contained new views, and its Weltanschauung had unalterably changed from that of the pre-war years.

The book's title was ambiguous. The name "Demian" was obviously based on the Greek word *daimon*, (God, divine being, devil, fate), yet the book was the story of Emil Sinclair, and Demian appeared only as a "supporting character". One had to assume that Demian was to be seen not literally as a discrete character, but as a force or an aspect of Emil Sinclair himself. The byline of the title spoke of "The History of an Adolescence".⁹ Remembering that Hesse's writings tended to be highly autobiographical, the adolescence he was referring to must have resembled his own. Yet Hesse, at the writing of *Demian* had turned forty. The book itself and the experiences of its characters were affected significantly by the war. Hesse, in his own youth, had given no indication whatever of anticipating the political events that would lead to the war, nor had he actually participated in the war. As a matter of fact, his preoccupation with his own personal development and his psychological orientation and his outsiderdom, effectively precluded social and political involvement at a grand scale. One should therefore interpret the subtitle to mean that Hesse did not consider the process of growing-up as being limited to one's early years, nor did he make the first-hand experience of modern war a prerequisite for the experience of crisis and chaos. His own experience during the wartime crisis, including his analysis, proved only that the process of maturation continued throughout one's lifetime. Most of the readers of *Demian* were young people, many of them returning from the war. They felt they recognized in the author of *Demian* one of their own. The story of one youth had become the story of many youths, as a matter of fact of an entire generation, and the German subtitle of the book was appropriately nonspecific. Hesse, under the pseudonym of Emil Sinclair, had ac-

⁷ Hesse was urged in 1917 to desist from publishing his controversial political essays in order not to endanger his work for the prisoners-of-war. Between 1914 and 1919 he published about twenty-five political essays, some of them under the pseudonym Emil Sinclair. cf. Siegfried Unseld, *Hermann Hesse: Eine Werkgeschichte*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp. 1973.

⁸ "Hermann Hesse. Briefe", *Neue Rundschau*, 83, 2 (1972), 214.

⁹ "Die Geschichte einer Jugend", translated by Michael Roloff as "The Story of Emil Sinclair's Youth", Bantam, 1965.

complished a remarkable feat: across the generations he had managed to be accepted as a spokesman of a multitude of young people. In his later works, Hesse was to repeat this accomplishment a number of times. Most remarkable was his acceptance by young Americans during the Vietnam era. Particularly this latter phenomenon could be seen as further proof that Hesse did not consciously cater to the tastes of the time.

Demian had, in the words of Thomas Mann, a great "electrifying" effect. It won the Fontane-Prize for the best novel of a young unknown author. Although Hesse's publisher Samuel Fischer saw no reason to doubt Hermann Hesse who had transmitted the manuscript to him presumably for a young unknown friend, a number of Hesse's friends and acquaintances were quick to recognize him as the author. Among them was Carl Gustav Jung. In January 1920 Hesse exhorted his doctor and friend Josef Bernhard Lang not to reveal his authorship although there were signs that people were about to guess who the real author was.¹⁰ After Eduard Korrodi had published two essays on the authorship of *Demian* in a major Swiss newspaper,¹¹ and had asked Hesse to lift the pseudonym, Hesse returned the Fontane-Prize. The 17th edition of *Demian* appeared under Hesse's own name. In 1934 Hesse wrote in a letter that Korrodi originally had praised the anonymous *Demian*, without guessing its author, and in part at the expense of Hermann Hesse, only to be embarrassed and resentful later when he discovered his mistake.

The book began with a prologue, as was Hesse's practice. The prologue provided the tone and set the frame for the work. If Hesse had not selected the pseudonym of Emil Sinclair, he probably would have stated in the introduction that some friend or archivist was sifting through the left papers of Emil Sinclair and had the following to report. Hesse in real life had preempted that type of distancing by forwarding his own manuscript to Samuel Fischer presumably for his unknown friend, Sinclair.

The prologue of two pages is in many ways an outstanding concise statement of Hesse's Weltanschauung. First, he emphasizes that the story is his own, which is true and not true at the same time. He also rejects the omniscient role of the novelists who "tend to take an almost godlike attitude toward their subject, pretending to a total comprehension of the story, a man's life, which they can therefore recount as God Himself might, nothing standing between them and the naked truth, the entire story meaningful in every detail."¹²

Hesse then stresses that the story deals with a real, not an imaginary person, and that this person is unique, since every human being "represents a unique and valuable experiment on the

¹⁰ Montagnola, January 26, 1920. *Hermann Hesse: Gesammelte Briefe*, I, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1978. 442f.

¹¹ Eduard Korrodi, "Wer ist der Dichter des Demian?", *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, Nr.1050, June 24, 1920; "An Hermann Hesse, den Dichter des Demian", *ibid.*, Nr.1112, July 5, 1920.

¹¹ Translated from the German by Michael Roloff and Michael Lebeck, Bantam, 1965.

¹² Translated from the German by Michael Roloff and Michael Lebeck, Bantam, 1965.

part of nature." The novelist's¹³ purpose is to stress the uniqueness of man, which is a significant and urgent task considering that in the present age human beings have come to be regarded as canon-fodder and are "shot wholesale". The individual is "the very special and always significant and remarkable point at which the world's phenomena intersect, only once in this way and never again." Thus, each human being is wondrous, worthy of respect and every consideration. "Within each one a redeemer is nailed to the cross."

The author does not intend to lecture his readers with his supreme insights. He himself is still looking for the answers, but he has learned not to look for them in "stars and books".¹⁴ Each individual will have to find his own answers within himself. If that inward search reveals much that is utterly disturbing and unsettling, one should not be discouraged. The goal is to become utterly and completely oneself. Some approach this goal intelligently, others awkwardly to the best of their ability. They try to escape from the "slime and eggshells" of their primeval past, to develop from frogs, lizards, and ants into truly human beings. Nature attempts again and again to accomplish its goal to create a human. While our sources are identical, while we share our mothers, we strive toward our own destiny. "We can understand one another; but each is able to interpret himself to himself alone."¹⁵

From the very beginning, we are faced with what on the surface appears to be an ambivalence between story and autobiography, the storyteller and the character, the individual being and the generation. These dichotomies are at the core of Hesse's art. Hesse attempts to exemplify that the way to one is through the other. If the distinct fate of one individual may appear to be of utmost concern only to that individual, it mirrors the fate of everyone else and thus becomes the concern of everyone else. The story of Emil Sinclair is the story of everyman. If the individual could be reborn, mankind as a whole would have another chance. The personal quest be-

¹³ Many critics have difficulties in seeing most of Hesse's books as "novels" and are reluctant to use the term. In the Prologue to *Demian*, Hesse himself used the expression: "Dichter, wenn sie Romane schreiben [...]." The term "Roman" is generally rendered as *novel* in English. Ziolkowski points out that *Demian* shares with *Peter Camenzind* that both are "Bildungsromane", a specifically German genre which flourished during Romanticism and produced masterworks such as Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, Hölderlin's *Hyperion*, Jean Paul's *Titan*, Thomas Mann's *Maqic Mountain*, Romain Rolland's *Jean Christophe*, Somerset Maugham's *Of Human Bondage*. The "Bildungsroman" is typically of an episodic structure that highlights the hero's growth in a broad variety of cultural circumstances. The Romantic "Bildungsroman" specifically utilizes the figure of a mentor who guides the hero toward the ideals of a group or secret society, which in *Demian* become internalized by the hero. Ziolkowski furthermore points to Hesse's personal touch in the use of prefiguration as a structural tool, and in the use of myths and symbols to create a broader implication for the fate of an individual. (Ziolkowski, op.cit., p.90f.)

¹⁴ Hesse's reservations against didacticism are well-known, at least since his *Peter Camenzind*. He cannot quite hide a didactic strain, however, even although he cautions readers in his letters to include his own books among the books in which one cannot find the answers to one's own search. One seeker, though, can serve as an example and source of encouragement for another and his story can be a consolation in despair.

¹⁵ Prologue, *Demian*, Bantam, 1965.

comes a "divine duty" and a "new humanity" can grow out of individualism.¹⁶ Demian's readers seemed to share Hesse's articles of faith.

We are reminded of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. The "need for a new man" was also the credo of the expressionists after World War I. The angry young intellectuals of Hesse's time believed that a new humanity could only be born after "the twilight of mankind". Tradition had to be annihilated for a new world to be created. In art and literature there appeared an increasing blend of anti-enlightenment mysticism and "pre-logical instinctivism".¹⁷

One of the founders of formal sociology, Georg Simmel, advocated what appeared to many as a return to irrationalism, and contributed to the increasing tendency to resolve the conflicts of the individual and society through religious, rather than political, means.¹⁸ Societies, groups, leagues, fraternities where individuals of like mind and conviction would find refuge from the burning issues of war-torn Europe, had become the vogue.

Hesse, as Fritz Böttger points out, had passed up much of what had been happening on the intellectual scene.¹⁹ At the latest in May 1915 in his review of Max Scheler's *The Genius of War and the German War*,²⁰ Hesse demonstrated a certain degree of fascination. As Böttger puts it, he applauded "hymnally an intellectually tempting mystagogue of war and clever feuilletonistic charlatan" (Scheler) while on the surface struggling with trivial chauvinists.²¹ Hesse was quoted as writing in "Apologie des Krieges" that the deeper sense and the positive side of war "had nowhere been so clearly and so well-documentedly, so warmly and heartily stated" as in "this

¹⁶ III, 406.

¹⁷ Fritz Böttger, *Hermann Hesse: Leben, Werk, Zeit*, Berlin: Verlag der Nation, 1974.

¹⁸ Georg Simmel, philosopher and sociologist, 1858-1918, professor in Berlin and Straßburg, he held the first chair in philosophy in Germany, started out from biological evolutionism (H. Spencer, Charles Darwin) and a critique of absolute-idealistic metaphysics. Later he shifted to Bergsonian metaphysics which was oriented toward a "philosophy of life" (Lebensphilosophie), and in which he advocated ethical norms which were based on "individual laws" rather than on objective necessity and objective applicability. The "individual" law acquired the function of an objective law for the individual. Simmel was concerned particularly with the relationship of individual and society. His thought on the perspectivism of values is echoed in modern sociology of knowledge (K.Mannheim).

¹⁹ "[...] er hatte sie (die Entwicklung der imperialistischen Intelligenz) gleichsam ein wenig verschlafen." Böttger, op.cit., p.246.

²⁰ Max Scheler, 1874-1928, professor of philosophy at Cologne and Frankfurt, founder of the "sociology of knowledge", first followed phenomenology of Husserl, later he became concerned mostly with the cultural and sociological issues of relativism and the sociological conditions of higher culture. According to Scheler, biological and economic factor may or may not block the actualization of moral, religious, and intellectual values and interests depending on the historical situation. Impulse and intellect coexist without intelligible connection. He reintroduced philosophical anthropology.

²¹ Böttger, op.cit., p.247.

work of an enthusiast, for whom the beginning of the war was a releasing thunderstorm and a first lightning in the mist of desolate utilitarianism."²²

The post-war generation wanted lucid and determined leaders who were willing to go their way in loneliness and as outsiders, living far from the "herd", leaders who belonged to an elite of the "stigmatized", those who bore "the mark of Cain".

As Theodore Ziolkowski points out, *Demian* abounds in Old and New Testament terminology, motifs, and figures: the Prodigal Son, Cain, Jacob, Christ.²³ Hesse certainly did not intend to write on Christian dogma. He merely used this language as a frame of reference. The former student of theology Pistorius tells his friend Sinclair that Jesus is only a mythical hero, not a divinity. Thus, there is no fundamental contradiction between Jesus and Nietzsche (the proverbial Antichrist). They both had the courage to stand for what they believed, to break from the herd, to follow their inner law. In *Demian* the Christian universe has become secularized.

The book emphasizes only one principle: man has the duty to be himself. If one lives this way, one will become a new man. One will dare to break old rules and create new ones, bearing the "mark" which is both distinction and punishment. One belongs to a league of those who are similarly marked, a communion of the elite, and who hail from all walks of life, including "astrologers, cabalists, yogi, Buddhists, and Tolstoyites." The members of this communion have nothing in common except the wish to become, and be themselves. Their differences in religious and philosophical outlook are unimportant because Hesse considers the whole world as a "manifestation of the One, The Divine".²⁴ *Demian* abounds not only in biblical terminology and references, though. It is also Nietzschean in theme and tone, and most distinctly of all it borrows heavily from the insights of "depth psychology".²⁵

²² *März*, 9, ii, 1915, 167ff.

²³ Theodore Ziolkowski, *The Novels of Hermann Hesse*, Princeton, 1965, p.126.

²⁴ VII, 497.

²⁵ Depth-Psychology, a collective term for a number of conflicting schools based on Freud's theories of neurotic symptoms, of dreams, and of association therapy. The schools of depth-psychology share the conviction that the key for understanding the conscious phenomena of mental life can be found in the "sub-" or "unconscious". The correction of neurotic or psychotic maladjustments requires making conscious certain subconscious impulses, a process which is resisted particularly in clinical cases for reasons of fear and guilt-feelings. Depth-psychology, although generally associated with Freud, Jung, and Adler, is anticipated in much of the writings particularly of the poets and philosophers of the late 18th and early 19th century associated with Romanticism, among them Novalis, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche. Especially interesting for the understanding of Hesse is not only the "analytical psychology" of C.G. Jung, but also the "existential analysis" which has its roots in the existentialism of S. Kierkegaard, M. Heidegger, K. Jaspers, and J.P. Sartre. Here the freedom of the individual is emphasized, rather than the control by a Freudian "id", and the desire of the individual to give meaning to his existence. Each "decision" for one of several alternatives results in self-restriction and metaphysical guilt (cf. M. Boss and G. Condrau). The resulting anxiety can be resolved only if the patient learns to stand up for his decision and assumes responsibility for his own life. Hesse's use of the term "soul", for instance, leans heavily on religion, but it is also a key term in depth psychology. The German equivalent of the word "psychology" was "Seelenkunde".

The mother of Demian is a personification of Soul, and since Hesse clearly intends to focus on the rebirth of what he calls Soul, Demian's mother, or Frau Eva, acquires a central position in the book.²⁶ Frau Eva is the biblical mother of mankind as well as the Jungian Magna Mater. If Emil Sinclair is to be reborn, he will first have to return to his Mother. The search for Frau Eva and for fulfillment remains the guideline throughout the book, and Sinclair's friend Demian serves as his guide, as do Beatrice and Pistorius.

In *Demian* Hesse presents us with a version of his own life which has been enriched by new experiences and insights. The locale of the book might easily be Calw, Hesse's birthplace. We follow Sinclair's development, his childhood and his fall from grace, through puberty and a quest for identity, through the achievement of liberation, and discover many features of Hesse's own evolution.

First we hear of the happy childhood in a safe, undivided world. Then the significant step is taken: what has been one, suddenly has become two. The supreme and symbolic unity of the mother's and father's world in the home has turned into a world of opposing principles, those of "light" and "darkness", of "goodness" and "sin", of articulate learnedness and mute nature, of boys and girls. Characteristically the "fall from paradise" coincides with the onset of puberty. The search for the Mother, while innocent in the child, has become "incestuous" and weighed down by guilt. The figure of the father acquires more and more the characteristics of the disciplinarian who represents the spirit and reason and enforces order, purity, and stern moral laws. The mother comes to represent whatever else makes life worth living, warmth, affection, emotion, love, but also danger, loss of happiness, death. While the father reigns supreme in the upper reaches of the house (the Lord), the mother, the sisters, and primarily the kitchen-maid come to represent the functional life of the household. The kitchen-maid becomes the link to the outside world, not because the boy does not mingle with his friends in the street, but because the maid relates to that dark and dangerous world of sin and guilt which the boy is about to enter and in which soul and chaos reigns.²⁷ Sinclair fluctuates between the two worlds, the security of the "light" world at home, and the temptation of the "dark" world outside. He takes his step outside when he encounters Kromer, the laborer's son, who heads a gang of boys and who at first is reluctant to deal with the clean-cut little boy who attends the Latin-School. Yet Kromer quickly grasps the opportunity to blackmail Emil when the latter makes the unfortunate boast that he has stolen some apples from a garden.

²⁶ Ziolkowski, op.cit., 134ff.

²⁷ *TIME Magazine* reported on March 14, 1977, that for the first time somebody had thought of asking elementary school children themselves systematically what life looked like to them. The Foundation for Child Development had reported the results of a nationwide survey of more than 2,200 children from seven to eleven years old. Most children feel good about their lives, their families, and just being themselves. "But many are also afraid. More than two-thirds are scared that "somebody bad" is skulking about their neighborhood, waiting to break into their homes. A quarter of the children are afraid that they will be attacked when they go outside - with some justification, since more than 40% have been harassed by older kids or adults while playing."

Emil Sinclair's progressing entanglement in the "dark" world is based not on the theft which had never taken place, but on his telling a lie in order to impress the boys in the street. Telling a lie is a conceptual betrayal of his father who stands for order and truth. ' It is also a betrayal of the "light" world which has been part of Emil Sinclair himself. Characteristically Emil Sinclair goes through a period of moral confusion, since the values he perceived at the outside were at odds with each other. Kromer acted as if he stood for truth, as if he were wronged and cheated. The betrayal immediately calls forth the feeling of guilt in Emil Sinclair when he faces his parents. He has become entangled in sin which crept up on him through the back-door of his own psyche from where he expected it in the least.

The fictitious theft now is used by Kromer in a casually clever way to lead Emil down the road to ever greater misdeeds. When Sinclair steals money to pay off Kromer, it is still his own which he is saving in a locked piggy-bank and he soon progresses to take the change from the kitchen table. But it is clear to him that he is going to be in ever greater trouble unless he manages to extricate himself from Kromer and return safely into the embrace of his father and mother.

Kromer makes the best of the situation for himself. He exploits the anguish which Emil Sinclair experiences. He is the child of the working classes, as Böttger points out. "Kid, what do you take me for? Do you think I own a mint? I'm poor, I don't have a wealthy father like you and if I can earn two marks I earn them any way I can."²⁸ Böttger concludes:

The blackmail derives less from the moral depravity of Kromer than from his class situation. Already Friedrich Engels had asked: "What reasons does the proletarian have not to steal? If one speaks of the 'sacredness of property', it is all nice and beautiful and sounds good to the ears of the bourgeois - but the sacredness of property disappears by itself for the person who owns no property. Money is the God of this world."

²⁸ Demian, *ibid.*,p.11.