

Gertrude

(1910)

Introduction and background

In *Gertrude* we are dealing again with the artist-life problem vis-à-vis a changing society as Hesse portrayed in *Peter Camenzind*, this time however the artist was a musician. One is reminded of the writings of Thomas Mann¹ and Hugo von Hoffmannsthal.² In contrast to Hesse's wife - the photographer and pianist Maria - Hesse himself was not a practicing musician³ but he valued music highly as reflected in most of his works. Music had been a consolation for him from early on and it now inspired Hesse to create the figure of the musician Kuhn in *Gertrude*. Hesse's friend at the time of writing the, the composer Othmar Schoeck⁴ - also had a strong influence on the young author. In the book the counterpoint to Kuhn in this configuration was the economist Muoth whose figure reminds us of Hesse's older maternal stepbrother Theodor Isenberg, referred to as *Ferromonte* in Hesse's *Glass Bead Game* (1943).

The primary theme of *Gertrude* was again the conflicted integration of the artist in a rapidly changing society in the decades prior to World War I. In difference from the nostalgic 19th-century Neo-Romanticism which then was still well integrated and socially accepted, we now hear about a figure (Kuhn) who is confronting a growing materialist way of life. There is rapid industrialization, ruthless economic competition, nationalism, colonialism, militarism with little space for the so-called self-possessed Romantic dreamers, nature lovers and world healers.

The great increase in economic and political power of nation-states made artists look inferior compared to the importance of the affairs of business and the state. Oswald Spengler⁵ stated cynically in his *Decline of the West*: "[...] art and abstract thinking are being overestimated in their historical significance. Important as they may have been in their Golden Age, there have always been more essential things." He continued: "[...] nowadays men of reality, industrialists, high officers, managers write better, more thoroughly, more clearly, more penetratingly than these so-called literary men, who made a joke out of style." The old, favored ruling class obviously felt no longer inclined to maintain the culturally oriented climate of the 19th century.

In *Gertrude* the artist Kuhn was faced with a harsh and even existential challenge and transfixed by the need of coming to terms with a threat to his profession and existence while he also tried to maintain the old ties and ideals. How could any traditional artist, and not just a Romantic one, find a home in this emerging and threatening new world? He saw himself as someone stigmatized, as being - in most aspects - a useless and unhappy individual. He was similar to a sick person, able to participate in "normal" life only while struggling with many handicaps.

¹ https://modernism.research.yale.edu/wiki/index.php/Tonio_Kröger

² See footnotes in previous lectures

³ We are reminded of his early enthusiasm for the violin which became a contributing factor in his unseemly departure from the monastery school at Maulbronn.

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Othmar_Schoeck

⁵ <https://archive.org/details/Decline-Of-The-West-Oswald-Spengler> (incl. complete text in PDF)

Thus, the cripple Kuhn in *Gertrude* becomes a symbol. He exhibits in his society not only the alienation of the creative individual from society, but also weakness and isolation, the collapse of the artistic personality and a sense of impotence, a point brought home by the contrast of his temperament to the vitality of Muoth, who was also his competitor for the favor of Gertrude.

Compared to Peter Camenzind's limited range of authentic exposure to city life and modern civilization, the young author himself was trying to develop a more sophisticated concept of life than that to which he and his family were exposed in Gaienhofen. Rural family life with – at that time – two children, with its normalcy and with his growing responsibilities, this life which initially might have been happy but soon turned out to be more problematic and burdensome, certainly did not yield the experience and inspiration the aspiring and essentially serious author needed in order to play a role in literature and address a larger than regional audience.

Aside from the sociological factors such as changes of the times, Hesse's precarious evolution as a writer and his increasing domestic obligations – one also needs to consider his psychological makeup and its role in his professional development. This third aspect of Hesse's situation before World War I was to evolve more and more into a serious factor by itself. The extraordinary sensitivity and self-orientation of his youth which had been quite evident from early on, his complex and at times wildly fluctuating relationship with his parents and their single-minded Pietist religiosity,⁶ in the serious crises of his educational career, his self-identification vis-à-vis the rigorous and often conflicting demands of his personal life and his chosen profession⁷ certainly did provide an important backdrop in the study of his work which can be described as autobiographical and introspective.

The reader today might be well aware of the fact that Hesse's personal situation and interests did not strongly support the objective study of localities and human situations in the sense of the dominant and popular literary movements of Realism or often rather blunt Naturalism did. His primary issues were more of a moral and psychological nature and deeply anchored in the complexity of his own psyche. This would lead him not only literarily to a more lyrical approach to nature based on the writer's own tendencies to project his personal feelings and insights onto the observable outside world rather than receiving the inspiration the other way around, the way a realist would.

This tendency might explain some of Hesse's ever continuing attempts to break free from actual life to hike to the beautiful South as he imagined it, for instance to the beauty of Venice or to the rage of the times, the naked nature apostles and healers on Ticino's Monte Verità⁸, or on a long trip to what he expected to be an ancient India.⁹ These trips – or escapes as one might call them – regularly led to bitter disappointment. The beauty and peace Hesse sought was a longing and projection of images that originated in his own mind. It should become a hallmark of his life and his writing.

Hesse does not provide an answer for this state affairs because he doesn't have one. His philosophical resumé appears to be something like this: "Fate was not good, life was moody and cruel, there was no benevolence and reason or beauty but in nature. Goodness and reason are within us, the people, with whom the mere chance of reality plays like a toy. But we can strive to be stronger than our fate, even if only for a few hours."

⁶ <http://www.wlupress.wlu.ca/Catalog/stephenson.shtml>

⁷ As early as when Hesse was thirteen he professed that he wanted nothing but become a poet.

⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monte_Verit%C3%A0

The bo⁹ <https://www.hermann-hesse.de/en/biography/journey-india>

It seems here that outer fate simply rolls over people, they have to accept what is dispensed at them - and thus the symbol of the cripple becomes the expression of a pessimistic fatalistic philosophy which exemplifies everything that inhibits the normal development of a sensitive perceptive human (the artist) and - as a recourse - predetermines the artist for his emphasis on his inner life. In times of utter desperation he would in fact seek help in the rapidly emerging field of depth- and Jungian analytical psychology.

The book

Back to Hesse's *Gertrude*. Kuhn's music shows his lyrical talent. There are few instrumental works, one opera, but his songs are most important. The lyrics are not based on great classical and romantic poets, but on contemporaries. Kuhn tries to express - in the style of folksong - the present time and the reality of his subjective experience of it. There are feelings of melancholy and depression about the suffering of the world. His counterpart Muoth concludes: " ... that is no consolation and no contentment, simply despair."¹⁰

Kuhn is not alone in his suffering and being a stranger in this world, lost, and tortured. Such feelings were quite commonplace at the time. They were being interpreted as affective derangement or *moral insanity*.¹¹ There was no cosmic meaning attributed to this phenomenon and it was strictly limited to the local geography and society. Hesse believed - even already then - that he was dealing with no universal, but with a contemporary problem, tied to the developed industrial society and the highly educated, more sensitive members of the middle class as he experienced or saw it. Hesse thus was concerned with the problems of his days but at this point he was still far away from the more comprehensive social criticism of *Der Steppenwolf* (1927) and in what he called the *Feuilletonistic Age* in *Das Glasperlenspiel* (1943).

Thus Kuhn's problem as an artist does not derive from a winter sport accident described in the book that crippled him. That experience contrasts with the characterization of Muoth, an artist of a totally different type who appears to exude vitality and enjoyment of fame, a hedonist, yet who ironically is lonely and starved for real friendship. He too suffers, tries to be alone, yet longs for love and appreciation. Life is worth nothing to him and he knows he should lead an ascetic existence, yet he numbs himself and leads a sensual life. In his marriage the last attempt fails to overcome loneliness, and he executes what Kuhn had only come close to: suicide.

Kuhn's and Muoth's mutual friend is Gertrude who stands between indecisive Kuhn, the cunctator, and Muoth, the go-getter. She is 20 and well educated. Her father - still in the spirit of the 19th century - supports the arts. Kuhn considers her the measure of all beauty, a muse, friend, comrade. Finally she becomes the object of his love dreams, which - unfortunately turns into an unhappy affection (cf. Hesse's own earlier experience with Helene Voigt-Diederichs). He becomes fully aware of this one evening, during the performance of the third movement of a sonata's trio in e-flat major, resolution and fulfillment.

Gertrude marries Muoth. This seems to suggest an attraction of opposites. Eventually she becomes the "suffering yet rational beautiful woman" (*die schöne Seele*),¹² traditional in literature since Lessing and Goethe, and her experience ends in resignation. Her father,

¹⁰ p.42

¹¹ Remember the double-meaning for the word "moral" in the 19th century: affective vs. ethical. The word "moral" was used here as alluding to an affective derangement. cf. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moral_insanity

¹² Literarily translated: "beautiful soul". The classical ideal of the perfect balance between reason, the rational mind, and human passion. (cf. Friedrich Schiller).

being rational, unsuccessfully pleads for divorce. She is denied the possibility of happiness, including that of marital fulfillment, but insists on continuation out of pride, self-imposed discipline and severity, and unflinching loyalty - contrary to all reason. The reader is reminded of the concept of *Haltungsmoral* in Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks* (1901),¹³ a book published when Mann was only 25 years old.

Thus two conservative features of Gertrude, the woman, become evident: the love for something which will destroy her, and the irrational willingness to sacrifice. Hesse-Kuhn, does not seem to be aware of this. Not to care about one's own well-being, to love somebody so that person's well-being is more important than one's own. Such rules would seem to be the principles of life to overcome what was perceived as the illness of the time: self-centered individualism.

Gertrude's actions, on the other hand, are governed by blind altruism.¹⁴ Her attitude would seem to provide an answer to the difficult question how an isolated member of the middle-class could ideally have worked out a reasonably satisfactory relationship with his or her time, corresponding to the prevailing ethics of the period, but such solution was either not accessible to Hesse in 1910, or at best not part of his intended literary portrayal in his book.

Conclusion

As far as Hesse's technique of writing *Gertrude* is concerned, Hesse apparently tried to perfect his mastery of the novella. That means it was not a comprehensive study of society, but a composition with few figures based on the young author's own life experiences and limitations. The book consequently became a kind of expanded novella - and that not only because of its structure, a not exactly rewarding topic for philologists who might concentrate on what not to do. It was, however, a kind of historic field study from a sociological, psychological, and even philosophic point of view, illustrating the struggles of an individual in coming to terms with his time, his life, and his art.

Gertrude turned into a story of recollections, consciously written from the assumed standpoint of the detached wisdom of old age and therefore certainly not of the middle-aged author in 1910 who was still emerging from new and grave challenges of life. The perspective of old age entered in the reflections of Kuhn and the figure of Lohe whose philosophy of life turned out to be the basic message of the book. Hugo Ball¹⁵ assumed that Lohe was modelled after Hermann Hesse father. It should be mentioned that there exist three versions of the book.

Literary historians are reminded of the novels of remembrance and resignation of Adalbert Stifter (1805-1868),¹⁶ Theodore Storm (1817-1888),¹⁷ and Ivan Turgenev (1818-1883)¹⁸. Goethe's Faust said: "Life is toil. Renunciation - continuous renunciation, - that's its secret

¹³ <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1058601/plotsummary>

¹⁴ p.235

¹⁵ cf. Richard Helt:

https://books.google.com/books?id=U3MenSD9U6gC&pg=PA32&lpg=PA32&dq=hugo+ball+hesse+biography&source=bl&ots=Mj9uNULmU_&sig=oBm-elj97yuTjfM7HNWf5EaW89I&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKewjOn8a-99nKAhXLJJQKHUIFB9oQ6AEIPDAF#v=onepage&q=hugo%20ball%20hesse%20biography&f=false

¹⁶ <http://www.britannica.com/biography/Adalbert-Stifter>

¹⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theodor_Storm

¹⁸ <http://www.online-literature.com/turgenev/>

meaning and its resolution, not the fulfillment of favorite thoughts and wishes, noble as they may be. The fulfilment of one's duty is one's main concern."¹⁹

One should remember, though, that the problem at Hesse's time - at the writing of *Gertrude* - was the unparalleled political and social complexity of public life in the decades before the war, not to mention the personal role of the artists and writers - as we outlined above - which had become ever more focused in the 20th century.

¹⁹ cf. *Gertrude*, p.193; Fritz Boettger, p.161, http://www.amazon.de/Fritz-B%C3%B6ttger/e/B00JF92IDE/ref=ntt_dp_epwbk_0