

## Hermann Hesse in the National Library in Jerusalem 2012

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are happy to see that fifty years after Hesse's death there is an exhibition in his memory in Israel. We wish to express our heartfelt appreciation to the local branch of the Goethe-Institute and the National Library of Israel which made this exhibition possible. After some general remarks about the author, I will use this opportunity to comment on the original copy of "*Piktors Metamorphoses*" which was handwritten and illustrated by the author himself in 1932 and is now owned by the National Library.

The recognition in this country of a writer who ranks with Thomas Mann and Stefan Zweig among the most widely-read 20<sup>th</sup>-century German-speaking authors in the world, has been long anticipated. Hermann Hesse's books were translated into more than seventy languages in at least 150 million copies. It may surprise you that only about one-seventh of this figure applies to German-language editions.

Considering the truly amazing international reception of Hesse's writings, one should remember his cosmopolitan origins. He was born in the small Black-Forest town of Calw in Swabia, the son of evangelical missionaries to India. His father came from the Baltic province of Estonia and thus was originally a Russian citizen. His mother Maria was born in India as the daughter of the internationally known theologian, indologist and missionary Hermann Gundert from Stuttgart and of a missionary mother from the French part of Switzerland whom Gundert had met while in India and who hardly knew any German at all. Hermann Hesse on the other hand, grew up in Calw, Basel, Maulbronn and Tübingen and transmitted numerous stories about the unmistakable atmosphere of his Swabian, yet also cross-cultural background.

In all the frequent autobiographical references in his novels and in more than a thousand poems, he created writings so prototypical that readers from all over the world could identify with them. For him, as for many other authors, his poems were a means of crisis management resulting from a clash of cultures, from the experience and solution of conflicts commonly experienced by all people

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<sup>1</sup> This public lecture by Mr. Michels in Jerusalem in 2012 was originally translated simultaneously from German into Hebrew. It was interpreted, adapted and augmented in order to ease the understanding by an English-speaking audience by Dr. Gunther Gottschalk (HHP) with the previous consent of the author.

who not merely wanted to adapt to their daily lives, but also wanted to extract a deeper meaning of their situation. People who had ever painfully experienced heteronomy through strict external controls, be they family-based religious, societal or political, and who had felt impeded in the unhindered development of their self-will and potential, could find in his books the encouragement to persist and to insist on following one's unique destiny.

Hermann Hesse left behind the troubling political developments in Germany as one of the first emigrants as early as two years before World War I. Later, as early as 1922, he rebuffed anti-semitism in as one of the editors of a popular magazine dedicated to cultural and political analysis. During his entire life he answered more than forty-thousand letters from readers of his publications who often confided their own problems. Hesse's responses were being collected to this date in many archives and libraries throughout the world, for instance here in Jerusalem.

Starting after World War I, many of his letters characteristically included little watercolors. There were also handwritten drafts, such as that of his so-called fairytale-of-love "*Piktor's Metamorphoses*" which were illustrated by himself. As I mentioned initially, the National Library owns such materials and I would like to direct your attention less to the background and significance of Hermann Hesse and the world-wide echo he found as a writer, but more to the unique merging of the arts in pictorial literary creations which are still widely unknown.

One of the many surprises we encountered while arranging a wealth of left papers were more than 3000 watercolor paintings of all kinds, hundreds of pen-and-ink drawings, and thousands of handwritten copies of poems decorated with colored vignettes. He had never made much ado about any of them and considered them his personal hobby.

What now prompted the literary man Hesse at about the halfway point in his life to rekindle an old affinity toward painting and to spend as much as one third of his remaining working hours perfecting his skills as a painter? Much later — at age 80 — he reminisced in a letter to a reader from Liverpool: "In my opinion the two most worthwhile ways to spend one's time are making music and painting. Both of these activities I dabbled in only playfully and as a dilettante, but they helped me meet the difficult challenge of coming to terms with my life."

In order to understand the circumstances and motives that prompted Hesse we return to the years of the First World War. Hesse painfully registered the powerlessness of reason in public discourse and deplored the hysterical abuse of language by politicians and the media. He began to experiment with new forms of expression — other than his post-romantic writings — and issued forceful warnings to the Europeans to promote international understanding. He published appeals in newspapers against the war and was promptly denounced in his native

country as an opportunist and traitor. These attacks — the experience of the unfolding war plus a number of very severe personal disruptions and losses — pushed him into the greatest crisis of his life, and he saw no other recourse but to seek help from a psychiatrist at the Sonnmatt Clinic near Zurich who soon was to become his friend.

This doctor Joseph Lang, a trained psychoanalyst and colleague of C.G. Jung encouraged his patients to supplement the Freudian patient-centered conversational therapy not only by preparing notes of their dreams but also by attempting to portray their dreams in images. This re-awakened Hesse's long dormant interest in drawing and painting. For example, in November 1903 — soon after having succeeded with his first novel "*Peter Camenzind*" — he had written to his colleague Stefan Zweig: "I often wondered what splendid paintings I could create if only I were a painter instead of poet. The problem is I can neither draw a straight line nor paint one."

It took thirteen years after that letter before Hesse — with the encouragement of Dr. Lang — put his dream into practice. This new graphic alternative to writing should soon become indispensable for him in order to manage his threatening life experiences. When reading his novel "*Beneath the Wheel*" (1906), we had been amused by the failed attempt of his leading character — no one else but himself — to conquer the violin starting at age twelve — much to the dismay of his music teacher and fellow-students at the monastic school of Maulbronn with the consequence that he was banished to the deserted clock tower to practice. Now again, in his forties he put his mind into teaching himself an artistic skill. This time, however, he was probably gently prodded along by some of his painter friends. Once in 1917 Hesse dreamed that all the paints in his palette had dried and he feared his doctor friend might draw the wrong conclusion and encourage him to intensify his efforts. This we have learned from the correspondence between the two which only very recently has been published in Switzerland.

Hesse — who had moved to Switzerland in 1912 — volunteered to assist the German Embassy in Berne soon after the beginning of the world war to publish a magazine and send reading materials to German prisoners of war. There was hardly any funding available for this effort. One of his friend suggested that in order to raise urgently needed funds he illustrate handwritten copies of his poetry and sell them to raise funds from his readers and literary collectors. A year later he followed up on this suggestion. He managed to set aside time in the evening to at least try to perfect his skills. We found boxes with left papers overflowing with innumerable designs for illustrated postcards which could be sold. He practiced the techniques of composition, perspective and color balance. There are hundreds of awkward sketches, bearing witness to the long and tedious path toward expressing in images what he apparently had been able to do so successfully in words.

Hesse's continuing diligence and persistence with which he acquired new skills and the craft of painting was most remarkable. And the additional benefit was that it helped him — as Dr. Lang had predicted — to focus his attention on something else rather than himself. "It is as if ...", he wrote at the time, "... a plant was injured and snapped and was about ready to wither away, and still tries quickly to form seeds, that is how I see myself — when I felt my life-nerve had been nicked, I recouped with the following new task: creating art with pen and brush. This was for me the wine which inspired and warmed my life enough so that I managed to endure."

The observer notes in Hesse's earliest pictures — architecture and landscapes in Berne and Locarno — how much devotion he put early on into his admittedly somewhat pedantic pen drawings which he attempted to enliven with faint tempera colors. This style was anticipated already a few years earlier in Hesse's pre-war artist-novel "*Roßhalde*" in which a painter named Veraguth produced naturalistic works, with cautious, even meticulous precision, even in the less significant details.

One cannot help but wonder how Hesse — only three years later — developed his chromatic range further as dramatically as he did, and how he moved from meticulously true-to-nature drawings to an expressionistic intensity of color and assertiveness. Love for detail was replaced by courageous summary and abstraction.

In 1919 Hesse wrote "*Klingsor's Last Summer*", another book about a painter. In it he wrote:

"The forms of nature, their top and bottom, their boldness and delicacy, could be re-arranged. One was able to relinquish the simple-minded means with which nature was merely imitated. One could also fake the colors, certainly intensify them, weaken them or translate them in hundreds of ways. But if one wanted to poetize in color a part of nature, it became a challenge to precisely capture the tension between various components in nature. Here the painter remained captive, here one remained being a naturalist, even if one used orange instead of grey, and rose-madder instead of black."

A leading figure in the *Klingsor* story alluded to Hesse's Swiss painter friend Louis Moilliet who was given the telling name "Louis the Cruel", and who in turn was friends with known artists like Paul Klee, Kandinsky and August Macke. Moilliet's images and those of August Macke of that same period are — if you prefer to classify and compare them in terms of art history — the closest in their luminous style to what Hesse hoped to accomplish.

But in addition to the group of artists called "The Blue Rider", Hesse also entertained contacts with a second school of artists, which likewise prepared the way for a new style of expressionist painting and was referred to as "The Bridge" (Die Brücke). Another important expressionist painter of Switzerland was Cuno Amie who also had become a close friend of Hesse and moreover the teacher and foster-father of Hesse's son Bruno — later a painter himself.

You might wonder: did Hesse feel comfortable in the company of these professionals, did he see himself — at this stage — as a hobby painter and dilettante? Again he confessed: "What happened is that I would not have survived at all, if not - in the most difficult phase of my life — my first attempts to paint had been my consolation and my rescue." Modest as he was, he continued to refer to himself as an amateur. In September 1917 he wrote his Bavarian painter friend Otto Blümel with a portion of self-irony: "Being almost 40 years old, I have started for the first time in my life to draw and paint watercolors. I am only lucky that you don't see my works, you wouldn't be able to help bursting out laughing."

And ten years later — when he had made much progress as an artist — he still emphasized „I am not a very good painter. I am a dilettante, but there is no single person in this wide valley who knows, loves and cherishes the passing of the seasons, of the days and hours, the folds of the landscape, the shapes of the banks, the winding trails in the green the way I do and who carries them in his heart and lives within them."

The press in those days often pounced on Hesse's sober self-assessment and used it against him. And yet they had to admit that among the 2000 watercolors — with which he glorified the scenery of his adopted homeland Switzerland — there were at least a few hundred which turned out so well that the unmistakable character of this landscape was expressed just as impressively as was accomplished in Hesse's writing. In these images we can visualize the valleys and their lakes in the Ticino valley south of the Alpine Gotthard range and that they were observed with similar eyes as those of van Gogh or Cézanne. This is because the impulse to track down the quintessential character of such a landscape is shared by Hesse.

Hesse's writing inspired us in a similar way. The desire to preserve and render characteristic moments captured from everchanging nature and thus take delight in images or scenes is characteristic for Hesse's writing as well. Hesse described the painting of his „small expressionistic watercolors, bright and colorful, very liberal in the interpretation of nature, yet being painstakingly observed", they have become a kind of active contemplation, a productive form of taking a break from time.

One cannot not help noticing in Hesse's painting the close interrelationship between colors and music when compared to similarities in his lyrics and prose. "You will see", he wrote January 1920 on the occasion of his first exhibition in the Kunsthalle of Basle, "that there is no discrepancy between my painting and my poetry, that here too I pursue not naturalistic, but poetic truth."

The concept of "poetic truth" and the Romantic merging of the arts was not everyone's cup of tea, certainly in more modern times. But absurd as it may appear, Hesse's paintings were not less controversial in much earlier periods than late. That is prior to and until the thirties.

To give you an example: in 1928 in Winterthur Switzerland Hesse mounted a combined exhibition of his paintings with the works of the early expressionistic watercolorist Emil Nolde. A newspaper offered the following comments, I quote from the review: "It might be best to simply ignore the ridiculous trash of Emil Nolde, but someone should tell this man that we are not bluffed by his brutal graffiti." And with regard to Hesse the same reviewer wrote: "Even if Hesse's literary work were not better than his paintings, one could feel sorry for him. One may want to hang his small southerly exploits on a wall and — with the help of small picture frames — manage to develop some colorful effects. [...] But even we ourselves have been doing something like that for a long time, and our students in secondary school art classes produce creations like this poet-painter by the dozens."

Undoubtedly however, Hermann Hesse as an artist had keen eyes. The intensity of his written descriptions of nature displayed a great plasticity so that the well-known journalist, satirist and writer Kurt Tucholsky put it this way: "often while reading [Hesse] one's heart experiences both passion — and coolness and peace at the same time", And Tucholsky's reaction applied to Hesse's paintings as well.

Hesse hardly took a step outside without observing scenes that needed to be caught instantly, because "the music of their colors, the play of tones, the progression of brightness and shadows stays not the same from one moment to the next." Hesse used the clarity of the Alpine foehn winds "to distinctly make out the windows of a distant village." He was present when at high noon the blazing sun illuminated the view of distant clusters of alpine houses of a village in such a way that the colors "contrasted with and enhanced each other in a grandiose way." Hesse's art contained the essence of all the skills he acquired in twenty years of direct close and careful observation and yet they maintained their charm of being simple and innocent, almost childlike.

“Spirit rules, which heals all maladies  
 Green rises from a nascent spring  
 New and wise the world is shared  
 The heart rejoices and is bright.”

We must admit that Hesse’s literary forms of expression are more widely honed than his pictorial, but his characteristic optimism and cheer — which in his books often shows only after lengthy and crisis-laden events — becomes more directly obvious in his watercolors. They became music in the form of images. It did not come as a surprise that Hesse’s art was occasionally characterized by his critics as “dream weaving”. Certainly all his writings as well as his watercolors exhibit an element of dreamlike ideals. They are defenseless in their tidy-minded peacefulness facing our world which is industrialized, split in conflicts and armed to the teeth. He juxtaposes to this an imaginary world with a plus in confidence and glorious life quality, the power of the sun over the clouds.

This skill in painting and writing he shared with many other well-known literary figures of roughly the same period, such as Goethe, Moerike, Gottfried Keller, E.T.A. Hoffmann, Stifter, Ringelnatz, Ernst Penzoldt, Henry Miller, Peter Weiss among many others. Hesse wanted to see his painting as adding a plus to the quality of life. This became apparent even in small ways — for example in his written response to one of the many thousand letters he received from his readers. In July 1930 he wrote to a troubled female student in Duisburg: “In response to your greetings I send you a little picture which I painted recently. Painting for me is a form of relaxation and rest. The picture is to show you that even in a difficult and problematic life the innocence of nature, the interplay of a few colors can in a few hours help us to regain hope and freedom.”

Now, if one accepts the close interplay of poetic and pictorial expression, one may be tempted to combine both elements simultaneously in writing and eventually in print. If we go back to the time of the first world war and the suggestions of Dr. Lang, we see that Hesse for the first time attempted illustrating a publication, the fairy-tale “*Der schwere Weg*” [The difficult path]). At that time his skill at the craft was, as we noted before, still in its infancy.

Later when — with increasing age — it had become difficult for him to go on painting excursions, Hesse was forced to borrow earlier motifs from his own amassed collection in order to create the small watercolors with which he often adorned letters and handwritten poems. That is to say: he reduced existing themes and thereby spared out all unnecessary details in order to emphasize the essential. This completed another circle: his early as well as his late pictures originated in his study at home.

The painter in Hesse's "*Klingsor's Last Summer*" (1920) said: „The small palette of pure, unblended colors, full of the highest luminosity was my consolation, my arsenal, my prayer book and my canon which I aimed at death. With its help a thousand times I used magic and won the battle with stupid reality.”

Apparently he did well and lived to the ripe old age of 85. A few weeks before his death he replied to a public inquiry of the large newspaper "Die Welt" when it asked well-known German authors: Why do you write? His answer was typically laconic and roguish: "Because one cannot paint all day long."

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Now in conclusion a few words about the handmade copy by Hesse of the illustrated manuscript of his fairytale „*Piktor's Metamorphoses*" [Piktors Verwandlungen] which was written by Hesse's own hand in 1932 for Dr. Weitz and which visitors can inspect here in the exhibition at the National Library.

The fairytale about the transformations of the "man of paradise" Piktor is one of of a kind in the immense collection of left papers of Hesse, just like the much better-known "*The Little Prince*" [Der kleine Prinz] of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. It may interest you that both authors — the French and the German — were autodidacts and had begun to draw not until age 40. Both stories were illustrated by the authors themselves. Hesse's picture fairy-tale has not been translated into anywhere near as many languages and editions as the charming book about "*The Little Prince*". This is partly due to a less clearly defined theme and a more convoluted history of the publication of "*Piktor*". While Saint-Exupéry limited his artistic work to one book, Hesse had added two more illustrated texts prior to *Piktor* in 1920: his travel log "*Wandering*" [*Wanderung*] and the album: "*Poems of a Painter*" [*Gedichte des Malers*]. As opposed to "*Wandering*" — translated into English by James Wright in 1972 — and "*Poems of a Painter*" Hesse was not in a hurry to have "*Piktor's Transformations*" published. Part of the reason was that he dedicated the extra cash-income from his manuscripted copies — which in the meantime had become collectors' items — to the support of needy people like artist colleagues, emigrants, politically persecuted people, gifted students and eventually then for refugees from East Germany.

As of today, the illustrated German edition of "*Piktor's Metamorphoses*" has sold approximately 200.000 copies and has been translated into five different languages. The text-only edition of this fairy-tale became part of Hesse's printed works and thereby reached a worldwide distribution of beyond one million. Hesse's publisher Peter Suhrkamp prodded Hesse not until 1954 to allow a first facsimile edition of the illustrated handwritten work. Hesse added to that a postscript in which he stated that the book was written and illustrated more than 30 years ago ... and that it was dedicated to a woman he [then] loved. A few

years before his death in 1962 the small piece of 1922 also appeared in a special edition of his collected fairy-tales [*"Märchen"*].

The woman he loved was none other than Ruth Wenger (1897-1994), the young daughter of the Swiss author Lisa Wenger and a Swiss industrialist in July 1919. She became Hesse's second wife, a marriage that lasted only from 1924 until 1927. In the in the chapter "Carona Day" of *"Klingsor's Last Summer"* Hesse recalled how he met his bride during a visit to the Wengers' summer home in the Ticino village of Carona near his own residence in Montagnola:

"A bird is singing today, a fairytale bird who awakens the sleeping princesses and shakes the sense out of their heads. Today a flower blossoms which is blue and unfolds only once in its lifetime, — and whoever picks it has won eternal happiness."

When he met Ruth Wenger ( the sleeping princess), he became aware that with fate "it was always the same: one circumstance never came alone, there always were birds announcing it ahead of time, there were always clues and messengers ahead."

Piktör, the painter felt as if he were in a fairy-tale paradise which by its magic facilitated transmutations. " It embodies the multi-faceted colorful variations of life and of the freedom to change oneself at will. There the entire evolution is re-enacted in constant back and forth metamorphoses of minerals to plants, from plants to animals. As early as in his preceding fairy tale *"Childhood of the Magician"* there is talk of "how little there is in the world that is firm, stable and persistent! All forms of life experienced a constant change and longed for more change, waiting expectantly for dissolution and renewal."

Piktör is fascinated most of all by trees because some of them remind him of a special quality that he himself lacks. They combine the male and the female aspects of life, the dualism of Yin and Yang, the bipolarity of life described in Chinese thought. In one of these trees that had died the serpent of paradise lay in waiting. The serpent in this fairy-tale realizes — and uses — Piktör's longing and it advises him to enlist the help of a magic wishing stone to become one of these trees and fulfill his wish of suspending his continuous experience of change. He yields to the temptation, turns into a tree and is happy - until he realizes that he has foregone his ability to further experience metamorphoses, and with that realization he begins to age. Not until a girl appears who longs to be with this lonesome tree. It is not the snake, but a magic bird which brings her a magic wishing stone which enables her to save him, and thus redeems him and frees him from his fate. Piktör in turn is now complemented by her presence. One half finds the other and forms a whole, the loner is transformed and shares

his life again, and together these two return to the full experience of life and regain the freedom of paradise, they regain the unlimited ability to experience change.

What is new in this fairy-tale of Hermann Hesse which he wrote so soon after World-War I? It points to the seemingly fabulous "breaks" slumbering in our everyday lives which lead to change, that is metamorphosis. If they are held back by routine of habit they cannot unfold unless suffering or an independent spirit shocks and releases these powers and thereby accomplish what we may call a miracle.

In contrast to previous authors of literary fairy-tales, the results were often symbol-laden, intellectual "fairy tales" hard to comprehend without interpretative help. Hesse's fairy tales remain closely linked to present life experiences and are easier to remember. They are, of course still literary in origin as opposed to original folktales handed down by word of mouth, and yet they may not evoke as much a sense of artificiality and remoteness. Their wondrous, seemingly naïve childlike magic is not directed at children, however, but provide a meaningful alternative expression of the developmental and growth potential of man in all stages of life.

"Piktors" story was written three years after Hesse's first encounter with Ruth Wenger and it is his merriest and most optimistic tales. It was written at the high point of their love and shows some of the expectations he vested in this phase of his life. Two years later they were married. He described the little piece as an "East-West Fantasy which developed out of series of images, and which — for thoughtful people — contained a serious paraphrase about the secret of life, for more naïve people just a cheerful story." [in a letter of October 1922 to Anny Bodmer].

The practice of illustrating poetic narratives was not a new invention. It followed the many beautiful examples of illuminated handwritten manuscripts of Oriental Poets enhanced by colorful illustrations. Hesse was well acquainted with these. He confirmed this in his 1919 story of the painter Klingsor: "I paint crocodiles and starfish, dragons and purple snakes and everything as it grows, everything as it changes, full of longing to become man, full of longing to become a star, full of decay, full of God and yet of death." And these internal rhymes remind us of models from the Far East, for instance of Tuti Nameh's Indian "*Book of Parrots*" (Papageienbuch), which was preserved in an old Persian copy which is more than 500 years old. Just because of these rhymes, Hesse recommended to his friends to read his fairy-tale aloud because it would show its melodiousness only then.

The musicality inherent in all of Hesse's writings manages to convey themes not only in a conceptual fashion, but also in a sensory. This may well be one of the reasons why his writings became so popular in their unique way of combining ethics and aesthetics and the interplay of the arts.

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