

Ut Pictora Poesis
Hermann Hesse as a Poet and Painter

by

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Hermann Hesse stands in the international tradition of writers who are capable of expressing themselves in several arts. To be sure, he became famous first of all for his lyrical poetry and prose. However, his thought and language is thoroughly permeated from his earliest to his last works with a profound sense of music. Great artists possess the specific gift of shifting their creative power from one to another medium. Therefore, it seems to be quite natural that Hesse, when he had reached a stage in his self-development which necessitated both revitalization and enrichment of the art in which he had thus excelled, turned to painting as a means of the self expression he had not yet experienced.

"... one day I discovered an entirely new joy. Suddenly, at the age of forty, I began to paint. Not that I considered myself a painter or intended to become one. But painting is marvelous; it makes you happier and more patient. Afterwards you do not have black fingers as with writing, but red and blue ones." (I,56)

When Hesse began painting around 1917, he stood on the threshold of his most prolific period of creativity. This commenced with Demian and continued for more than a decade with such literary masterpieces as Klein und Wagner, Siddhartha, Kurgast up to Der Steppenwolf and beyond. The reason or, rather, inspiration for Hesse's first attempts at painting may have been his psychotherapy sessions with Dr. J.B.Lang which indeed took place during the same time. In keeping with thoughts of C.G.Jung whose student he was, Dr.Lang recommended to his patient among other creative activities especially painting as a form of self-expression through which integration and a renewed feeling of one's own value could be achieved. The poet confirms this idea in a letter of September 9, 1925, to Ina Seidel:

"... in fact I would have long since given up living if my first attempts at painting had not comforted and saved me during that most difficult time in my life." (II,120)

More important, however, than trying to establish a correlation between painting and regaining his inner equilibrium, is its influence

on Hesse's future writings. At first a few remarks concerning his development as a painter and his achievements in an art so closely related to music and poetry are in order. Though his reflections on the essence of music are articulate enough to surpass those of many experts, he considers them as nothing *but* "musical notes of a layman." With the same modesty he characterizes his painting: "I am not a very good painter, I am a dilettante." (III,12) This definitely does not apply to Hesse. Behind his miniature drawings as letterheads, the illustrations of his own poems and his watercolors in larger format one discovers, in the words of Georg Bodamer, "a genuine painter and draftsman, a magician with colors – in short an artist who masters the technique of watercoloring most brilliantly." (IV,133)

Talent for the fine arts is abundant in Hesse's family. It is reflected in the remarkable sketchbooks and oil paintings of Hesse's older sister, Adele, who received her artistic education with Sofie Heck (1859-1919), a well-known painter in Stuttgart. Furthermore, the artistic heritage reveals itself in Hesse's three sons: Bruno became a painter, Heiner a graphic artist, and Martin a photographer. It lives on in their children and grandchildren. As a visual person, Hesse had always cultivated his friendship with painters. In his early years in Basel he made the acquaintance of Max Bucherer; later he met Otto Blümel, Ernst Kraidolf and Albert Welti in whose house in Bern he lived from 1912 - 1919. He portrays his artist friend, Louis Moilliet, as "Louis the Gruesome" in his narrative, Klingsors letzter Sommer. Moilliet himself was a friend of Paul Klee and W.Kandinsky. It was he, too, who undertook together with August Macke that journey to Tunisia fraught with so many consequences for the future of modern painting. Moilliet also served Hesse as a link to *Der Blaue Reiter* and *Die Brücke*. Hesse's expressionist painter friend, Cuno Amiet, belonged to the latter.

However much Hesse appreciated August Macke as his favorite watercolorist – he would have never thought of imitating his style of painting nor would he adopt the more conservative tradition of the cartoonist Olaf Gulbransson or of other contemporaries such as Karl Hofer, Hans Purrmann, let alone Alfred Kubin, Ernst Morgenthaler or Gunter Böhmer. Certainly Hesse may have learned a great deal from the intensive exchange of thought and from the written correspondence among all these prominent painters. However, he acquired the technical skills of a painter, as those of a poet, in the first place as an autodidact with immense diligence and determination.

Among the inventory found after his death were piles of surplus Christmas cards for the prisoners of war he had officially been in charge of during World War I. Hesse, as an extremely economical and ecologically-minded person had used the empty space on the reverse side of the cards for practicing the techniques of design, perspective and contrast of colors within a painting. It must have been a long and laborious way before he finally developed that in which he had always excelled as a poet: his own painting style.

His early pictures derived their themes from architecture and landscapes. They were sketches in earth-colored hues, drawn with affec-

tionate pedantry with a series of tiny little strokes as the painter Veraguth in the novel Rosshalde (1914) would have done under the influence of Hans Thoma and other representatives of *Jugendstil*. After his personal crisis following the Great War, Hesse's care for the naturalistic detail cedes to a more vigorous self-confident palette, as if Hesse had been associated with the young generation in their revolt against late Impressionism and Naturalism of the collapsed German Empire and other monarchies. With his seismographic sensitivity for changes in politics and culture, he reacted accordingly through his artistic style. Hesse did not deem it necessary that everybody would tune into these fluctuations and would eulogize them. But in his understanding it was neither accidental nor due to the whim of certain individuals that within a few years Expressionism became of utmost importance all over Europe. He recognized it as an organic, historical development.

Hesse went through similar phases until he found that which he wanted to express in his individual style, namely "... *small expressionist aquarelles, very freely drawn from nature, but carefully studied in their specific forms. Everything should be rather bright and colorful.*" (III,104)

In Klingsor's Last Summer he speaks in connection with the painter's self-portrait of a *Farbenkonzert* (symphony of colors) and "a tapestry that in spite of its brilliant hues gives a sense of tranquillity and nobility." (V,211)

The tapestry-like, two-dimensional features are characteristic of many of Hesse's watercolors and are perfectly in harmony with the main motifs: Ticino landscapes, mountains, lakes, trees, flowers, houses, churches, villages; frequently he draws attention to a single object such as a chair with books, a winding staircase, a blooming magnolia – all of which seem to be simple, unpretentious things at first sight but radiant with symbolic meaning at a closer look. Seldom do we find animals or human figures. If so, as in the poet's illustrations accompanying his fairy tale Piktors Verwandlungen they appear to be integral parts of nature which surrounds them like an all-encompassing flower bed. (VI)

Hesse sometimes painted his watercolors in a more abstract, sometimes in a more realistic style. Their contours are asymmetrical and rhythmical, never very exactly measured. Even the windows of houses look like leaves of a tree which resemble each other but are mathematically never identical. Hesse's paintings convey predominantly a sense of harmony, order and concentration. In keeping with the pangs of an existence surviving two World Wars, they do not exclude disturbing, even demonic features as can be seen in the dismemberment of the "humanoid" (or clown) in the midst of naturalistic and abstract figures in the gaudy watercolor *Maskenball* of 1926 reminiscent of Picasso.

Contemplating one of Hesse's watercolors means never forgetting it as the quintessence of the *sujet* represented through it. For example, the graciously bent stem of a peach tree whose blossoms spread like

rosy foam across blue mountains in the background. It appears to be the transformation of Hesse's poem "Voll Blüten" into the medium of shapes and colors – *ut pictura poesis* in the truest sense of the word: "Voll Blüten steht der Pfirsichbaum/Nicht jede wird zur Frucht/Sie schimmern hell wie Rosenschaum/Durch Blau und Wolkenflucht" (Full of blossoms stands the peach tree, not every one becomes a fruit, they shimmer brightly like rose foam through blue and flight of clouds.) The first line of the following stanza "Wie Blüten gehen Gedanken auf" (Thoughts sprout like blossoms) hints at the existential truth behind the image – the symbol for which it stands in poetry and in painting. (VII,415) Above all, it is the *Magic der Farben* (magic of colors) in the poet's own words, which distinguishes every single painting as one of Hesse's unmistakable creations.

In his later years, he no longer emphasizes colorfulness and details in his drawings with India ink. He prefers playing with more restrained forms and colors and also knew by then how to incorporate his handwriting with the ease of a graphic artist, as in the illustration of his poem "Ein Traum" (A Dream) from the collection of Marlies Bodamer née Schiler. His rhythmical yet always readable lettering corresponds to the very motif of twilight expressed in dreamy blue shades.

Hesse as a painter took the extraction of solar energy seriously as Volker Michels points out in his brilliant essay. (VIII,31-42) Similar to collectors of light, heat and sun, the shining brilliance of Hesse's paintings stands in stark contrast to our "gloomy and overcrowded areas", and thus gives us at least "an inkling of summer, hope and joy of living." Precisely this was Hesse's intention.

By no means had he mastered the art of drawing and color mixture from the beginning. Only in the course of his extended experience with painting did he develop a theory of his own: "*The forms of nature*", he writes in a letter of September 14, 1919 to Frau Schädelin, "*their top and bottom, thickness and thinness can be shifted, subdued, transposed in a hundred possible ways. But if you want to transmogrify a piece of nature, it is indispensable that the new colors stand accurately, even most precisely in the same relationship and in the same tension to each other as they do in nature ...*" (III, 104)

During World War I, when funds for the care of prisoners of war became more scarce, Hesse began illustrating his manuscripts and typescripts of poems and offered them to admirers, collectors and patrons for purchase. With the proceeds he paid for numerous books and care packages sent to the prison camps. For one specimen of these handwritten poems he received at that time 250 Swiss francs; typewritten ones were 50 francs less. At the end of the war, Hesse still being a German citizen and financially almost exclusively dependent on his German publishers, became impoverished to such a degree that he had to maintain his family's livelihood in part through selling his paintings and those illustrated manuscripts. Later on, even until his old age, he used the earnings of his fine art for the support of needy colleagues and destitute people in general. He seldom sold one

of his many hundred watercolors of large format. With the countless miniatures as letterheads he delighted friends and correspondents.

Hesse's first book with reproductions of his own paintings was Gedichte des Malers published in 1920. It was followed in the same year by Wanderung: prose and poems with watercolors and drawings based on motifs of his hike from northern Switzerland across the Gotthard Pass into the southern Ticino and the surroundings of Locarno. Elf farbige Aquarelle aus dem Tessin and Zwölf farbige Bildtafeln (Twelve color plates) came out in 1955. The lover's fairy tale, Piktors Verwandlungen (Pictor's Metamorphoses) written and drawn in 1922 for his second wife, was sold or given away before 1954 only in manuscript form each with different pictures. It appeared in 1954 first as a facsimile edition, and the original version for Ruth née Wenger as an Insel pocketbook in 1975. (ix) In 1977, the centennial of Hesse's birth, two bibliophile volumes in large format entitled Hermann Hesse als Maler and Klingsors letzter Sommer were published by Orell Füssli in Zurich. They contain, besides texts, watercolors in their original size. Since 1976, a perennial calendar Mit Hesse durch das Jahr is published by the Suhrkamp Verlag as a pendant to the popular Goethe Calendar. Also available since 1977 are regular editions of Hesse wall-calendars in large format with watercolors, poems and prose. In recent years also Italian, French and Japanese publications of Hesse's paintings deserve special attention (xii).

The lasting value of Hesse's works as a painter was not fully recognized until the sixties. Since then, his fine art has been exhibited with ever increasing success in various European countries as well as in Japan and America. Accordingly, his paintings have been considerably reevaluated and are sold now by autograph dealers for more than a hundred times their original price.

As mentioned above, Hesse was several times his own book illustrator, but commissioned also Peter Weiss and Gunter Böhmer with illustrations. Once invited to Montagnola, G.Böhmer stayed forever in the Casa Camuzzi and became both Hesse's friend for life and most congenial illustrator, as can be gleaned from Volker Michels's edition Gunter Böhmer-Hermann Hesse. Dokumente einer Freundschaft (1988).

"As a poet I would not have made so much progress without painting." Hesse wrote in 1924 to his patron, the art collector Georg Reinhart in Winterthur. Painting had enabled him, as he points out, to take "a detached view of literature" (III,110) And much more. His increasingly differentiated – and also more conscious – treatment of color gradations, their *valeurs* finds its poetic expression in the structure and narratives such as Klein und Wagner and Klingsors letzter Sommer. Hesse's subtle knowledge of color symbolism serves him like an artistically handled spotlight with which to illuminate the course of the plot from outside and inside.

This phenomenon has been elucidated by Reso Karalashvili (1940-1989) in one of his last lecture-essays on Hesse under the spell of Goethe, "Taten des Lichts" (Feats of light). An entire chapter in Karalashvili's book on Hesses Romanwelt deals with the poet's "astonishing

capability of designing colorful landscapes of suggestive power." (XI,117-120) However, that which Hesse as a colorist achieved in his Klingsor novella, Karalashvili emphasizes, "goes beyond all possible limits." With a few brushstrokes Hesse succeeds in designing images through the medium of language which remain ineffaceably in the reader's memory: bluish mountain slopes with tiny white villages on the mountain crest, or red houses which look like jewels in the deep green of their gardens. In the same novella, more than 50 different shades of color occur; among them common ones like snow-white, gray-white, lilac, violet, dark blue and light blue, red, red-brown, light pink, dust-green etc. However, we also find colors which belong exclusively to the jargon of the professional painter such as cadmium and cobalt, rubiate, vermillion, Chinese blue, Neapolitan yellow and Veronese green.

It took him years, Karalashvili continues, before Hesse realized the "poetic value" and "way of functioning" of the numerous colors. On the one hand, the many designations of specific colors in the Klingsor novella contribute to livening up the dazzling images of a southern Ticino landscape in the summer. On the other hand, the individual colors have a particular function and are fraught with symbolic meanings closely related to the basic structure of the narrative.

Consider for instance red which, according to R.J.Humm, constitutes Hesse's favorite color. It signals first of all a connection to earth and eros, symbolizes the color of the pulsating blood and of fire. However, red is also symbolic of spiritual love, as the term "passion" with its reference to Jesus Christ's suffering suggests. Accordingly, Klingsor's style of painting is characterized as being "*lodernder Flammenstil*" (a style full of blazing flames) analogous to van Gogh's expressionism. Furthermore, red appears both as an *epitheton ornans* and a noun attribute characterizing the "*rote Königin der Gebirge*" (red Queen of the Mountains) who is Ruth Wenger. She was dressed all red, "*eine rote Flamme*", when she cut bread and served wine. This analogy to the Last Supper is a subtle reminder of Klingsor's "last" summer, his imminent death. It was on a hot day in "Karenö" (that is, Carona near Lugano) when Ruth had put on indeed a "*feuerrotes Kleid*" (a fire red robe), as Hesse reports to Louis Moilliet.

Similar examples of color symbolism can be found in the novella Klein und Wagner in which yellow dominates. The "Yellow" or "Blonde" one is the name of Klein's young mistress, Teresina. Yellow signifies also the hair color of the Great Mother as well as of Demian's and Goldmund's mother and many other female figures in Hesse's works.

One subtle observation of Karalashvili may have eluded most Hesse readers and researchers. For sure, Klein's suicidal death in the lake is depicted archetypically as a return into mother's womb. But it is accompanied by a vision in which all opposites, also of contrasting colors, dissolve in view of a "transparent dome of sound" in the midst of which God sits, "*a bright star, invisible from sheer brightness (...), the quintessence of light*" (v, 143) That which before – Feats of light! – had disintegrated into the different colors

of the rainbow is now being unified in the pure, undivided light of God. (XIII,283)

There is, in the final analysis, no discrepancy between Hesse's painting and writing, for in both closely related arts, Hesse was always concerned not with "naturalistic", but with "poetic truth." (III,106) Which truth, however?

A reflection on a possible answer of this intriguing question is given to us by Albert Schweitzer. In his chapter on "Poetic and Pictorial Music" as part of his book on J.S.Bach, he writes about the complexity of every artistic idea and claims that neither in painting, nor in music, nor in poetry is there such a thing as "absolute art". For in every artist dwells another who wishes to have his own say, the difference being that in one his activity is obtrusive, in another hardly noticeable. Therefore, Schweitzer seems to be close to a solution by stating that "*art in itself is neither painting nor poetry nor music but an act of creation in which all cooperate.*" (XIII,8)

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