

5-1990

Hesse and the Hippies: The Sociology of a Literary Phenomenon

James Joseph Black

Follow this and additional works at: http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/uhp_theses

Recommended Citation

Black, James Joseph, "Hesse and the Hippies: The Sociology of a Literary Phenomenon" (1990). *Honors Theses*. Paper 232.

This Dissertation/Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the University Honors Program at OpenSIUC. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of OpenSIUC. For more information, please contact opensiuc@lib.siu.edu.

Hesse and the Hippies: The Sociology of a Literary Phenomenon

James J. Black

May 7, 1990

University Honors Senior Thesis

With the Assistance of

Dr. Frederick Betz, German Department

When Hermann Hesse (1887-1962) was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1946, most American readers posed the puzzled question: "Who?" In the month following the award, the "New York Times Book Review" printed what amounts to a basic introduction to the author and his works. The article includes the remarkable statement that "altogether, it is safe to assume that out of a hundred educated Americans not more than one had ever heard of Hesse before last month. ...Only four of his novels have been translated into English: Gertrude and I (1915), Demian (1923), Steppenwolf (1929) and Death and the Lover* (1932), but they never became best-sellers, and they are now out of print." (1)

Despite America's almost complete ignorance of Hesse during the post-World War II period, the author at that time was riding the crest of his second great wave of popularity in Germany. The first had occurred

[* "*Death and the Lover*" is the original title of the first English translation of Hesse's "*Narziss und Goldmund*."]

directly after World War I. Both periods of Hesse's vogue in Germany took place under very similar social circumstances. As the noted Germanist Theodore Ziolkowski pointed out, these periods "reflected to the young people experiencing them the total collapse of past standards of value. Many young Germans in 1919 and 1945 rejected the order that had brought about, or permitted, two world wars." (2)

As the sting of World War II gradually wore off in Germany, so did Hesse's popularity in his homeland. So far, in fact, did his readership plunge that, as the Yale Germanist Jeffrey L. Sammons relates, "within a year of his death in August, 1962, his collected works were available in German bookstores at reduced prices, an annihilating commercial judgment, as German booksellers rarely mark down prices on anything, and least of all the works of a Nobel Prize winner recently deceased." (3)

While Hesse's readership in Germany fell off drastically, it began to skyrocket in the United States as Hesse was "discovered" by an entire generation of young Americans. Beginning around 1957, Hesse became the darling of what became known to many as the Hippie generation. A number of his works that previously had been unavailable in English were translated for the first time, and many of his famous novels, including

Narziss und Goldmund and Der Steppenwolf, were reissued in updated or completely new paperback translations.

The so-called Hesse cult was the subject of innumerable articles in major American magazines and newspapers throughout the 1960s and early 1970s. "The New Yorker," for example, ran a parody of Hesse's Siddhartha that could be understood only by people who had read the Hesse work, testimony to Hesse's tremendously large following in this country. (4)

While the younger generation was worshipping its new hero, however, the literary establishment was busy trying to find a way to get rid of this uninvited guest. As Ziolkowski put it: "Particularly the critics for the newspapers of the New York intellectual Establishment grew angry that an author, and a German-writing one at that, experienced such great success without their stamp of approval." (5)

This extraordinary situation placed literary critics and scholars in a very unfamiliar, and uncomfortable, reactionary role. In effect, the literary Establishment was reacting to the literary movement of the day rather than creating it. This rare challenge to their authority elicited an indignant attack on Hesse and his young fans from several critics and scholars.

As Rudolf Koester noted, "one person's guru is another person's charlatan. The exaggerated adoration (of the younger generation), which resembled a secular canonization, was for the Hesse-haters just what the doctor ordered, for it made a counterattack that much easier. As a result, the Hesse debate in the U.S. often broke down into an argument between hagiographs and iconoclasts, which generally produced more inflammation than illumination." (6)

Indeed, a number of respected scholars and journalists were relentless in their attacks on Hesse's intellect and art. In a review of three Hesse translations in "The New Yorker" magazine, the noted critic George Steiner said of Narcissus and Goldmund simply: "This is not literature; it is incense. ...Like prayer bells and beads, like pot and love-ins, Hesse seems to offer ecstasy and transcendence on the easy-payment plan." (7) The prominent critic D.J. Enright, writing in the "New York Review of Books," added condescendingly: "(Hesse) is the ideal second-order writer for the sort of serious-minded reader desirous to believe that he is grappling successfully with intellectual and artistic profundities of the first order." (8)

Sammons portrayed Hesse as a failed intellectual. "(It cannot) be

denied that he had talents as a writer. ...His intellectual powers, however, are another matter. Of course, there have been many important writers who did not think very clearly, but for Hesse intellectual matters are the substance and fabric of his writing; he is priestly about his ideas and culture, and he wrestled throughout his career with issues with which he was simply not intelligent enough to deal." (9)

Hesse himself, however, surely would have taken exception to Sammons' insulting statement on purely literary-theoretical grounds. In a letter to a reader, Hesse wrote perhaps the most authoritative analysis of his art. "...you are wrong to assume that I wanted to get across certain ideas or lessons to the reader there. That would mean the so-called 'meaning' or intellectual content of the story would have been the most important thing to me, that the story itself, its figures, colors, etc., was only means to an end, only decoration. That is a complete misinterpretation of the artist's work. For the artist, it is exactly the other way around: the visible, tangible, perceptible is much more important to him than everything intellectual." (10)

From the other end of the spectrum, Hesse fans did little to help their cause as they provided plenty of exaggerated and oversimplified

interpretations of their hero's work. Many young readers of Hesse construed his writings to endorse free love, the use of psychedelic drugs, and virtually anything else they found enticing. Writing in "The Psychedelic Review," for example, Timothy Leary and Ralph Metzner called Hesse "the master guide to the psychedelic experience and its application. Before your LSD session, read Siddhartha and Steppenwolf. The last part of Steppenwolf is a priceless manual." (11)

In his excellent overview of the Hesse phenomenon, "Saint Hesse Among the Hippies," Ziolkowski wrote: "If young American readers, in their enthusiasm, sometimes go too far in their sanctification of Hesse, it is equally certain that the sneering critics of the literary Establishment reveal little but their own provincialism in their failure to understand the forces that move the post-modern generation and the reasons for Hesse's appeal." (12) In this passage, Ziolkowski brings up perhaps the most important, and certainly the most interesting, issue in any discussion of the Hesse vogue in the United States of the 1960s, namely: Why did it happen? Ziolkowski, in the same article, proposes that the phenomenon was "less aesthetic than cultural," an idea that Ziolkowski uses to discredit the highbrow literary critics and their dismissal of Hesse as a

second-rate writer. He argues that "any discussion regarding Hesse's purely literary merits is irrelevant to the subject. ...anyone wishing to understand the phenomenon must be concerned not so much with what Hesse actually says in his works as with what his readers think or like to believe that he says." (13) This extraordinary idea is echoed by Egon Schwarz, another prominent Germanist, who wrote: "What is irrelevant is a literary scholarship that artificially isolates its subject from the world and refuses to study its connections with the life around it." (14)

The idea that the readers' perception of what Hesse said in his works is more important than what he actually meant to say is particularly applicable to the American Hesse cult of the 1960s and 1970s, as virtually all of Hesse's fans in the United States read him in translation. In effect, the Americans did not read Hesse's works, rather interpretations of Hesse's works. This circumstance served to separate author and reader even further than in cases where an author is read in the original. In light of this fact, it may be fruitful to examine some of the English translations of Hesse's most popular works in order to see how they might have influenced, or been influenced by, Hesse's remarkable popularity in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s.

Siddhartha, one of Hesse's most widely read books, was completed in 1922. The first English-language translation of the book was published by New Directions in 1951, well before the Hippie generation discovered its bard-to-be. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Siddhartha became one of the basic texts of the counter-culture movement. Its tale of a young man in search of enlightenment and spiritual fulfillment caught the fancy of many young people of this era who longed to break out of the typical cycle of school, college, job, etc., in order to seek the very things that the novel's main character found at the river's edge.

In the original, Siddhartha is quite possibly the most accessible of Hesse's major works, due in no small part to its extraordinarily simple, yet elegant, language. While it is unclear whether the simplicity of Hesse's language contributed greatly to the popularity of Siddhartha in Germany, the accessibility it provided undoubtedly played a major role in the book's remarkable success in the United States, where many young people were unwilling or unable to read texts of much complexity. As Steiner pointed out in a 1969 book review, "the young have read little and compared less. Stringency is not their forte." (15) In fact, Steiner notes in the same article that Hesse's books were in many cases the sole reading material of

a good portion of the Hippie community.

An analysis of the New Directions translation of Siddhartha indicates that the translator not only reproduced, but even expanded upon the linguistic simplicity that facilitated its popularity among young American readers. An example of the ways in which the English translation exceeds even Hesse's original in simplicity of language is the fact that numerous longer sentences from the original were broken down into shorter ones by the translator.

In a passage very near the end of the book, for example, Govinda bends down and kisses the forehead of the enlightened Siddhartha. Upon doing so, Govinda sees a flood of images appear where Siddhartha's face had been, which symbolizes the unity of all existence and supports the symbolism of the river, which has no beginning and no end. In the original, Hesse describes the series of images in a very long run-on sentence, which allows the reader to experience all of the various images without pause, as Govinda was to have experienced them. This device allowed Hesse to recreate the feeling of simultaneity that was vital to the symbolism in this scene. However, in the English translation, this passage is broken down into no fewer than eleven short sentences. Excerpts from the German

and English passages follow.

"Er sah das Gesicht eines Fisches, eines Karpfens, mit unendlich schmerzvoll geöffnetem Maule, eines sterbenden Fisches, mit brechenden Augen--er sah das Gesicht eines neugeborenen Kindes, rot und voll Falten, zum Weinen verzogen--er sah das Gesicht eines Mörders, sah ihn ein Messer in den Leib eines Menschen stechen--er sah, zur selben Sekunde, diesen Verbrecher gefesselt knien und sein Haupt vom Henker mit einem Schwertschlag abgeschlagen werden--er sah die Körper von Männern und Frauen nackt in Stellungen und Kämpfen rasender Liebe--, er sah Leichen ausgestreckt, still, kalt, leer--er sah Tierköpfe, von Ebern, von Krokodilen, von Elefanten, von Stieren, von Vögeln--er sah Götter, sah Krischna, sah Agni--, er sah alle diese Gestalten und Gesichter in tausend Beziehungen zueinander,..." (16)

"He saw the face of a fish, of a carp, with tremendous painfully opened mouth, a dying fish with dimmed eyes. He saw the face of a newly born child, red and full of wrinkles, ready to cry. He saw the face of a murderer, saw him plunge a knife into the body of a man; at the same moment he saw this criminal kneeling down, bound, and his head cut off by an executioner. He saw the naked bodies of men and women in the postures and transports

of passionate love. He saw corpses stretched out, still, cold, empty. He saw the heads of animals--boars, crocodiles, elephants, oxen, birds. He saw Krishna and Agni. He saw all these forms and faces in a thousand relationships to each other..." (17)

When one reads these passages, it becomes quite apparent that the translator considered simplicity of form to be more important than the very striking and clear effect of simultaneity that exists in the original. While this is just one of innumerable passages in which longer sentences were broken down into several shorter ones by the translator, this is perhaps the most obvious example of the translator's quite conscious effort to make her version of Siddhartha even more accessible than the original. Although her motivation for doing this is unclear (and for our purposes irrelevant), it seems very likely that the great simplicity of the language she used in Siddhartha contributed to the book's remarkable success in what basically was a non-reading population.

Narziss und Goldmund was completed by Hesse in 1930 and soon thereafter was translated into English under the title Death and the Lover. This translation was reissued by Peter Owen and Vision Press of England in 1959 under the title Narziss and Goldmund. This novel, like Siddhartha,

became one of the Hippies' basic texts. Its tale of the contrast between the intellectual Narziß and the artistic Goldmund, who sets out on a journey similar to that of Siddhartha, appealed in its sensuality and appreciation of nature to many young Americans in the 1960s and 1970s. This translation was the only one available during the first decade of the Hesse cult in the United States. In 1968, however, Farrar, Straus & Giroux issued a completely new translation under the title Narcissus and Goldmund, presumably in response to the great popularity of the earlier one. As such, this second translation can reasonably be viewed as a reaction to the Hesse phenomenon. Viewed in this light, it is interesting to note in what ways the 1968 translation differs from the 1959 one, and from the original, and to discuss what these differences might signify.

The most striking difference between the two translations is the change in the title. As was mentioned earlier, the original translation from the 1930s was entitled Death and the Lover. When this translation was reissued in 1959, it bore the title Narziss and Goldmund, which, in the new, 1968 version, became Narcissus and Goldmund. This steady progression from the somewhat cryptic "Death and the Lover" to the ever-more anglicized "Narcissus and Goldmund" may indicate a desire on

the part of the translator or publisher to make the novel seem more accessible to American readers. This progression can quite easily be viewed as a reaction to the Hesse phenomenon, as the translator or publisher attempted to capitalize on, and expand, the popularity of this novel in the United States.

In addition, an analysis of the translations provides another example of the way in which Hesse's already simple language was made even simpler in translation. The first translator of Narziss und Goldmund remained true to the original in most ways. However, the 1968 translator consistently simplified the text by breaking down innumerable longer sentences into several shorter ones. Chapter 10 contains a passage in which this simplification is extremely obvious. The very first sentence of the chapter in the original reads as follows:

"Wieder trieb das Eis die Flüsse hinab, wieder duftete es unter faulem Laub nach Veilchen, wieder lief Goldmund durch die bunten Jahreszeiten, trank mit unersättlichen Augen die Wälder, Berge und Wolken in sich ein, wanderte von Hof zu Hof, von Dorf zu Dorf, von Frau zu Frau, saß manchen kühlen Abend beklommen und mit Weh im Herzen zu Füßen eines Fensters, hinter dem Licht brannte und aus dessen rotem Schein ihm hold und

unerreichbar alles strahlte, was es an Glück, an Heimat, an Frieden auf Erden geben mochte." (18)

In the first translation, which, one must bear in mind, was written before the Hesse vogue in the United States, this passage was translated intact as one long sentence. It reads as follows.

"Once more the ice drove down the streams, and the violets thrust up through the earth, scenting the air where leaves had rotted, and Goldmund trudged again through the pied seasons, his senses drinking their fill of woodland, mountain, and cloud, as he strayed from village to village, castle to castle, wench to wench, sitting to rest in the cool of many evenings, sad at heart under lighted windows, where far off, in a gleam of candle-light, there shimmered clear, remote and unattainable, all that the night can show to vagrants of this world's comfort, happiness, and peace."
(19)

However, in the 1968 translation, this passage became three shorter, simpler sentences. The 1968 version reads as follows.

"Again ice was floating down the rivers, and a scent of violets rose from under the rotten leaves. Goldmund walked through the colorful seasons: his insatiable eyes drank in the forests, the mountains, the clouds; he

wandered from farm to farm, from village to village, from woman to woman. Many a cool evening he'd sit anguished, with aching heart, under a lighted window; from its rosy shimmer radiated all that was happiness and home and peace on earth, all that was lovely and unreachable for him."

(20)

Once again, it is quite apparent that the translator of the 1968 version made a concerted effort to simplify the text as far as possible. This passage certainly can be translated as one long sentence, as the earlier translator demonstrated. But it seems the 1968 translator, much like the translator of Siddhartha, placed more value on the accessibility of the work to a basically non-reading public than on loyalty to the original text. Unfortunately, this accessibility comes at the expense of Hesse's intended effect in this passage, which was that of a long, tiresome journey without the luxury of pauses. The insertion of periods in this passage, however, disrupts this image by providing readers with exactly that which Hesse intended to deny them, namely a place to catch their breath in the midst of this sentence. It seems quite possible that the translator of the 1968 version was motivated to simplify the text, regardless of the literary cost, by a desire to further popularize the novel. This sort of attitude

reinforces the idea that the Hesse phenomenon was "less aesthetic than cultural," (21) as the translator probably would have been unwilling to place accessibility ahead of literary accuracy if Hesse's popularity had been based primarily on the literary quality of his works.

The examples cited above of the various ways in which some of Hesse's translators were willing to alter his novels in order to make them more accessible to young Americans supports the idea that the social circumstances of the time, and not the purely literary aspects of Hesse's works, lay at the root of his phenomenal popularity in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s. Indeed, this seems to be Hesse's fate; both waves of popularity that he enjoyed in Germany occurred under social circumstances similar to those in the United States during Hesse's American heyday. Young Germans turned to Hesse for spiritual and moral support directly following disastrous wars and during times of social uncertainty and distress. Young Americans in the 1960s, too, were in need of such support as a result of the war in Vietnam, the civil rights movement, and various other issues that led them to question their society's basic standards of value.

Schwarz offers an insightful and accurate characterization of Hesse as

"an honest minor writer who may have something to say to young people as long as the social conditions of our societies lead to chauvinism, war, racial discrimination, and other dangerous prejudices, and that could be for a long time to come. ...If there had been no Hesse, the American dissidents would have had to invent one!" (22)

Hesse seemed to remain oblivious to most of the debate about the true nature of his art, and he consistently refused to engage in much discussion of the "correct" interpretation of his writings. Indeed, as Hesse said, "the writer's books need be neither explained nor defended. They are exceedingly patient and can wait, and if they are worth something, they will usually live longer than all those who are arguing about them." (23)

Endnotes

1. Alfred Werner, "Nobel Prize Winner," New York Times Book Review, Dec. 8, 1946, p. 6.
2. Theodore Ziolkowski, "Saint Hesse among the Hippies," American-German Review, V.35, No.2, 1969, p. 20.
3. Jeffrey L. Sammons, "Notes on the Germanization of American Youth," Yale Review, Spring 1970, p. 348.
4. Roger Angell, "Sad Arthur," The New Yorker, March 14, 1970, pp. 33-35.
5. Ziolkowski, "Hermann Hesse in den USA," in Hermann Hesse Heute, edited by Adrian Hsia, (Bonn: Bouvier, 1980) p. 12.
6. Rudolf Koester, "USA," in Hermann Hesses Weltweite Wirkung, edited by Martin Pfeifer, (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1977) pp. 164-165.
7. George Steiner, "Eastward Ho!" The New Yorker, Jan. 18, 1969, pp. 93, 96.
8. D. J. Enright, "Hesse vs. Hesse," New York Review of Books, Sept. 12, 1968, pp. 10-14.
9. Sammons, p. 349.

19.

10. Volker Michels, ed., Hermann Hesse: Gesammelte Briefe, Vierter Band 1949-1962 (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1986) p. 361.

11. Timothy Leary and Ralph Metzner, "Hermann Hesse: Poet of the Interior Journey," The Psychedelic Review, Fall 1963, p. 181.

12. Ziolkowski, American-German Review, p. 23.

13. Ibid, p.20.

14. Egon Schwarz, "Hermann Hesse, the American Youth Movement, and Problems of Literary Evaluation," PMLA, V.85, No.5, Oct. 1970, p. 987.

15. Steiner, p. 96.

16. Hermann Hesse, Siddhartha (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1953) pp. 119-120.

17. Hermann Hesse, Siddhartha, translated by Hilda Rosner (New York: New Directions, 1951) p. 150.

18. Hermann Hesse, Narziss und Goldmund (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp Taschenbuch Verlag, 1957) p. 147.

19. Hermann Hesse, Narziss und Goldmund, translated by Geoffrey Dunlop (London: Peter Owen and Vision Press, 1959) p. 134.

20.

20. Hermann Hesse, Narcissus and Goldmund, translated by Ursule Molinaro
(New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1968) p. 148.

21. Ziolkowski, American-German Review, p. 20.

22. Schwarz, p. 985.

23. Koester, pp. 166-167.

Note to Dr. Betz:

As is clear from the endnotes, a number of the excerpts and quotes included in this paper originally appeared in German. The translations are mine. So that you can judge whether these passages have been accurately rendered into English, I am listing the original German versions below. The number preceding each passage refers to the citation number of the same excerpt in the endnotes.

5. Ziolkowski: "Vor allem die Kritiker für die Zeitschriften des New Yorker intellektuellen Establishments ärgerten sich, daß ein Schriftsteller, zumal ein deutschschreibender, ohne ihr Gutachten einen so großen Erfolg erlebte."

6. Koester: "...was dem einen sein Guru, ist dem andern sein Scharlatan. Die übertriebene Verehrung, die einer säkularen Heiligsprechung entsprach, kam den Hesse-Verächtern wie gerufen; denn sie erleichterte eine Gegenreaktion. Folglich artete die Hesse-Diskussion in den USA nicht selten zu einer Auseinandersetzung zwischen Hagiographen und Ikonoklasten aus, wobei meist mehr Erhitzung als Erhellung erzeugt wurde."

2.

10. Hesse: "Doch irren Sie, wenn Sie annehmen, ich habe da dem Leser gewisse Gedanken oder Lehren mitteilen wollen. Das würde bedeuten: der sogenannte "Sinn" oder gedankliche Inhalt der Erzählung sei mir das Wichtigste daran gewesen, die Erzählung selbst, ihre Gestalten, Farben usw. nur Mittel zum Zweck, nur Einkleidung. Das ist eine vollkommene Verkennung der künstlerischen Arbeit. Es verhält sich für den Künstler genau umgekehrt; das Sichtbare, Tastbare, Fühlbare ist ihm sehr viel wichtiger als alles Gedankliche."

23. Hesse in Koester: "Die Bücher der Dichter bedürfen weder der Erklärung noch der Verteidigung, sie sind überaus geduldig und können warten, und wenn sie etwas wert sind, dann leben sie meistens länger als alle die, die über sie streiten."