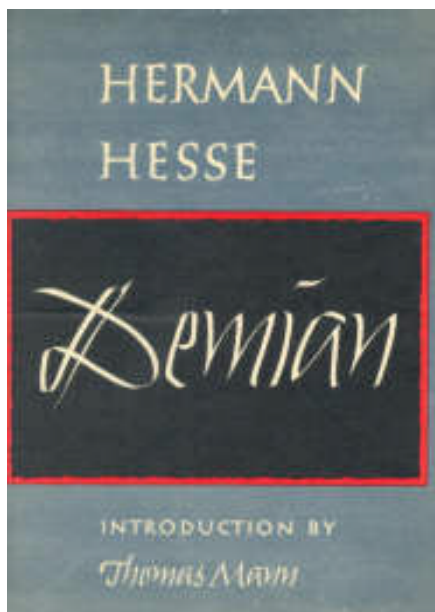


Demian

The Story of Emil Sinclair's Youth by Hermann Hesse

With an introduction by Thomas Mann



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Introduction

A full decade has passed since I last shook Hermann Hesse's hand. Indeed the time seems even longer, so much has happened meanwhile--so much has happened in the world of history and, even amid the stress and uproar of this convulsive age, so much has come from the uninterrupted industry of our own hand. The outer events, in particular the inevitable ruin of unhappy Germany, both of us foresaw and both lived to witness--far removed from each other in space, so far that at times no communication was possible, yet always together, always in each other's thoughts. Our paths in general take clearly separate courses through the land of the spirit, at a formal distance one from the other. And yet in some sense the course is the same, in some sense we are indeed fellow pilgrims and brothers, or perhaps I should say, a shade less intimately, confreres; for I like to think of our relationship in the terms of the meeting between his Joseph Knecht and the Benedictine friar Jacobus in *Glasperlenspiel* which cannot take place without the "playful and prolonged ceremony of endless bowings like the salutations between two saints or princes of the church"--a half ironic ceremonial, Chinese in character, which Knecht greatly enjoys and of which, he remarks, Magister Ludi Thomas von der Trave was also past master.

Thus it is only natural that our names should be mentioned together from time to time, and even when this happens in the strangest of ways it is agreeable to us. A well-known elderly composer in Munich, obstinately German and bitterly angry, in a recent letter to America called us both,

Hesse and me, "wretches" because we do not believe that we Germans are the highest and noblest of peoples, "a canary among a flock of sparrows." The simile itself is peculiarly weak and fatuous quite apart from the ignorance, the incorrigible arrogance which it expresses and which one would think had brought misery enough to this ill-fated people. For my own part, I accept with resignation this verdict of the "German soul." Very likely in my own country I was nothing but a gray sparrow of the intellect among a flock of emotional Harz songsters, and so in 1933 they were heartily glad to be rid of me, though today they make a great show of being deeply injured because I do not return. But Hesse? What ignorance, what lack of culture, to banish this nightingale (for, true enough, he is no middle-class canary) from its German grove, this lyric poet whom Moerike would have embraced with emotion, who has produced from our language images of purest and most delicate form, who created from its songs and aphorisms of the most profound artistic insight--to call him a "wretch" who betrays his German heritage simply because he holds the idea separate from the form which so often debases it, because he tells the people from whom he sprang the truth which the most dreadful experiences still cannot make them understand, and because the misdeeds committed by this race in its self-absorption stirred his conscience.

If today, when national individualism lies dying, when no single problem can any longer be solved from a purely national point of view, when everything connected with the "fatherland" has become stifling provincialism and no spirit that does not represent the European tradition as a whole any

longer merits consideration, if today the genuinely national, the specifically popular, still has any value at all--and a picturesque value may it retain--then certainly the essential thing is, as always, not vociferous opinion but actual accomplishment. In Germany especially, those who were least content with things German were always the truest Germans. And who could fail to see that the educational labors alone of Hesse the man of letters--here I am leaving the creative writer completely out of account--the devoted universality of his activities as editor and collector, have a specifically German quality? The concept of "world literature," originated by Goethe, is most natural and native to him. One of his works, which has in fact appeared in America, "published in the public interest by authority of the Alien Property Custodian, 1945," bears just this title: "Library of World Literature"; and is proof of vast and enthusiastic reading, of especial familiarity with the temples of Eastern wisdom, and of a noble humanistic intimacy with the "most ancient and holy testimonials of the human spirit." Special studies of his are the essays on Francis of Assisi and on Boccaccio dated 1904, and his three papers on Dostoevski which he called Blick ins Chaos (Glance into Chaos). Editions of medieval stories, of novelle and tales by old Italian writers, Oriental fairy tales, Songs of the German Poets, new editions of Jean Paul, Novalis, and other German romantics bear his name. They represent labor, veneration, selection, editing, reissuing and the writing of informed prefaces--enough to fill the life of many an erudite man of letters. With Hesse it is mere superabundance of love (and energy!), an active hobby in addition to his personal, most extraordinarily personal, work--work which for

the many levels of thought it touches and its concern with the problems of the world and the self is without peer among his contemporaries.

Moreover, even as a poet he likes the role of editor and archivist, the game of masquerade behind the guise of one who "brings to light" other people's papers. The greatest example of this is the sublime work of his old age, *Glasperlenspiel*, drawn from all sources of human culture, both East and West, with its subtitle "Attempt at a Description of the Life of Magister Ludi Thomas Knecht, Together with Knecht's Posthumous Writings, Edited by Hermann Hesse." In reading it I very strongly felt (as I wrote to him at that time) how much the element of parody, the fiction and persiflage of a biography based upon learned conjectures, in short the verbal playfulness, help keep within limits this late work, with its dangerously advanced intellectuality, and contribute to its dramatic effectiveness.

German? Well, if that's the question, this late work together with all the earlier work is indeed German, German to an almost impossible degree, German in its blunt refusal to try to please the world, a refusal that in the end will be neutralized, whatever the old man may do, by world fame: for the simple reason that this is Germanic in the old, happy, free, and intellectual sense to which the name of Germany owes its best repute, to which it owes the sympathy of mankind. This chaste and daring work, full of fantasy and at the same time highly intellectual, is full of tradition, loyalty, memory, secrecy--without being in the least derivative. It raises the intimate and familiar to a new intellectual, yes, revolutionary level--revolutionary in no direct political or social sense but

rather in a psychic, poetical one: in genuine and honest fashion it is prophetic of the future, sensitive to the future. I do not know how else to describe the special, ambiguous, and unique charm it holds for me. It possesses the romantic timbre, the tenuousness, the complex, hypochondriacal humor of the German soul--organically and personally bound up with elements of a very different and far less emotional nature, elements of European criticism and of psychoanalysis. The relationship of this Swabian writer of lyrics and idyls to the erotological "depth psychology" of Vienna, as for example it is expressed in *Narziss und Goldmund*, a poetic novel unique in its purity and fascination, is a spiritual paradox of the most appealing kind. It is no less remarkable and characteristic than this author's attraction to the Jewish genius of Prague, Franz Kafka, whom he early called an "uncrowned king of German prose," and to whom he paid critical tribute at every opportunity --long before Kafka's name had become so fashionable in Paris and New York.

If he is "German," there is certainly nothing plain or homely about him. The electrifying influence exercised on a whole generation just after the First World War by *Demian*, from the pen of a certain mysterious Sinclair, is unforgettable. With uncanny accuracy this poetic work struck the nerve of the times and called forth grateful rapture from a whole youthful generation who believed that an interpreter of their innermost life had risen from their own midst--whereas it was a man already forty-two years old who gave them what they sought. And need it be stated that, as an experimental novel, *Steppenwolf* is no less daring than *Ulysses* and *The Counterfeiters*?

For me his lifework, with its roots in native German romanticism, for all its occasional strange individualism, its now humorously petulant and now mystically yearning estrangement from the world and the times, belongs to the highest and purest spiritual aspirations and labors of our epoch. Of the literary generation to which I belong I early chose him, who has now attained the biblical age, as the one nearest and dearest to me and I have followed his growth with a sympathy that sprang as much from our differences as from our similarities. The latter, however, have sometimes astounded me. He has written things--why should I not avow it?--such as *Badegast* and indeed much in *Glasperlenspiel*, especially the great introduction, which I read and feel "as though 'twere part of me."

I also love Hesse the man, his cheerfully thoughtful, roguishly kind ways, the beautiful, deep look of his, alas, ailing eyes, whose blue illuminates the sharp-cut face of an old Swabian peasant. It was only fourteen years ago that I first came to know him intimately when, suffering from the first shock of losing my country, my house and my hearth, I was often with him in his beautiful house and garden in the Ticino. How I envied him in those days!--not alone for his security in a free country, but most of all for the degree of hard-won spiritual freedom by which he surpassed me, for his philosophical detachment from all German politics. There was nothing more comforting, more healing in those confused days than his conversation.

For a decade and more I have been urging that his work be crowned with the Swedish world prize for literature. It would not have come too soon in his sixtieth year, and the

choice of a naturalized Swiss citizen would have been a witty way out at a time when Hitler (on account of Ossietzky) had forbidden the acceptance of the prize to all Germans forevermore. But there is much appropriateness in the honor now, too, when the seventy-year-old author has himself crowned his already rich work with something sublime, his great novel of education. This prize carries around the world a name that hitherto has not received proper attention in all countries and it could not fail to enhance the renown of this name in America as well, to arouse the interest of publishers and public. It is a delight for me to write a sympathetic foreword of warm commendation to this American edition of *Wemian*, the stirring prose-poem, written in his vigorous middle years. A small volume; but it is often books of small size that exert the greatest dynamic power--take for example *Werther*, to which, in regard to its effectiveness in Germany, *Demian* bears a distant resemblance. The author must have had a very lively sense of the suprapersonal validity of his creation as is proved by the intentional ambiguity of the subtitle "The Story of a Youth" which may be taken to apply to a whole young generation as well as to an individual. This feeling is demonstrated too by the fact that it was this particular book which Hesse did not wish to have appear over his own name which was already known and typed. Instead he had the pseudonym Sinclair--a name selected from the Hölderlin circle--printed on the jacket and for a long time carefully concealed his authorship. I wrote at that time to his publisher, who was also mine, S. Fischer in Berlin, and urgently asked him for particulars about this striking book and who "Sinclair" might be. The old man lied loyally: he had