

Editions SR
Volume 33

VENERATION AND REVOLT
Hermann Hesse and Swabian Pietism



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Wilfrid Laurier University Press



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Introduction

HERMAN HESSE: THE MISSIONARY'S SON

Despite all my rebelling ... I have nevertheless remained the missionary's son. —HERMANN HESSE, Christmas Eve, 1930¹

When I began reading Hermann Hesse's stories, poems, recollections, and letters, having read several of his novels years earlier, I was surprised to discover how frequently they deal with the history, people, and places of Hesse's native Swabia and Hesse's Pietist heritage. Like most North American readers with an interest in Hesse, I had been reared on images of the man as an icon of 1960s counterculture—a "pilgrim of crisis,"² a "rebel-seeker,"³ the "western man most in touch with the wisdom of the east."⁴ Nevertheless, Hesse, I came to realize, was intimately in touch with the religious and cultural traditions of Swabia and had a great deal to say about Pietism. The towns, the landscapes, the details of Hesse's personal biography, but also the broader religious and cultural history of Swabia, are omnipresent in Hesse's fiction and essays.

"I don't know what you mean," wrote Hesse to one of his readers in a letter of 1935,

when you speak of my "spiritual heritage." Probably you mean by that my earlier fascination with Indian [spirituality]. Yes—but before this "heritage" there was an earlier one, namely a childhood and youth in a pious Christian family; and if this Protestant-Pietist Christianity that I found there provoked rebellion in my youth, it nevertheless helped to shape and form who I am.⁵

In poring over Hesse's collected works, I found many such passages of debt, and so, in an effort to make the strange familiar—for Pietism was a religious tradition I knew little about—I began reading through the vast secondary literature on Hesse.

Biographies and criticism began to fill in and expand on what I had encountered in Hesse's letters and autobiographical works. Hesse was

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born into a Pietist family of missionaries and theologian-scholars. He grew up in Swabia, the Black Forest region of southwestern Germany, in what is now the province of Baden-Württemberg. I learned that from an early age Hesse was groomed to follow in the footsteps of his father, even more so his grandfather—the path of seminarian and theological student at the Maulbronn cloister school near his hometown of Calw and then on to Swabia’s famed Tübinger Stift. I read that Hesse struggled with family expectations and desires, dropping out of Maulbronn seminary when he was fourteen and subsequently suffering through a protracted adolescent identity crisis, and that he filled the void created by his rejection of the Pietist faith of his family with German Romanticism and the religion of art. Hesse vowed to become a “poet or nothing at all,” and his excursions through the texts of nineteenth-century Romantics, of Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, Freud, and Jung, and of the sacred texts of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism provided him with grist for the literary mill that would eventually in his being awarded the 1946 Nobel Prize in Literature.

My excursion into the world of Hesse scholarship taught me something else. Scholarly and popular interest in timely topics have influenced the reception and interpretation of Hesse’s works: Buddhism and the East, Romanticism and modernism, Nietzsche and psychoanalysis have been timely—Pietism has not. I found little in the secondary literature that shed light on Hesse’s many references to Pietism in his novels, letters, and essays. Where Pietism has drawn any attention at all, the discussion has been plagued by two limitations. First, the approach has remained narrowly biographical. The portrait painted of Pietism in the secondary literature on Hesse relies primarily on *Kindheit und Jugend vor Neunzehnhundert* (Childhood and Youth Before 1900), two volumes of family letters edited by Hesse’s wife and published after his death.⁶ The *Kindheit und Jugend* letters are of immense value in understanding Hesse’s childhood, his complex and difficult adolescence, family dynamics and desires, and the details of Hesse’s departure from Maulbronn seminary, which resulted in a bitter falling-out with his parents. But these letters are not necessarily the best—and certainly not the only—source from which to develop an understanding of Pietism. One searches in vain through the secondary literature on Hesse for any references to studies of Pietism. A lack of interest on the part of Hesse scholars to acquaint themselves with the reach of the Pietist tradition in Swabia has resulted in stereotypical portraits and little appreciation for how Hesse’s reflection on Pietism informs each of his major novels. This influence on Hesse is not limited to biography. A necessary step in understanding the place of Pietism in Hesse’s literature is to

broaden and deepen our conception of Pietism beyond the sphere of Hesse's family—that is, to do a better job of articulating literary contexts.

Swabia was Hesse's favourite narrative space:

Between Bremen and Nepal, between Vienna and Singapore I've seen many beautiful cities: cities on the sea and cities high in the mountains. And as a pilgrim I have taken a drink from many wells that later left in me the sweet poison of homesickness ... the most beautiful city of all that I know is Calw on the Nagold, a small, old, Swabian town in the Black Forest.⁷

A few Hesse scholars have noted that Hesse's memory of Swabia "continued to fascinate [him] until the end of his life."⁸ Hesse's literature springs from "deep Swabian roots;"⁹ it is permeated by the "regional spirit" of Swabia; it "shows his love for his native Swabia and Calw, his connection to Swabian air and land, with the spirit and idiom of Swabia."¹⁰ Nevertheless, such observations have not led critics into the world of Pietism, which is odd, given that no "German region had its spiritual tenor so deeply and permanently shaped by Pietism as did Württemberg."¹¹ As with place, so it is with Hesse's favourite era.

Theodore Ziolkowski comments, "The period ... 1750–1850 ... is the age in which Hesse, as he repeatedly stated, [felt] spiritually most at home."¹² Again, little consideration has been given to the fact that this era is very much the high point of Pietist influence in Swabia. Pietism was a cultural force and, as such, part of Hesse's cultural memory. The system of Latin and cloister schools that Hesse attended in his youth, and the Tübinger Stift, which in the eyes of his family he was destined for, became the central cultural institutions in Swabia. These schools were home to the Swabian Pietist "fathers"—Johann Albrecht Bengel, Friedrich Christoph Oetinger, and Philip Matthäus Hahn. Pietism was one of the roots of Romanticism, and influenced German music, philosophy, and literature. Bach, Kant, Goethe, Schleiermacher, Herder, Nietzsche, Hegel, Novalis, Hölderlin, Schiller, and Mörike, the last three of these Swabians, are among those influenced by Pietist circles. Swabia was fertile ground for a culture of poets and literati strongly influenced by the land's speculative, mystical, Pietist ethos. Studying the religious dimensions of Hesse's literature requires dealing with Pietism not just because Hesse was born into a Pietist family and in adolescence suffered a protracted religious and vocational crisis, but also because he was born into and strongly affected by the ethos and worldview of the Swabian literary tradition, and this tradition was greatly influenced by Pietism.

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The second major problem with Hesse criticism as it bears on the question of Pietism is that it has not been nearly dialogical enough. That Hesse rebelled against his Christian heritage, that his thinking and art owe a great deal to Asian religions, that Nietzsche and Goethe, both outspoken critics of Christianity, were important literary and philosophical influences, that Hesse was an advocate of the individual and repeatedly and consistently had harsh words for the church and organized religion—all this is well known and highlights Hesse's adversarial relationship to Christianity. There is, however, another side to this relationship, and what I found in the secondary literature—or rather, failed to find—became the impetus for this study. Hesse's experience and memory of Pietism remained a lasting influence. Far from simply rejecting it outright, Hesse struggled to come to terms with his Pietist heritage in a “back and forth between veneration and revolt,”¹³ and his literary works bear the marks of this struggle. To be sure, Hesse was no Pietist, but he realized that “despite all [his] rebelling” he “nevertheless remained the missionary's son”¹⁴—that is, he stood in a tradition, and owed that tradition a loyalty and a debt.

Hesse was born, raised, and educated in a Pietist culture—and this context is the basis for any thorough discussion of Hesse's literature. Hesse's emphasis on introspection and religious subjectivity; his autobiographical and confessional literary style; his ethic of self-will; his aesthetics and efforts to unify artistic and religious impulses; his conception of God; his implicit epistemology and anthropology; his moral and political views; the skepticism and cynicism with which he viewed bourgeois, *fin de siècle* German culture; his chiasm and utopianism; his pluralist, ecumenical outlook; his speculative mysticism; his criticism of church and state; his conception of a spiritual realm of immortal beings; his preoccupation with the themes of sin, grace, and guilt—all these aspects of Hesse's thought and style, embodied in his literary works, owe something to and are worked out in relation to Pietism and Protestant culture.

In Part I, I develop the cultural and biographical contexts that inform Hesse's lifelong reflection on Pietism. The remaining three sections follow the chronological appearance of Hesse's major novels. These are generally recognized as *Peter Camenzind* (1904), *Unterm Rad [Beneath the Wheel]* (1906), *Demian* (1919), *Siddhartha* (1922), *Der Steppenwolf* (1927), *Narziss und Goldmund* (1930), *Die Morgenlandfahrt [The Journey to the East]* (1932), and *Das Glasperlenspiel [The Glass Bead Game]* (1943). Where appropriate, I will draw on other works from Hesse's corpus—letters, essays, and short stories—as well as the secondary literature on Hesse.

I have divided my study of Hesse's novels into three parts. The title of

these sections suggests a developmental movement in Hesse's relationship to Pietism: "Setting Out," "Turning Back," and "Coming Home." Such a circular movement on Hesse's part was by no means neat and tidy. At the end of his life, Hesse had not achieved a complete rapprochement with the "faith of the fathers," but neither had he completely abandoned it in the wake of the Maulbronn affair. The course of any life typically belies harmonious, uncomplicated movement. Still, if we consider Hesse's corpus as a whole, his "back and forth" was not one of being stuck in the mud, lurching forward only to be pulled back in. If Pietism was an obstacle to be overcome, it was no less a fundamental condition and context of Hesse's thought, a fact that Hesse became increasingly cognizant of as he matured as a writer. Hesse's novels reveal his lifelong *Auseinandersetzung* with his Pietist heritage, but they also reveal an *Entwicklungsgeschichte*, a developmental story of flight, recovery, and return.

They also reveal a purpose and a hope. In a late letter to his cousin Wilhelm Gundert, Hesse discusses how both men received something of the spirit and character of their grandfather's generation, through their work formed and shaped that inheritance anew, and in so doing passed it on to the next generation—"the tradition will not end."¹⁵ If I imagine Hesse picking up this book—perhaps intrigued by the title—my hope is that he would conclude somebody has finally done justice to recognizing and pointing out the threads of Pietism woven into his fiction and his life.