

# literatur für leser

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Forever young?  
Unschuld und Erfahrung im Werk  
Hermann Hesses

Herausgegeben von Ingo Cornils

Mit Beiträgen von Maike Rettmann,  
Jon Hughes, Neale Cunningham,  
Sikander Singh, Mauro Ponzi



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## Hermann Hesse and the Butterflies – A Journey from Innocence to Experience and Back

In the *Tractat vom Steppenwolf*, the pamphlet which falls into the hands of Harry Haller after a night out drinking on the town, he reads, “Der Weg in die Unschuld, ins Unerschaffene, zu Gott führt nicht zurück, sondern vorwärts, nicht zum Wolf oder Kind, sondern immer weiter in die Schuld, immer tiefer in die Menschwerdung hinein.”<sup>1</sup> The spiritual journey from childhood innocence, through the experience of individuation and becoming fully human, back to a redemptive innocence, is known from Hesse’s ‘Three-Step Doctrine’ in his 1932 essay *Ein Stückchen Theologie*.<sup>2</sup> Here, Hesse introduces the idea of a process of human individuation comprising three stages of development: a stage of innocence; a stage of guiltiness, in which there is a knowledge of good and evil, which leads every serious, critical individual invariably to despair; and a final stage which ends either in downfall, or a breakthrough to grace, redemption, and faith.<sup>3</sup> In this latter state the ego has been subsumed into the true self.<sup>4</sup> In the *Tractat vom Steppenwolf* this notion is presented as follows:

Statt deine Welt zu verengen, deine Seele zu vereinfachen, wirst du immer mehr Welt, wirst schließlich die ganze Welt in deine schmerzlich erweiterte Seele aufnehmen müssen, um vielleicht einmal zum Ende, zur Ruhe zu kommen. Diesen Weg ist Buddha, ist jeder große Mensch gegangen, der eine wissend, der andre unbewußt, soweit ihm eben das Wagnis glückte.<sup>5</sup>

Innocence, it is often suggested, is characteristic of the child, the quality of being free from guilt, sin or moral wrong. Innocence is a state in which there is a lack of experience or knowledge. Experience, on the other hand, is gained from the process of doing and learning. The developmental process is then thought to stop as in the maxim ‘once experience is gained, innocence is lost’. In this paper I will argue that Hesse’s lifelong interest in butterflies, and its literary exploration, reflect a spiritual journey from innocence to experience and back.

### The sensory innocence of childhood

Hesse’s earliest memories, as related in *Hermann Lauscher*, include innocent, vivid sensory recollections of butterflies. In one passage, Hesse writes about his experiences in the meadows around the house Am Müllerweg 26 in Basel at the age of five:

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- 1 Hermann Hesse: *Sämtliche Werke. Der Steppenwolf. Narziß und Goldmund. Die Morgenlandfahrt*. Ed. by Volker Michels. Vol. 4. Frankfurt am Main 2001. 65. Subsequent references to the *Sämtliche Werke* will be cited as *SW*, volume and page number.
  - 2 *SW*: 12: 152-164.
  - 3 *Ibid.* 152.
  - 4 „Sein Ich ist ganz zum Selbst geworden.“ *Ibid.* 153.
  - 5 *SW* 4: 66.

Da waren helle Morgen, an denen ich, ins Gras gestreckt den Kopf auf den Händen, über das von Sonne flimmernde, gekräuselte Meer der Gräser hinwegschaute, in welchem rote Inseln von Mohn, blaue von Glockenblumen und lilafarbene von Schaumkraut lagen.<sup>6</sup>

This paradise was also alive with butterflies, flitting to and fro:

Darüber flatterten und reizten mich die blitzgelben Zitronenfalter, die zarten Bläulinge, die in einem kostbaren, gleichsam antiquarisch seltenen Schimmer aufleuchtenden Schiller- und Distelfalter, die schweren Flügel der Trauermäntel, das Edelwild der Segler und Schwalbenschwänze, der schwarzrote Admiral, der seltene, mit Ehrfurcht genannte Apollo. (MH: 227)

One cannot help but be impressed by the vivid immediacy and the sensory power of the writer's memory. In just one sentence Hesse is able to identify nine different species of butterflies. The text also reveals the childish intoxication of hunting and collecting butterflies. This act is both innocent, yet also unconsciously brutal, hinting at the darker side of experience to come. Hesse describes an amateurish attempt to catch the rare 'Apollo':

Aber nach der unberechenbaren und grausamen Art der Kinder beschlich ich bald das edle Tier und warf meinen Hut nach ihm. Er schaute um sich, stieg mit elegantem Schwunge auf und war allsogleich in der flirrend goldigen Sonnenluft verschwunden. (MH: 227)

The butterfly is able to evade the childish attempt to ensnare it, rising elegantly away, as if mocking the attention of the still young child.

Although Hesse recalls the exact names of the Lepidoptera at the time of writing in Tübingen in 1896, as a child, Hesse's interest in butterflies was purely innocent and free from any scientific rigour. "Irgendeine Art von wissenschaftlichem Interesse war in meinen Jagden und Sammlungen niemals." (MH: 227) The young Hesse adopted an impish and innocent approach to naming, and devised his own nicknames for the butterflies he encountered. In Basel, where Hesse spent part of his earliest childhood from 1881 to 1886, caterpillars and butterflies were known collectively as "Sommer-vöglein", or "Summervögli". Hesse, however, playfully coined his own good-natured names, "für viele erfand ich eigene Namen", which described their flight, anatomical form, or for the rabble of more common butterflies the derogatory term of 'lummoxes'. "Ein Art von rötlichen Fliegen nannte ich 'Zitterlinge', eine Gattung brauner 'Schnabler', und für den gesamten Pöbel der Weißlinge, Waldteufel und anderer wenig schöner und rarer Schmetterlinge hatte ich den verächtlichen Sammelnamen Tolpatsch." (MH: 227-8)

Once captured, the young Hesse, however, was unable to generate any real interest in the charnel house of lifeless specimens: "Für die gesammelte tote Beute hatte ich wenig Sorgfalt und habe es nie zu einer sauberen Sammlung gebracht." (MH: 228) The emphasis for the youthful Hesse seems to focus on the enchanted, delicate insect in the natural realm rather than a sterile, lifeless exhibit pinned to the mount in a collection.

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6 Hermann Hesse: *Meine Kindheit*. In: *Hermann Lauscher. SW 1: 227*. Subsequent references to *Meine Kindheit* in the SW will be cited as MH and page number in the text.

In 1907, Wilhelm Schussen, the Schwabian author,<sup>7</sup> recalls visiting Hesse in Gaienhofen and describes Hesse's continuing fascination with butterflies in what appears to be a return to innocence.

Ich erinnere mich auch noch, daß wir dort von Pflanzen und Schmetterlingen redeten, daß ich meine Begleitung mit dem Wiesenknopf (*Sanguisorba officinalis*) bekanntmachte, und daß sich Hesse in Schmetterlingsfragen als gewiegter Kenner offenbarte. ... Aber da lief dieser unbeschreibliche Hesse nun plötzlich auf eine Hecke zu, schwang seine Arme wie Flügel in der Luft und jagte so einen ganzen Schwarm fuchsroter Falter auf. ... Und es schien, als habe die Hecke Feuer gefangen, als nun eine ganze Wolke dieser roten Schmetterlinge über seinem Haupte durcheinander wirbelte.

"Das ist der Fuchs", sagte Hesse dann nach einer Weile, wie aus fremden Räumen zurückkehrend.<sup>8</sup>

In Schussen's portrayal of Hesse in 1907, the cloud of red butterflies seems to have the transformative power to transport him back to a state of magical innocence, in a reverse direction and away from the priority of experience in adult life.

### The torments of experience

*Das Nachtpfauenauge*, a biographical story set in Calw and written in 1911 by Hesse, demonstrates again the power of butterflies to resurrect a state of childhood innocence in which the primacy of sensory perception trumps the insistence of experience in adulthood:

Ich spüre etwas von dieser Leidenschaft noch jetzt manchmal, wenn ich besonders schöne Schmetterlinge sehe. Dann überfällt mich für Augenblicke wieder das namenlose, gierige Entzücken, das nur Kinder empfinden können und mit dem ich als Knabe meinen ersten Schwalbenschwanz beschlich.<sup>9</sup>

The fulcrum of the story, however, is the theft of the rare *Nachtpfauenauge* (emperor moth) from the room of the protagonist's school friend, Emil. The story takes a dark turn and the narrator, Heinrich Mohr, is subject to a transformative emotional process indicative of experience as life's teacher: initial feelings of joy and curiosity at the thought of seeing a specimen of the moth caught by Emil ("Als ich es hörte, empfand ich im ersten Augenblick nur die Freude, endlich das seltene Tier zu Gesicht zu bekommen, und eine brennende Neugierde darauf." DN: 17) soon alter and become characterized by envy ("Dann stellte sich freilich der Neid ein," DN: 17). Impatient to view the extraordinary moth, after dinner the narrator crosses the courtyard and knocks on the door of Emil's room in the neighbouring house. Finding no one at home, he pushes open the door, and notices the moth pinned and mounted on a setting board, "Da sahen mich die vier großen merkwürdigen Augen an, weit schöner und wunderlicher als auf der Abbildung," (DN: 18) The youth is then consumed and overwhelmed by a sudden desire to possess the object of his curiosity, even if it means committing theft and, therefore, a morally reprehensible act:

<sup>7</sup> Wilhelm Schussen (real name: Wilhelm Frick, 1874-1956) was author of the picaresque novel *Vinzenz Faulhaber* (1907).

<sup>8</sup> Aus Wilhelm Schussen: *Anekdote meines Lebens*. Ravensburg, 1953. Volker Michels: *Hermann Hesse in Augenzeugenberichten*. Frankfurt am Main 1991, 499.

<sup>9</sup> *SW 8*: 15. Subsequent references to *Das Nachtpfauenauge* in the *SW* will be cited as DN and page number in the text.

[...] bei ihrem Anblick fühlte ich eine so unwiderstehliche Begierde nach dem Besitz des herrlichen Tieres, daß ich unbedenklich den ersten Diebstahl meines Lebens beging, indem ich sachte an der Nadel zog und den Schmetterling, der schon trocken war und die Form nicht verlor, in der hohlen Hand aus der Kammer trug. (DN: 18)

### **Through this act the innocent child falls from grace.**

The insistency and torments of experience continue as the narrator of the story leaves Emil's room and descends the stairs. He hears the approach of the maid and he is immediately gripped by a bad conscience, he feels remorse about the theft, and, in the same instant, realizes that he is a villain and good-for nothing ("ein gemeiner Kerl" DN: 18). The experience is an acute lesson in what is morally wrong and what is morally right. The cascade of experiences continues as the narrator is then overtaken by the fear that his wrong-doing may be discovered ("zugleich befiel mich eine ganz schreckliche Angst vor der Entdeckung," DN: 18). He conceals the theft by shoving the hand in which he holds the moth into his jacket pocket. Standing at the foot of the stairs, heart racing, perspiration matting his brow, the narrator finds his own behavior beyond comprehension and he is astounded by what he has done ("und vor mir selbst erschrocken." DN: 18). At once he realizes that he must undo his misdeed by returning the insect to the place from which he took it. Despite his fear of meeting somebody and of discovery he hastens up the stairs and back into Emil's room. Retracting his hand from the pocket, he places the moth on to the table, and instinctively knows, before he even sees the specimen that it has been destroyed ("ehe ich ihn wieder sah, wußte ich das Unglück schon und war dem Weinen nah, denn das Nachpfaueauge war zerstört." DN: 19).

At this point in the story, two feelings are conflictingly fused in the narrator's mind whereby the morally wrong deed of theft is surpassed by the anguish felt at having destroyed the beautiful, rare insect ("Beinahe noch mehr als das Gefühl des Diebstahls peinigte mich nun der Anblick des schönen seltenen Tieres, das ich zerstört hatte." DN: 19). The youth is tormented by both culturally determined experiences of right and wrong as well as the destruction of the simple beauty embodied by the moth. Wracked by despair and self-laceration, the boy finally finds the courage to confess the theft to his mother in the evening, who, though initially shocked, is able to understand that for the youth the act of confession far outweighs any fear of punishment he might have to endure for his wrong-doing. Childish innocence has been disrupted by the experiential train of curiosity, envy, desire, theft, regret and confession. Would redemption also follow?

"Du mußt zum Emil hinübergehen", sagte sie bestimmt, "und es ihm selber sagen. Das ist das einzige, was du nun tun kannst, und ehe das nicht geschehen ist, kann ich dir nicht verzeihen. Du kannst ihm anbieten, daß er sich irgend etwas von deinen Sachen aussucht, als Ersatz, und du mußt ihn bitten, daß er dir verzeiht." (DN: 19)

The mother proposes confession, an exchange of possessions, and a petition for forgiveness in order to placate the victim and undo the act of theft. When the youth goes over to the neighbouring house to confess, Emil pre-empts him and tells him that someone has destroyed the specimen, either a thoroughly bad person ("ein

schlechter Kerl" DN: 19), or a bird or a cat. Emil leads the narrator back into his room, where the youth sees the unsuccessful attempt Emil has made to repair the moth. He then confesses and tries to explain how the events leading to the theft unfolded. Emil silences him abruptly, not by shouting but by whistling quietly through the teeth and says, "So so, also so einer bist du." (DN: 20) The downward spiral of tormenting experiences seems to take no end. There is no way back for the youth; the only way is forwards through the quagmire of painful experiences.

In a futile act of placation, the narrator offers his own butterfly collection by way of compensation, but Emil declines disdainfully: "Danke schön, ich kenne deine Sammlung schon. Man hat ja heut wieder sehen können, wie du mit Schmetterlingen umgehst." (DN: 20) All the efforts the protagonist has made to make good the theft and destruction of the rare moth remain unsuccessful. "Es war nichts zu machen, ich war und blieb ein Schuft, und Emil stand kühl in verächtlicher Gerechtigkeit vor mir wie die Weltordnung. Er schimpfte nicht einmal, er sah mich nur an und verachtete mich." (DN: 20) The youth comes to the painful conclusion for the first time that "man nichts wiedergutmachen kann, was einmal verdorben ist." (DN: 20) As a quasi-emanicipatory act in the realization that nothing in the experiential world can be made good in retrospect, and to free himself from despair, the youth then systematically destroys his own butterfly collection: "Und dann nahm ich die Schmetterlinge heraus, einen nach dem anderen, und drückte sie mit den Fingern zu Staub und Fetzen." (DN: 20)

### Return to redemptive innocence – literal and figurative equivalence

In further writings and poetry on Lepidoptera there is evidence that Hesse presents a literal (the world of innocence) and figurative (the world of experience) equilibrium which suggests a state of unity with the world and nature, not unlike the grace of the final stage of the transformative process described in his 'Three-Step Doctrine' in which the conflicts, torments and the problems of the world of experience are overcome.

In the essay *Zwischen Sommer und Herbst*, written in 1930, Hesse describes a visual memory of a late summer evening in Montagnola on which a moth strays into his room. "Er setzt sich, hell bestrahlt, auf dem grünen Glase nieder, schlägt die langen schmalen Flügel zusammen, zittert mit dünn befiederten Fühlern, und seine schwarzen kleinen Augen glänzen wie feuchte Pechtropfen."<sup>10</sup> In the intricate design and veins of the wings Hesse finds a metaphor for the natural seasonal transition from summer to autumn. "Über seine geschlossenen Flügel läuft eine vielfach geäderte zarte Zeichnung wie Marmor, da spielen alle matten, gebrochenen, gedämpften Farben, alle Braun und Grau, alle Farbtöne welkender Blätter durcheinander und klingen sammetweich."<sup>11</sup>

Hesse's description of the moth on this late summer evening is notable for the equivalence that is given to the natural object and the imaginative vision of the human observer. The metaphorical meaning is not over-privileged, although the language used

<sup>10</sup> SW 14: 160.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 160.

to describe the natural object does, of course, immerse us in the human realm. As human beings we respond to nature through sensory experience, which is then re-worked figuratively, often to the point where the metaphorical natural images become transformed, transcendent, and the real world is made to seem more meaningful. The literal is constituted by the actual sensory experience of nature and the figurative by the metaphorical transformation of the sensory experience.

In Hesse's later writings on Lepidoptera the literal and the figurative are balanced, which suggests conciliation between the world of innocence and the world of experience. Hesse's 1919 poem *Falter im Wein* is an example of immanent natural imagery in which equivalence is granted to both the literal and the figurative.

In meinen Becher mit Wein ist ein Falter geflogen,  
Trunken ergibt er sich seinem süßem Verderben,  
Rudert erlahmend im Naß und ist willig zu sterben;  
Endlich hat ihn mein Finger herausgezogen.

So ist mein Herz, von deinen Augen verblendet,  
Selig im duftenden Becher der Liebe versunken,  
Willig zu sterben, vom Wein deines Zaubers betrunken,  
Wenn nicht ein Wink deiner Hand mein Schicksal vollendet.<sup>12</sup>

The first verse is unreflective in its activity and represents recalled sensory experience. The last line suggests a sense of detached observation as if the finger had acted independently, yet remains a concrete, literal experience as it is rooted in a particular place and time. We experience the near drowning of the moth through Hesse's own eyes.

The second verse provides the figurative element to the poem. The association between wine and love is a frequently used one as is the simile between love and intoxication. Love, of course, is also indicative of innocence and of harmony between human beings. However, despite the figural reworking of the sensory experience, the verse is based closely on actual sensory experience and the poem is balanced in a way that the literal and figurative elements are held in a state of equilibrium in which neither aspect is privileged.

Hesse's 1904 poem *Der Schmetterling* provides us with a further example. The first and final verses are quoted here:

Mir war ein Weh geschehen,  
Und da ich durch die Felder ging,  
Da sah ich einen Schmetterling,  
Der war so weiß und dunkelrot,  
Im blauen Winde wehen.

Feldeinwärts ward getrieben  
Der weiß' und rote Schmetterling,  
Und da ich träumend weiterging,  
War mir vom Paradiese her  
Ein stiller Glanz geblieben.<sup>13</sup>

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**12** SW 10: 261-2.

**13** SW 10: 199.



The utterer of the poem finds amelioration of his pain through being in nature and in the sensory experience of the white and dark red butterfly. In the second verse he is touched by a shimmer of paradise, a sign of the divine and of unity with nature. Neither the literal nor the figurative is over-privileged.

To underline the point being made further, Hesse's 1927 *Blauer Schmetterling* demonstrates symmetry between literal sensory experience and figurative transformation, while retaining delicate equilibrium between both elements.

Flügel ein kleiner blauer  
Falter vom Wind geweht,  
Ein perlmutter Schauer,  
Glitzert, flimmert, vergeht.

So mit Augenblicksblinken,  
So im Vorüberwehn  
Sah ich das Glück mir winken,  
Glitzern, flimmern, vergehn.<sup>14</sup>

In the literal description of the butterfly and the figurative reworking of the butterfly in the simile of happiness (*Glück*), both are deemed transitory and thus cannot be possessed. Possession is characteristic of the world of experience and would ultimately lead to the destruction of these delicate objects and emotions, the very opposite of the possessor's intention.

## Conclusion

In the *Tractat vom Steppenwolf* Harry Haller learns that the road to redemptive innocence runs forwards. Similarly, despite fleeting returns to innocence when, for example, the sight of a butterfly may trigger a childhood memory, a person cannot return backwards to the world of idyllic innocence, but must journey forwards through the actual reality of the real world, and experience in full all its torments and problems. Only then is it even possible to enter a dimension of redemptive grace in which there can be unity with nature and thus a re-uniting with the world of innocence.

Hesse's prose and lyrical poetry on the theme of Lepidoptera provide evidence of the stages of the three-step spiritual journey Hesse described in *Ein Stückchen Theologie*. The idyllic world of innocence was documented by Hesse's childhood experiences of butterflies in Basel, while *Das Nachtpfauenauge* laid bare the loss of innocence and a journey into the destructive jealousy, selfishness and cold-heartedness of the world of experience. Finally, in Hesse's lyrical poetry on the theme of butterflies, we find verses finely balanced in equilibrium between literal (the world of innocence) and figurative (the world of experience) elements, which suggests an author who had found moments of harmony with the world, and a destination beyond.

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14 SW 10: 307-8.

