

literatur für leser

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38. Jahrgang

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



PETER LANG
EDITION

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literatur für leser

herausgegeben von:

Peer Review:

Verlag und

Anzeigenverwaltung:

Redaktion der

englischsprachigen Beiträge:

Redaktion der

deutschsprachigen Beiträge

Erscheinungsweise:

Bezugsbedingungen:

Keith Bullivant, Ingo Cornils, Carsten Jakobi, Bernhard Spies, Sabine Wilke
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4mal jährlich

März/Juni/September/Dezember

Jahresabonnement EUR 32,-; Jahresabonnement für Studenten EUR 22,-;

Einzelheft EUR 9,20. Alle Preise verstehen sich zuzüglich Porto und Verpackung.

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“Der Fluß des Geschehens”: Time and Experience in Hermann Hesse’s *Demian* and *Siddhartha*

The idea of “experience”, and the implications thereof for our development as human beings, was of central importance to the literary imagination of Hermann Hesse. This essay will explore the reasons for this, and provide a reading of two of Hesse’s most remarkable texts, *Demian. Die Geschichte von Emil Sinclairs Jugend* (1919) and *Siddhartha. Eine indische Dichtung* (1923), in the context both of contemporary discourses and intellectual trends and of the philosophical framework that underpins the texts. It will argue that a paradoxical but fruitful understanding of experience lies at the heart of the works, and of *Siddhartha* in particular. They present a case for the essential value of experience, which provides the structure to a chronological narrative and is the means through which we perceive the world, and at the same time make a philosophical case for its ultimate irrelevance.

Experience as a category of being, emerging from and simultaneously negating a state of “innocence”, was of course well established, at least in Western traditions, as part of the narrative of human life. According to the French historian Philippe Ariès, for example, the idea of childhood as a distinct phase emerged in the late medieval period, and with it a culture of childhood which placed the child at the centre of the nuclear family and invested great value in the notion of the child’s “innocence”, which was to be protected and celebrated.¹ From this period on, the Western cultural imagination has tended to view life as a process of inevitable transition from this state of innocence and “purity” to the knowledge, desires and eventual resignation that come with age. On the one hand, the influence of Christian theology is evident in depictions, for example in the work of Milton, and later Blake and many of the Romantics, of life and experience resulting in a “fall” from the grace of childhood into a state of sin. On the other hand, the intricacies of development and growth offered narrative literature a teleological structure that closely related to the emerging understanding of history as both a concept and a narrative practice. The *Bildungsroman*, of course, offers the clearest example of this, in which ideas of transformative “experience”, as well as of education and self-determination, are central. Tobias Boes observes, moreover, that the intention, after Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister*, was often to show the development of the individual in the light of the passage of historical time, and thus individual failings may reflect those of society as a whole.² In Hesse’s early work,

¹ See Philippe Ariès: *Centuries of Childhood*. New York 1962.

² “*Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* provides a literary response to the contemporary attempts to narrate history, and thus represents a major departure from the novels of previous eras. The English realists sought to clarify essentially timeless laws in their writings; Goethe’s new *Bildungsroman*, on the other hand, intends to relate the individual formation of its protagonist to the historical development of the era in which he moves.” Tobias Boes: “Apprenticeship of the Novel: The *Bildungsroman* and the Invention of History, ca. 1770-1820”. In: *Comparative Literature Studies*. 45 (2008), 3, pp. 269-288 (p. 274).

which is indebted to Romanticism and to the tradition of the *Bildungsroman*, experience is often presented in traumatic terms, as a process of “breaking down” rather than development. Hesse’s novel *Unterm Rad* (1906), which presents its protagonist’s short life in precisely such terms, is an obvious example. Childhood memories become painful reminders of the imperfection of the self in the present moment, but regressive attempts to return to a state of “innocence”, as in Hans’ abortive “second childhood” in a later chapter of *Unterm Rad*, are doomed to fail. Many of the early works, like Hesse’s later texts, focus on outsiders, aspirant artists and “seekers” of various kinds, who fall outside the expectations and social patterns of mainstream society. With the partial exception of Hesse’s debut novel, *Peter Camenzind* (1904), in which the protagonist finds a sense of stability in an eventual return to community, the characters in these texts seldom are able to make long-term, teleological sense of experience, which results in crisis rather than a sense of destination or completion. The result, in the literary fiction Hesse produced up to the War, is a state of constant dissatisfaction and disappointment, as reflected in recurrent motifs of unrequited love or unfulfilled potential. The sensitive individual seems doomed to remain in a state of conflict with himself and the wider world. In *Knulp* (1915), however, we glimpse the thematic concerns that were beginning to push Hesse towards narratives that might allow the perceived conflict between the individual and the world to be overcome, and a sense of unified self to be achieved despite exposure to the contingencies of historical time. The conclusion of *Knulp* sees the eponymous protagonist dying from tuberculosis, which seems to be a symptom of both his temperament and his restless existence. He seeks out the isolation of the forest near the home town in which he feels he can never belong, and imagines a dialogue with God about his wasted life. The outcome reflects both a fatalistic acceptance that things could not have been different, but also, optimistically, that his life and more importantly his *experiences* validate themselves. He has, we read, wandered, lived, and experienced in “God’s name”. This resolution grants a sort of retrospective value to lived experience and to suffering, but it is an insight granted only at the point at which experience ends, with the protagonist’s death. Although it would seem that *Knulp* discovers this for himself, it is presented via the aforementioned “dialogue” and it is unclear whether *Knulp* is able fully and consciously to embrace what he is “told”. As we will see, the novels which follow *Knulp* seem to recognise the problem with this conclusion, which lies not so much with the message but with the dogmatic way in which it is communicated via an authoritarian “God”.

It was not until after the catastrophic and traumatic collective experience of the First World War, and only through a period of considerable personal and artistic struggle, that Hesse was able to construct a narrative of a life in which *both* a form of perfect “innocence” *and* lived, historical “experience” receive validation. The two novels published in the years that followed the end of the War mark a turn away from the narrative style and approach with which he had established his name. *Demian*, which was published under the pseudonym Emil Sinclair in an attempt to facilitate this attempt at a literary rebirth, and *Siddhartha* eschew character-driven story and descriptive detail. By his own admission Hesse is no longer interested in “realism” and indeed in “reality” in its everyday sense: “Die Wirklichkeit ist das, womit man unter gar keinen Umständen anbeten und verehren darf, denn sie ist der Zufall, der Abfall

des Lebens.”³ There are of course thematic continuities between his earlier work and the postwar texts, most obviously in the focus on social “outsiders”. They were written and published at a time of Modernist experimentation with form and medium, and could also be said to reflect the same sense of “crisis” and yearning for change. Despite this, the two novels tend to be categorised mainly in terms of Hesse’s own development, marking a shift to his highly successful “middle” period, which also saw the publication of *Der Steppenwolf* (1927) and *Naziß und Goldmund* (1930). The explicit incorporation of philosophical ideas into both the form and content of his writing, particularly those emerging from the engagement with Buddhism and other Eastern belief systems, and with Jung’s theories, is distinctive and unusual. As a consequence the postwar texts stand out both from successful earlier novels with a more pronounced “Romantic” tendency and from the work of contemporaries with a clearer focus upon the social and political realities of the day. At the same time, Hesse’s shift in direction does not see him depart entirely from structures and devices that offered a degree of familiarity to readers.

Despite the very different settings of the respective texts, both *Demian* and *Siddhartha* employ an episodic narrative structure that gestures towards the tradition of the *Bildungsroman*. As such each documents the stages in a life – that of the narrator Emil Sinclair and that of Siddhartha – defined by constant restlessness, dissatisfaction and “seeking”. Through a series of encounters with figures of influence, a path towards authenticity and recognition of one’s true “self”, which is otherwise obscured by superficialities, is in both cases embarked upon. This structure, modelled around that of the path or journey, necessarily depends upon an understanding of time as an historical continuum. With the focus in each case upon youthful, questioning seekers, the texts can, at one level, be understood as a product of a generational “turn” that was very much of its day – the postwar period in which a younger generation began to question established truths and norms, political, social and cultural. “Generational” thinking of the sort that defined both avant-garde art movements such as Expressionism as well as aspects of popular culture through the 1920s, proceeded from an understanding of identity, history and time in terms of generational transitions, with 1918-19 representing precisely such a moment.⁴ The cultural emphasis upon “youth” in this period, which is in turn bound up with a symbolic rejection of the older, parental generation and its standards, reflects this. Indeed, it seems likely the positive reception of both *Demian* and *Siddhartha* (and indeed their ongoing popularity with a younger readership) has profited from the tendency. Both narratives commence with episodes in which the parental home, and implicitly also the values represented by the parents’ generation, are rejected.

Demian is set in the twilight years of German empire, and it is clearly not accidental that the older generation, with the exception of Max Demian’s mother Frau Eva, who seems to exist outside the parameters of society, is represented as lifeless and dull. Emil’s teachers and even his parents are distant, entirely undeveloped figures

3 From Hesse’s *Kurzgefaßter Lebenslauf* (1921). Quoted by Gunnar Decker: *Der Wanderer und sein Schatten. Hermann Hesse: Biographie*. Munich 2012, p. 316.

4 For more on the generational discourses of the postwar period see: Jon Hughes, “The (Re)generation Game: Discourses of Age and Renewal between Expressionism and the *Neue Sachlichkeit*”. In: *Aesthetics and Politics in Modern German Culture. Festschrift in Honour of Rhys W. Williams*. Ed. by Brigid Haines, Stephen Parker and Colin Riordan. Bern 2010, pp. 25-38.

in the narrative, with whom it is impossible to identify, and their world is one of tired, bourgeois solidity and comfort which is as restrictive as it is “safe”. The psychological break with this world (triggered by the secrets he chooses to keep from his parents, such as his “debt” to the bully Franz Kromer) is presented as traumatic yet necessary, a formative step in life’s journey:

Es war ein erster Riß in die Heiligkeit des Vaters, es war ein erster Schnitt in die Pfeiler, auf denen mein Kinderleben geruht hatte, und die jeder Mensch, ehe er er selbst werden kann, zerstört haben muß. Aus diesen Erlebnissen, die niemand sieht, besteht die innere, wesentliche Linie unsres Schicksals. Solch ein Schnitt und Riß wächst wieder zu, er wird verheilt und vergessen, in der geheimsten Kammer aber lebt und blutet er weiter.⁵

The language employed, with the references to destruction and to a wound that never fully heals, makes clear that the rejection of the world of the parents is painful.⁶ Yet it is equally clear that for the individual to realise his true self – a core theme in Hesse’s writing – it is an essential rite of passage. It is associated both with death and rebirth, the first in a series of moments in a life in which the individual consigns part of his previous self to the past:

Wanduhr und Tisch, Bibel und Spiegel, Bücherbord und Bilder an der Wand nahmen gleichsam Abschied von mir, ich mußte mit erfrierendem Herzen zusehen, wie meine Welt, wie mein gutes, glückliches Leben Vergangenheit wurde und sich von mir ablöste, und mußte spüren, wie ich mit neuen, saugenden Wurzeln draußen im Finstern und Fremden verankert und festgehalten war. Zum erstenmal kostete ich den Tod, und der Tod schmeckt bitter, denn er ist Geburt, ist Angst und Bangnis vor furchtbarer Neuerung. (*Demian*, p. 22)

This experience arrives almost by accident for Emil; it is not entirely willed and triggered less by a fearless desire to seek than by social fear. Indeed, throughout the narrative the narrator Emil frames the slow, painful development of a true “self” as a process that it is repeatedly facilitated by others, chief among whom is, of course, his friend Max Demian. As has been well documented, Hesse’s own experience of Jungian therapy under J. B. Lang, as well as an ongoing interest in the occult, played a role in the shaping of the characters and ideas in his postwar texts, and *Demian* in particular.⁷ The most obvious parallel here is in the idea of “individuation”. According to Jung, the development of the personality takes place through this difficult process which requires conflicting opposites in the psyche to be overcome, manifested for example in tensions within the ego between the public “persona” and the unconscious or unexpressed (“shadow”) psychic layers. Only through individuation can an integrated and healthy sense of self be achieved. Jung makes clear that it is only the exceptional few who are capable of this, with the majority preferring to remain within the confines of social expectation; he also views the process as an expedition or journey:

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- 5 Hermann Hesse: *Demian. Die Geschichte von Emil Sinclairs Jugend*. In Hermann Hesse: *Gesammelte Werke*. 12 vols, V. Frankfurt a.M 1970, pp. 7-163 (p. 21). Further references to *Demian* are from this edition and are parenthesised in the main text.
 - 6 There is a parallel in *Siddhartha*, when the protagonist’s son abandons him, likewise characterised in terms of a wound that will never fully heal (see below). In both cases the pain of separation is presented as necessary for growth to take place.
 - 7 See for example Decker (*Der Wanderer und sein Schatten*, p. 324) on the complicated but fruitful relationship between psychoanalysis and art for Hesse: „Jeder Künstler soll – hier folgt Hesse Dostojewski und Nietzsche, die es darin bereits zu Meisterschaft brachten – auch ein Psychologe sein, er muss die Atmosphäre erahnen, in der ein Mensch lebt, und das ihm selbst verborgen Geliebene erspüren.“

Die Unternehmung der Persönlichkeitsentwicklung ist in der Tat ein unpopuläres Wagnis, ein unsympathisches Abseits von der breiten Straße, eine eremitenhafte Eigenbrödlerei, wie es den Außenstehenden bedünken will. Kein Wunder, daß von jeher nur die Wenigen auf diese sonderbare Aventure verfallen sind. Wenn es allesamt Narren gewesen, so könnten wir sie [...] aus dem Blickfeld unseres Interesses entlassen. Unglücklicherweise aber sind die Persönlichkeiten in der Regel die legendären Helden der Menschheit, die Bewunderten, Geliebten, Angebeteten, die wahren Gottessöhne, deren Namen „nicht in Äonen untergehen“. Sie sind die echten Blüten und Früchte, die weiterzeugenden Samen des Menschheitsbaumes. Der Hinweis auf die historischen Persönlichkeiten erklärt hinlänglich, warum die Entwicklung zur Persönlichkeit ein Ideal, und warum der Vorwurf des Individualismus eine Beschimpfung ist. Die Größe der historischen Persönlichkeit hat niemals in ihrer unbedingten Unterwerfung an die Konvention, sondern im Gegenteil in ihrer erlösenden Freiheit von der Konvention bestanden. Sie ragten wie Berggipfel aus der Masse, die sich an kollektive Ängste, Überzeugungen, Gesetze und Methoden klammerte, hervor und wählten den eigenen Weg. Und immer kam es dem gewöhnlichen Menschen wunderlich vor, daß einer den gebahnten Wegen mit bekannten Zielen einen steilen und schmalen Pfad, der ins Unbekannte führt, vorziehen sollte. Deshalb hielt man immer dafür, daß ein solcher, wenn nicht wahnsinnig, so doch von einem Dämon oder Gott bewohnt sei; denn dieses Wunder, daß einer es anders tun könnte, als es die Menschheit seit jeher getan hat, konnte nur aus einer Begabung mit dämonischer Kraft oder göttlichem Geiste erklärt werden.⁸

Sinclair presents his early life in terms of conflict and polarisation, torn between, for example, two symbolic “worlds” that he characterises in terms of “light” (associated with familial bonds, domestic and bourgeois life, and predictable social rules) and “dark” (associated with sexuality, taboo-breaking, excess). Yet it takes the guidance of Demian, whose very name suggests the “dämonische Kraft” Jung alludes to, for him to begin to recognise that such dualistic thinking is misguided, as is evident in the proposition of a religion in which God *and* the Devil are equally venerated: “wir sollen *Alles* verehren und heilig halten, die ganze Welt, nicht bloß diese künstlich abgetrennte, offizielle Hälfte!” (*Demian*, p. 62). Sinclair eventually arrives, in a piercing moment of “Erkenntnis”, at consciousness of the process and the goal, if not of the way to achieve it: “Es gab keine, keine, keine Pflicht für erwachte Menschen als die eine: sich selber zu suchen, in sich fest zu werden, den eigenen Weg vorwärts zu tasten, einerlei wohin er führte.” (*Demian*, p. 126) In *Demian*, this search, or journey, begins with a recognition of one’s individuality or otherness – that one bears the “mark of Cain”, as Demian puts it – and aims towards the discovery of “das eigene Schicksal” (p. 127), which is not in itself an endpoint but a necessary precondition to an authentic existence.

The parallels to the dynamic of the story in *Siddhartha* are clear. That text also opens, in what in this case is a reference to the biography of the Buddha, with the central character’s decision to reject the world of his parents. Siddhartha’s father is a Brahmin priest whose life is to a large extent pre-determined by tradition and ritual. As Leroy R. Shaw observes, his is “a world of things as they have become, determined by the past and geared to the perpetual repetition of an unchanging way of life”.⁹ For Siddhartha, his decision to leave home is a conscious one, driven not by necessity but by a restless conviction that it is the only path to unity with one’s true or universal “self”, with the *Atman* of Hindu and Buddhist tradition:

8 C. G. Jung: “Vom Werden der Persönlichkeit”. In: C. G. Jung: *Gesammelte Werke*. Ed. by Lilly Jung-Merker and Elisabeth Rief. 19 vols, XVII. Olten 1972, pp. 191-211 (pp. 198-99).

9 Leroy R. Shaw: “Time and the Structure of Hermann Hesse’s *Siddhartha*”. In: *Symposium*. 11 (1957), 2, pp. 204-224 (p. 208).

Dorthin zu dringen, zum Ich, zu mir, zum Atman – gab es einen andern Weg, den zu suchen sich lohnte?
Ach, und niemand zeigte diesen Weg, niemand wußte ihn, nicht der Vater nicht die Lehrer und Weisen, nicht die heiligen Opfergesänge!¹⁰

Here, and throughout the narrative, Hesse employs a framework that would again seem to be Jungian, and which can also be read as part of Western cultural tradition – scholars have discerned parallels between Siddhartha's yearning and that of Faust, between his biography and that of Christian saints (particularly in the emphasis placed in the text upon love), and with the structural patterns of European "quest" novels.¹¹ Yet its status as an "indische Dichtung" is not merely token, as some have claimed, and in fact Jung's understanding of the unified self derived in part from his comparative reading of Eastern religions.¹² In Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism the true human "self" (or "soul"), Atman, is distinct from both conscious mind and body, but is an expression of Brahman, the ultimate reality in the universe, beyond our experience of time and space. "Self-knowledge" is therefore also knowledge of the true nature of the unity of all reality, but cannot be achieved by conscious reflection on reality as it is ordinarily perceived, a paradox that is at the heart of Eastern philosophies, and also central to the depiction of "experience" in *Siddhartha*.¹³ Siddhartha begins his journey, then, *not* in a state of "innocence" but of intellectual and spiritual "thirst" – he is likened to a vessel yearning to be filled (*Siddhartha*, p. 357). As with Emil Sinclair, the departure from the complacency and comfort of the home is the first "experience" in a path that, it is hoped, will lead to a fully conscious, integrated "self". Where the two narratives differ, however, is in the manner through which the path is revealed. Emil Sinclair shares the same restlessness of spirit as Siddhartha, but he is characterised throughout as a disciple, as a rather passive introvert (in Jungian terms) who only seems to make progress in his life under the influence of others. Max Demian functions as a contrast figure, a leader, a sage, and a model of someone who is at one with himself, even at an early age. Yet he remains wholly inaccessible and inscrutable within the first-person narrative, and indeed drops out of the story altogether for long periods, though he remains a mysterious, almost totemic presence in Sinclair's life.¹⁴ Siddhartha shares many of the same qualities as Demian, but instead occupies the focus in a text whose spare, third-person narrative mimics the narrative style of myths and legends. He is defined from the start both as a potential leader – the devotion he

10 Hermann Hesse: *Siddhartha. Eine indische Dichtung*. In: Hermann Hesse: *Gesammelte Werke*. 12 vols, V. Frankfurt a.M. 1970, pp. 353-471 (pp. 357-8). Further references to *Siddhartha* are from this edition and are parenthesised in the main text.

11 Robert Conrad has argued that *Siddhartha* fits a European "archetype" in its structure, drawing parallels with texts (*Moby Dick* and *Huckleberry Finn*) that are foundational in the canon of American literature. It is worth noting, as Conrad does not, that *Demian* also fits most of the categories of this archetype – it has a male protagonist, features a flight from society, a (symbolic) escape from death, adventure in isolation and, of course, a central male-male relationship. Robert Conrad: "Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha, eine indische Dichtung* as a Western Archetype". In: *German Quarterly*. 48 (1975), 3, pp. 358-69.

12 Decker, (*Der Wanderer und sein Schatten*, p. 417) notes Hesse's unhappiness with the contemporary reception the text received, which tended to ignore the "allgemeinmenschliche Parabel" and view *Siddhartha* as an example of Western exoticism rather than a serious engagement with Asia.

13 The idea of "unity" was of particular importance to Hesse, as Claude Manfredini observes. Claude Manfredini: "Hermann Hesse und das indische Denken". In: *Hermann Hesse und die Religion*. Ed. by Friedrich Bran and Martin Pfeifer. Bad Liebenzell 1990, pp. 105-116 (pp. 109-10).

14 In Jungian terms, Demian seems to function as a 'shadow', a sort of alter-ego or projection of the hidden sides to the narrator's personality. Demian's ability to read Sinclair's mind is one indication of this.

inspires in others, particularly his friend Govinda, is emphasised – and as someone who has the confidence truly to tread his “own” path. The latter is a motif of central importance in the text, for his insistence upon it means, for example, that he refuses to become the Buddha’s disciple for that would mean forfeiting the experiences of his own journey and submitting to the teachings prescribed by another:

Du hast die Erlösung vom Tode gefunden. Sie ist dir geworden aus deinem eigenen Suchen, auf deinem eigenen Wege, durch Gedanken, durch Versenkung, durch Erkenntnis, durch Erleuchtung. Nicht ist sie dir geworden durch Lehre! Und – so ist mein Gedanke, o Erhabener – keinem wird Erlösung zuteil durch Lehre! Keinem, o Ehrwürdiger, wirst du in Worten und durch Lehre mitteilen und sagen können, was dir geschehen ist in der Stunde deiner Erleuchtung! (*Siddhartha*, p. 381)

True insight and “awakening” is presented as something that remains fundamentally incommunicable, that can be discovered but not taught. Shaw observes that the Buddha has “found his place in the present and yet is still at home in Atman, is a reminder that the roots of the timeless are embedded in the experiences acted out within the world of time”.¹⁵ The result, paradoxically, is that the only way for Siddhartha to live according to the Buddha’s teaching is by choosing *not* to follow him, just as he eventually rejects all of the teachers he encounters, starting with his father.

Of course, the symbolic rejection of the teacher/father was highly resonant in the period of Expressionism and in the postwar decade in particular. Gunnar Decker observes that, as a motif, the rejection of all teachers “hat zweifellos mehr von Nietzsches Zarathustra an sich als von Buddha”.¹⁶ There were countless narratives of literal or metaphorical “Vatermord” in what the psychoanalyst Paul Federn, in his reading of what he saw as a positive breaking down of patriarchal authority, referred to in 1919 as “[d]ie vaterlose Gesellschaft”.¹⁷ The same period’s cult of “youth” was a clear secondary product of the conviction shared by many (young and old) that the old order in Germany had failed and that the catastrophe of the War represented an opportunity for renewal and the establishment not only of a possible new social and political structure but even of a new form of humanity. This apocalyptic-utopian “Menschheitsdämmerung”, to cite the title of Kurth Pinthus’ influential anthology of poetry of 1919, haunted the imagination in cultural products of the immediate postwar period, discernible in the poems in Pinthus’ collection, in plays by Toller, Kaiser and others, as well as in films and paintings throughout the early Weimar period. *Demian*, composed during the War, reflects this pattern of thought and the imaginary of the “neuer Mensch” very clearly. Imagining the future as “eine Neugeburt und ein Zusammenbruch des Jetzigen” (*Demian*, p. 144), *Demian* casts himself and other such outsiders as facilitators of the future who have the courage to be “schicksalsbereit” (*Demian*, p. 145). His rather dubious, Darwinistic vision of human history in evolutionary terms (“Man muß sich das immer biologisch und entwicklungsgeschichtlich denken!” [*Demian*, p. 145]) reflects the ideological currents, in particular the influence of Nietzsche, that shaped pre-War discourses of age, culture and history. The same period, of course, saw the emergence of youth movements, the recognition of “adolescence” by educational psychology, the embracing of physical culture and sports, and above all

15 Shaw: “Time and the Structure of Hermann Hesse’s *Siddhartha*”, p. 210.

16 Decker: *Der Wanderer und sein Schatten*, p. 395.

17 Paul Federn: *Zur Psychologie der Revolution. Die vaterlose Gesellschaft*. Leipzig 1919.

of a form of generational bonding, forged in the experience of war, that was unparalleled in its intensity. The result, Helga Karrenbock has argued, was an anchoring of identity in the collective, and in the present and/or imagined future, rather than the past, with which ties are symbolically cut: “Das offensive Generationsbewußtsein der Kriegsgeneration, ihr verlorenes Gedächtnis und ihre Hinwendung zur Gleichzeitigkeit sind auch Produkt dieses Generationserlebnisses”.¹⁸

Yet, despite the central importance of the rejection of authority as a motif, in neither *Siddhartha* nor *Demian* does “youth” itself seem to possess more intrinsic value than any other life stage, being defined less in terms of “innocence” than of incompleteness and ignorance, just as the complacency and ingrained habits characteristic of adulthood and old age are likewise problematic. Instead, the achievement of a sort of agelessness which is neither restless and “seeking” nor complacent and closed-off, is presented as an elusive ideal towards which the protagonists must strive. In *Siddhartha*, we first encounter this ideal in the shape of the Buddha himself; in *Demian* it is embodied by Max Demian and, in particular, his mother. In the former, in the chapter entitled “Gotama”, young Siddhartha encounters the Buddha, who has already established his reputation as a teacher and leader, as someone who has achieved enlightenment and transcended Samsara, the eternal cycle of death and rebirth that is a cornerstone of Hindu belief. He is described in terms that emphasise calmness and inwardness that are almost inhuman in their perfection. Despite the comparative reference to a healthy child, it is clearly *not* an evocation either of childhood innocence or youthful energy:

Der Buddha ging seines Weges bescheiden und in Gedanken versunken, sein stilles Gesicht war weder fröhlich noch traurig, es schien leise nach innen zu lächeln. Mit einem verborgenen Lächeln, still, ruhig, einem gesunden Kinde nicht unähnlich, wandelte der Buddha, trug das Gewand und setzte den Fuß gleich wie alle seine Mönche, nach genauer Vorschrift. Aber sein Gesicht und sein Schritt, sein still gesenkter Blick, seine still herabhängende Hand, und noch jeder Finger an seiner still herabhängenden Hand sprach Friede, sprach Vollkommenheit, suchte nicht, ahmte nicht nach, atmete sanft in einer unverwelklichen Ruhe, in einem unverwelklichen Licht, einem unantastbaren Frieden. (*Siddhartha*, p. 375)

The reference to the Buddha’s “hidden” smile relates to the ability to unite opposites, to be in motion whilst suggesting complete stasis, and anticipates Siddhartha’s achievement of a comparable state of perfection at the end of the novel:

Und, so sah Govinda, dies Lächeln der Maske, dies Lächeln der Einheit über den strömenden Gestaltungen, dies Lächeln der Gleichzeitigkeit über den tausend Geburten und Toden, dies Lächeln Siddharthas war genau dasselbe, war genau das gleiche, stille, feine, undurchdringliche, vielleicht gütige, vielleicht spöttische, weise, tausendfältige Lächeln Gotamas, des Buddhas. (*Siddhartha*, p. 470)

The accumulation here of the elusive qualities associated with the smile, and in particular the emphasis upon unity and simultaneity, is significant, and relates both to the associated motif of the river, and to the concepts of time and experience, to which we shall return. What is clear is that this is *not* the smile of age and experience but of someone who has overcome the personal altogether, who has perceived reality

18 Helga Karrenbock: “Die ‘Junge Generation’ der Zwanziger Jahre – oder: ‘Vom Angriff der Gegenwart auf die übrige Zeit’”. In: *Literatur und Kultur im Österreich der Zwanziger Jahre. Vorschläge zu einem transdisziplinären Epochenprofil*. Ed. by Primus-Heinz Kucker. Bielefeld 2007, pp. 103-18 (p. 107).

and approached *nirvana*, as Buddhist tradition would have it, or, in Jungian terms, has passed through the process of individuation and become one with the true self.

Max Demian is a more ambivalent figure, who in some ways embodies aspects of “youthful” rebelliousness. For example, he is willing to question the received truths, particularly religious, that are a standard part of the education system; and when Sinclair meets him again at university, after a period of years, he finds him practising boxing, an illegal sport in Wilhelmine Germany that was associated above all with Anglo-Saxon culture and values, and apparently embodying the physicality and, indeed, sexuality of youth: “Demian sah prachtvoll aus, die breite Brust, der fest männliche Kopf, die gehobenen Arme mit gestrafften Muskeln waren stark und tüchtig, die Bewegungen kamen aus Hüften, Schultern und Armgelenken hervor wie spielende Quellen.” (*Demian*, p. 141) Yet far more often the narrative emphasises that Demian seems older than he should, or else, significantly, embodies an ageless state that anticipates that to which Siddhartha strives:

Ich sah Demians Gesicht, und ich sah nicht nur, daß er kein Knabengesicht hatte, sondern das eines Mannes; ich sah noch mehr, ich glaubte zu sehen oder zu spüren, daß es auch nicht das Gesicht eines Mannes sei, sondern noch etwas anderes. Es war, als sei auch etwas von einem Frauengesicht darin, und namentlich schien dies Gesicht mir, für einen Augenblick, nicht männlich oder kindlich, nicht alt oder jung, sondern irgendwie tausendjährig, irgendwie zeitlos, von anderen Zeitläuften gestempelt als wir sie leben. (*Demian*, p. 52)

As his name suggests, Demian in fact functions less as a rounded character than as the embodiment of Emil Sinclair’s potential as a human being, and beyond that of the potential of humans in general to penetrate the superficial world of appearance and custom and connect with the universe, with nature and with a deeper self that is beyond the conscious ego. Likewise his mother, Eva (the name evokes both the maternal and the sexual), embodies an “agelessness” that reflects a perfection of the spirit: “ebenso wie Max vor Zeiten auf niemand den Eindruck eines Knaben gemacht hatte, so sah seine Mutter gar nicht wie die Mutter eines erwachsenen Sohnes aus, so jung und süß war der Hauch über ihrem Gesicht und Haar, so straff und faltenlos war ihre goldige Haut, so blühend der Mund” (*Demian*, pp. 138-9). Although this Romantic evocation of feminine beauty might seem at first reading unoriginal, the defiance of the signs of ageing seems less a sign of eternal youth than an external sign of the same tranquil, “timeless” state that Sinclair discovers in the drawing he makes of a woman he has glimpsed and named “Beatrice”, but which comes to represent something else altogether: “Es schien mir eine Art von Götterbild oder heiliger Maske zu sein, halb männlich, halb weiblich, ohne Alter, ebenso willensstark wie träumerisch, ebenso starr wie heimlich lebendig.” (*Demian*, p. 82) The ambivalent relationship with her son (no mention of any father is ever made) and the thematic emphasis in both cases upon agelessness suggests that Max and his mother rather function, in the symbolic world of the text, as two sides to the same essence, together incorporating the superficial opposites (masculine and feminine; the individual and the collective; young and old) which are within us all and which must be recognised and overcome. Again, the influence of Jung is very clear. For the narrator, however, while he comes to recognise the path and the goal, the attempt to fulfil his own “fate” results in a sequence of crises, and dependence in each case upon the intervention of the figures he views as “Führer” (*Demian*, p. 129) to guide him forwards. With its “open” ending

in the chaos of war, *Demian* could be said to avoid offering a clear resolution to the crisis undergone by its narrator and which is posited as one for mankind as a whole.

Siddhartha, by contrast, with its “closed” ending, presents a resolution *and* a paradox. The text invites us, namely, to participate in a “journey” through chronological time that consists in accumulated experience and development, even though, it should be said, this growth takes place through multiple new beginnings and rebirths rather than through continuous progress. The first part of the text, for example, concludes with an “awakening” that is likened to “der letzte Krampf der Geburt” (*Siddhartha*, p. 387) and results in the psychological ties to his social context and personal history being severed, anchoring him in the present moment, but without giving him purpose or enlightenment: “Jetzt war er nur noch Siddhartha, der Erwachte, sonst nichts mehr” (*Siddhartha*, p. 386). What follows, in the second part, is a process of *experimentation with experience*, as Siddhartha develops multiple personas and immerses himself, via his relationships with Kamala, the courtesan, and the merchant Kamaswami, in the world of physical and material pleasures. He learns, as Shaw observes, “how to utilize the present so that it will produce a desired consequence in the future”.¹⁹ As we have seen, the impossibility of completing this journey without personal experience is made very clear – thus Siddhartha’s rejection of a path based only on “Lehre” and not on experience. Thus although the structure of the novel, and of Siddhartha’s journey, is mapped by Hesse on to the structure of Buddhist thought, with the first part of the narrative corresponding approximately to the Four Noble Truths, and the final eight episodes to the Eightfold Path that leads to enlightenment, the path is *lived* rather than learned.²⁰ The paradox emerges in the concluding chapters, which see Siddhartha return to the same river he had crossed at the start of his journey and in which he had, briefly, considered drowning himself, and which is flagged as a location of symbolic importance: “Ihm schien, es habe der Fluß ihm etwas Besonderes zu sagen, das er noch nicht wisse, das noch auf ihn warte.” (*Siddhartha*, p. 431) Siddhartha’s physical journey has indeed come to an end here – he spends the rest of his life as a simple ferryman on the river, in the final transformation in his biography. He becomes an apprentice to the old ferryman Vasudeva, who is able to reflect on the wisdom that the river, we are told, has given him. Vasudeva is able to confirm a crucial philosophical insight, that time itself is an illusion:

“Hast du”, so fragte er ihn einst, “hast auch du vom Flusse jenes Geheime gelernt: daß es keine Zeit gibt?”
Vasudevas Gesicht überzog sich mit hellem Lächeln.

“Ja, Siddhartha”, sprach er. “Es ist doch dieses, was du meinst: daß der Fluß überall zugleich ist, am Ursprung und an der Mündung, am Wasserfall, an der Fähre, an der Stromschnelle, im Meer, im Gebirge, überall, zugleich, und daß es für ihn nur Gegenwart gibt, nicht den Schatten Vergangenheit, nicht den Schatten Zukunft?” (*Siddhartha*, p. 436)

Siddhartha suggests that his life “war auch ein Fluß” (*Siddhartha*, p. 436), and that the conventional linear understanding of a biography as sequence between childhood and old age is false: “Nichts war, nichts wird sein; alles ist, alles hat Wesen und Gegenwart”. (*Siddhartha*, p. 436) The paradox emerges in the fact that the intellectual

19 Shaw: “Time and the Structure of Hermann Hesse’s *Siddhartha*”, p. 212.

20 On the structure of the text see *ibid.*, p. 211.

recognition of this cannot itself transform a psychological structure in which an historical understanding of time is deeply ingrained, and that the only way to arrive at such a transformation is through historical experience. One must learn from time, in other words, in order to overcome time. Siddhartha is subsequently reunited with figures from his past, including the dying Kamala, who brings him the son they had had together. Siddhartha's helpless devotion to the son, who is ungrateful and unhappy living with the two ferrymen, gives him his first experience of something that is described as deeply human, blinkered and flawed – paternal love. By attempting to mould his son, and in his reluctance to allow him to develop independently, Siddhartha mirrors his own experience with his father. It is only when the boy runs away, inflicting a “wound” of loss on him, that he can gradually begin (in the chapter entitled “Om”) to embrace the “unity” of the self and universe. This was impossible as long as his love and attention were focused on another individual. Love and loss, then, as key experiences that are necessarily tied to historical time, act as triggers:

Langsam blühte, langsam reifte in Siddhartha die Erkenntnis, das Wissen darum, was eigentlich Weisheit sei, was seines langen Suchens Ziel sei. Es war nichts als eine Bereitschaft der Seele, eine Fähigkeit, eine geheime Kunst, jeden Augenblick, mitten im Leben, den Gedanken der Einheit denken, die Einheit fühlen und einatmen zu können. (*Siddhartha*, p. 454)

The message is that only by living through, overcoming and rejecting individuality, specificity and time itself, understood as a causal sequence, can one ever achieve true insight and harmony with both the self and the universe. As such, *Siddhartha* can be understood *both* as a generational text in which the idea of experience is absolutely central and important *and* as a radical challenge, comparable in some ways to the exploration of time and memory one finds in other key modernist texts, to the very understanding of historical time that allows experience to be possible in the first place.

Siddhartha achieves his moment of epiphany and transcendent insight both at and through the river. By immersing himself in the sound of the flowing river, with the guidance of Vasudeva, Siddhartha is able to overcome the suffering that is the condition of the individual, tied to his particular concerns and worries, and become one with the unity of the universe. It is a key moment underpinned by a philosophical implication, namely that all living creatures are ultimately all connected parts of a single unified existence, and that apparently separate events are all part of a single flowing chain, “der Fluß des Geschehens” (*Siddhartha*, p. 458). In attaching such importance to the motifs of the river and the ferryman, Hesse was of course very aware of the literary, mythic and Romantic associations they evoke.²¹ Parallels with the figure of Charon, with Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and related ideas about flux, change and recurrence familiar from Heraclitus and Plato are all relevant here. For Siddhartha, his journey can only be complete when he is able to “hear” the river. A river is permanently in motion, and as Heraclitus would have it, one cannot step into the same river twice; as such it is an appropriate symbol of impermanence and transience. Yet its function in *Siddhartha* goes beyond this, as Siddhartha's earlier question about timelessness anticipates. In being forever in motion, a river also represents simultaneity; only a river

21 It is also a significant motif in other texts by Hesse, notably in *Unterm Rad*, where the river is associated both with the natural world, in contradistinction to society, and with death (Hans drowns in the river).

can be in more than one place at the same time, overcoming the customary linearity of time and space. At the critical moment, Siddhartha recognises not a “symbol” but something akin to a synecdoche, in which a particular natural phenomenon provides the key to understanding the nature of the universe, which is *itself* a sort of river, defined by flow, and in which the distinction between past, present and future has no place. The language at this point has epiphanic qualities, and form mirrors content: he makes use of repetition and a consciously *flowing*, lengthy sentence to reflect and to illustrate Siddhartha’s moment of insight, which for the first time goes beyond conscious experience – it is not “caused” by a particular moment or object.

Zum Ziele strebte der Fluß, Siddhartha sah ihn eilen, den Fluß, der aus ihm und den Seinen und aus allen Menschen bestand, die er je gesehen hatte, alle die Wellen und Wasser eilten, leidend, Zielen zu, vielen Zielen, dem Wasserfall, dem See, der Stromschnelle, dem Meere, und alle Ziele wurden erreicht, und jedem folgte ein neues, und aus dem Wasser ward Dampf und stieg in den Himmel, ward Regen und stürzte aus dem Himmel herab, ward Quelle, ward Bach, ward Fluß, strebte aufs neue, floß aufs neue. (*Siddhartha*, p. 458)

Siddhartha, we are told, “listens” to the river at this point, in a form of transformed consciousness that is linked to the “Om”, the holy word spoken as a means of controlling breathing and achieving the cataleptic state that is the goal of meditation.²² The result is that physical and psychological barriers between the “self” and the universe are dismantled. But this is not, it is clear, a phenomenon that can be “taught” or communicated in words, concepts or thoughts – it can, in fact, only be *experienced*. And here, in a way, the narrative is caught in a double-bind, bound itself by the limitations of words, yet attempting to communicate something that is by its nature beyond words. Precisely this conundrum is self-consciously addressed in the final chapter, which reunites Siddhartha with his old friend Govinda:

[V]ielleicht war es so gemeint, daß ich eben den Stein, und den Fluß, und alle diese Dinge, die wir betrachten und von denen wir lernen können, liebe. Einen Stein kann ich lieben, Govinda, und auch einen Baum oder ein Stück Rinde. Das sind Dinge, und Dinge kann man lieben. Worte aber kann ich nicht lieben. Darum sind Lehren nichts für mich, sie haben keine Härte, keine Weiche, keine Farben, keine Kanten, keinen Geruch, keinen Geschmack, sie haben nichts als Worte. (*Siddhartha*, pp. 465-6)

The proximity of *Siddhartha* to the context of modernism becomes apparent – for of course avant-garde literature from the end of the nineteenth century was driven by a very similar sense of the limited capacity of words and language to do justice to reality.²³

Paradox is fundamental to the Eastern philosophy which, in part mediated through Jung, inspired and informed both *Siddhartha* and *Demian*. Ostensible opposites, such as passivity and activity, are imagined as one and the same, as in the image of being both bow and arrow in meditation. Similarly, the distinctions between conscious and unconscious, between interior and exterior, between the individual self and external reality, are irrelevant to a philosophy in which Atman (the true self) is understood

22 Max Demian is also described as falling into cataleptic (or possibly epileptic) states on two occasions in the novel, although Sinclair is not certain on either occasion what is happening to his friend.

23 Decker (*Der Wanderer und sein Schatten*, p. 397) makes the interesting observation that the peculiar, mannered style in *Siddhartha* is reminiscent of Brecht’s *Lehrstücke*: „Nur, dass hier eben nichts anderes gelehrt wird, als dass jede Lehre letztendlich im Leben untergehen muss, will sie fruchten.“

not as separate from but as a part of Brahman (ultimate reality), even if one cannot immediately understand this. Hence the verse which the young Siddhartha repeats mechanically in the opening chapter: “Om ist Bogen, der Pfeil ist Seele, / Das Brahman ist des Pfeiles Ziel, / Das soll man unentwegt treffen” (*Siddhartha*, p. 359). It is therefore perhaps appropriate that a narrative which ultimately seeks to evoke the timelessness and interconnectedness of the universe should do so by anchoring its narrative, in the manner of a *Bildungsroman*, in the passage of time and in the accumulation of experience.

For Hesse, in his postwar works, experience does not function as the negation of a state of primal “innocence”, the belief in which, as is particularly evident in *Demian*, can only ever be a form of regressive denial or fantasy. Rather, it is the alternative to the restrictiveness of orthodoxy of all forms, to inherited beliefs, dogmas and conventions of all types. This message, chiming so aptly with the postwar spirit of generational rebellion and yearning for new beginnings, clearly inspired readers, some of whom may have recognized the irony in this – for although *Siddhartha* encourages the rejection of teaching and teachers, as a text that quickly became canonical it may have come to occupy a comparable role for the many “seekers” who have responded to it.

