

Nobel Prize in Literature 1946



Hermann Hesse

The Nobel Prize in Literature 1946 was awarded to Hermann Hesse *"for his inspired writings which, while growing in boldness and penetration, exemplify the classical humanitarian ideals and high qualities of style"*.

This year's Nobel Prize in literature has been awarded to a writer of German origin who has had wide critical acclaim and who has created his work regardless of public favour. The sixty-nine-year-old Hermann Hesse can look back on a considerable achievement consisting of novels, short stories, and poems, partly available in Swedish translation.

He escaped from political pressure earlier than other German writers and, during the First World War, settled in Switzerland where he acquired citizenship in 1923. It should not be overlooked, however, that his extraction as well as his personal connections had always justified Hesse in considering himself as much Swiss as German. His asylum in a country that was neutral during the war allowed him to continue his important literary work in relative quiet, and at present Hesse, together with [Mann](#), is the best representative of the German cultural heritage in contemporary literature.

With Hesse, more than with most writers, one has to know his personal background to understand the rather surprising components that make up his personality. He comes from a strictly pietist Swabian family. His father was a well-known church historian, his mother the daughter of a missionary. She was of French descent and was educated in India. It was taken for granted that Hermann would become a minister, and he was sent to the seminary at the cloister of Maulbronn. He ran away, became an apprentice to a watchmaker, and later worked in bookshops in Tübingen and Basle.

The youthful rebellion against the inherited piety that nonetheless always remained in the depth of his being, was repeated in a painful inner crisis, when in 1914 as a mature man and an acknowledged master of regional literature he went new ways which were far removed from his previous idyllic paths. There are, briefly, two factors that caused this profound change in Hesse's writings.

The first was, of course, the World War. When at its beginning he wanted to speak some words of peace and contemplation to his agitated colleagues and in his pamphlet used Beethoven's motto, «O Freunde, nicht diese Töne», he aroused a storm of protest. He was savagely attacked by the German press and was apparently deeply shocked by this experience. He took it as evidence that the entire civilization of Europe in which he had so long believed was sick and decaying. Redemption had to come from beyond the accepted norms, perhaps from the light of the East, perhaps from the core hidden in anarchic theories of the resolution of good and evil in a higher unity. Sick and doubt-ridden, he sought a cure in the psychoanalysis of Freud, eagerly preached and practised at that time, which left lasting traces in Hesse's increasingly bold books of this period.

This personal crisis found its magnificent expression in the fantastical novel *Der Steppenwolf* (1927) [*Steppenwolf*], an inspired account of the split in human nature, the tension between desire and reason in an individual who is outside the social and moral notions of everyday life. In this bizarre fable of a man without a home, hunted like a wolf, plagued by neuroses, Hesse created an incomparable and explosive book, dangerous and fateful perhaps, but at the same time liberating by its mixture of sardonic humour and

poetry in the treatment of the theme. Despite the prominence of modern problems Hesse even here preserves a continuity with the best German traditions; the writer whom this extremely suggestive story recalls most is E.T.A. Hoffmann, the master of the *Elixiere des Teufels*.

Hesse's maternal grandfather was the famous Indologist Gundert. Thus even in his childhood the writer felt drawn to Indian wisdom. When as a mature man he travelled to the country of his desire he did not, indeed, solve the riddle of life; but the influence of Buddhism soon entered his thought, an influence by no means restricted to *Siddhartha* (1922) the beautiful story of a young Brahman's search for the meaning of life on earth.

Hesse's work combines so many influences from Buddha and St. Francis to Nietzsche and Dostoevsky that one might suspect that he is primarily an eclectic experimenter with different philosophies. But this opinion would be quite wrong. His sincerity and his seriousness are the foundations of his work and remain in control even in his treatment of the most extravagant subjects.

In his most accomplished novellas we are confronted both directly and indirectly with his personality. His style, always admirable, is as perfect in rebellion and demonic ecstasy as in calm philosophical speculation. The story of the desperate embezzler Klein, who flees to Italy to seek there his last chance, and the marvellously calm description of his late brother Hans in the *Gedenkblätter* (1937) [Reminiscences] are masterly examples from different fields of creativity.

In Hesse's more recent work the vast novel *Das Glasperlenspiel* (1943) [*Magister Ludi*] occupies a special position. It is a fantasy about a mysterious intellectual order, on the same heroic and ascetic level as that of the Jesuits, based on the exercise of meditation as a kind of therapy. The novel has an imperious structure in which the concept of the game and its role in civilization has surprising parallels with the ingenious study *Homo ludens* by the Dutch scholar Huizinga. Hesse's attitude is ambiguous. In a period of collapse it is a precious task to preserve the cultural tradition. But civilization cannot be permanently kept alive by turning it into a cult for the few. If it is possible to reduce the variety of

knowledge to an abstract system of formulas, we have on the one hand proof that civilization rests on an organic system; on the other, this high knowledge cannot be considered permanent. It is as fragile and destructible as the glass pearls themselves, and the child that finds the glittering pearls in the rubble no longer knows their meaning. A philosophical novel of this kind easily runs the risk of being called recondite, but Hesse defended his with a few gentle lines in the motto of the book, «...then in certain cases and for irresponsible men it may be that non-existent things can be described more easily and with less responsibility in words than the existent, and therefore the reverse applies for pious and scholarly historians; for nothing destroys description so much as words, and yet there is nothing more necessary than to place before the eyes of men certain things the existence of which is neither provable nor probable, but which, for this very reason, pious and scholarly men treat to a certain extent as existent in order that they may be led a step further toward their being and their becoming.»

If Hesse's reputation as a prose writer varies, there has never been any doubt about his stature as a poet. Since the death of Rilke and George he has been the foremost German poet of our time. He combines exquisite purity of style with moving emotional warmth, and his musical form is unsurpassed in our time. He continues the tradition of Goethe, Eichendorf, and Mörike and renews its poetic magic by a colour peculiar to himself. His collection of poems, *Trost der Nacht* (1929) [The Solace of Night], mirrors with unusual clarity not only his inner drama, his healthy and sick hours, and his intense self-examination, but also his devotion to life, his pleasure in painting, and his worship of nature. A later collection, *Neue Gedichte* (1937) [New Poems], is full of autumnal wisdom and melancholy experience, and it shows a heightened sensibility in image, mood, and melody.

In a summary introduction it is impossible to do justice to the many changing qualities which make this writer particularly attractive to us and which have justly given him a faithful following. He is a problematic and a confessional poet with the wealth of the South German mind, which he expresses in a very individual mixture of freedom and piety.

If one overlooked the passionate tendency to protest, the ever-burning fire that makes the dreamer a fighter as soon as the matters at stake are sacred to him, one might call him a romantic poet. In one passage Hesse says that one must never be content with reality, that one should neither adore nor worship it, for this low, always disappointing, and desolate reality cannot be changed except by denying it through proving our superior strength.

Hesse's award is more than the confirmation of his fame. It honours a poetic achievement which presents throughout the image of a good man in his struggle, following his calling with rare faithfulness, who in a tragic epoch succeeded in bearing the arms of true humanism.

Unfortunately, reasons of health have prevented the poet from making the journey to Stockholm. In his stead the envoy of the Swiss Federal Republic will accept the Prize.

For more details please visit:

http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1946/press.html