



## Hesse's Grandiose Conjectural Autobiographies

### On the Fairy Tale *Iris*

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#### **Abstract:**

Hermann Hesse's well-known fairy tale *Iris* is interpreted psychoanalytically within the framework of his lifelong practice of 'conjectural autobiography'. Hesse often merged fact and fiction to dramatize his inner crises, his troubled marriage, and his desperate attempts at self-realization. In *Iris*, the protagonist Anselm follows Hesse's familiar triadic pattern of childhood harmony, alienation, and apparent reconciliation; however the conclusion suggests not maturity but a symbolic regression into the maternal womb. In this sense, *Iris* may be read as an 'anti-fairy tale': rather than affirming life, it idealizes mystical dissolution. Hesse's magnetic appeal may, at least in part, lie in his ability to transform unconscious desires for retreat and self-annihilation into grandiose visions that offer irresistible, yet ultimately empty, promises of spiritual fulfillment.

**Keywords:** Hermann Hesse, fairy tales, (Neo-)Romanticism, psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, Carl Gustav Jung

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## I. Hesse's Autobiographical Writing

Hardly any modern German author has engaged as intensively and as consistently with himself—his personal crises and life stages—as Hermann Hesse. Indeed, there is scarcely a single work of his that could not, in some form, whether overtly or covertly, be described as autobiographical. All his stories and novels are literary acts of self-interpretation, often also self-stylizations, conveyed through the medium of fiction: in exotic disguise (*Siddhartha* [Siddhartha]), in allegorical representation (*Der Steppenwolf* [Steppenwolf]), in historical costume (*Narziss und Goldmund* [Narcissus and Goldmund]), or through utopian imagination (*Das Glasperlenspiel* [The Glass Bead Game]). While Hesse did, on occasion, recount his life without adopting a fictional persona,<sup>1</sup> even in these writings the subjective interpretation of his inner development predominates. The bare factuality of life never held much interest for him. From his earliest literary beginnings as a Neo-Romantic, he consistently favored imagination over so-called reality. He persistently resisted, wherever possible, what he called “that false song of life, that submission to ‘reality’, to the laws of adulthood, that adaptation to the world ‘as it is’” (GW 6, 388)<sup>2</sup>. His entire oeuvre can be read as a spiritual autobiography, structured according to a triadic schema derived from both Christian belief and the Romantic worldview: the paradise of childhood, followed by guilt and despair, and ultimately, either downfall or salvation and the recovery of grace.<sup>3</sup> As Theodore Ziolkowski has noted, Hesse delighted in blurring the boundaries between poetry and truth, between fiction and biography.<sup>4</sup> He had a penchant for playfully engaging with the material of his lived experience, a trait he—incidentally—shared with Thomas Mann, and one that achieved genuine triumphs in *Morgenlandfahrt* [The Journey to the East]. Hesse’s world was always that of psychic reality: what he called the “timeless realm of the spirit.”

For Hesse, the purpose of autobiographical writing lay primarily in the psycho-biographical recognition and shaping of his own *entelechy*. In Castalia, the world of *The Glass*

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Hermann Hesse, *Eigensinn. Autobiographische Schriften*. Edited by Siegfried Unseld. Frankfurt am Main, 1972.

<sup>2</sup> Hesse’s works will be cited according to the *Werkausgabe* in 12 volumes (Edition Suhrkamp), Frankfurt a. M., 1970; namely, GW [volume number], [page numbers].

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *Ein Stückchen Theologie* [A Bit of Theology] (1932, GW 10, 74–88).

<sup>4</sup> Theodore Ziolkowski, *Der Schriftsteller Hermann Hesse. Wertung und Neubewertung*. Frankfurt am Main, 1979, p. 109.

*Bead Game*, the repeated act of describing one's own life story across different historical periods and cultures is practiced as an exercise in self-knowledge. The students in Waldzell are expected to compose each year a *Lebenslauf* [curriculum vitae], that is, a fictional autobiography projected into an arbitrary past era. In this way, they are to learn "to regard one's own person as a mask, as the transient garment of an entelechy" (GW 9, 119). The prerequisite for this is a belief in the transmigration of souls—not as a religious dogma, but as a guiding principle of creative imagination.

In this respect, Hesse as autobiographer clearly stands in the tradition of the Goethean era: in the belief in a core of personality that unfolds over the course of a life, and in the belief that the *daimon*, the inner law by which one is called, can be distinguished from *tyche*, the influence of environment, time, and changing circumstances. What Josef Knecht's drafts of various life stories aim to achieve as monastic exercises is the discovery of entelechy within the simulation space of imagination. The interaction of *daimon* and *tyche* had been the very material of Goethe's autobiography. Hesse's thought consistently revolves around the *daimon* and its intrinsic tendency toward unfolding. In the novel *Demian*, it appears in personified form. Hesse's modernity as an autobiographer lies above all in the fact that, unlike Goethe, he does not look back with sovereign confidence on the completed stages of his life journey; instead, he makes the arduous search for his own, uniquely appropriate path to self-realization his central theme—placing crises and phases of disorientation at the very heart of his narrative rather than concealing or downplaying them, as Goethe had done. To be sure, in the *Traktat vom Steppenwolf* [Treatise on the Steppenwolf], Hesse temporarily distances himself from the concept of entelechy and instead, with modern radicalism, conceives of identity and personality as self-deception and illusion. But in his later work *The Glass Bead Game*, the concept of personality once again forms the structural foundation of the novel.

Hesse's engagement with his own life crises, with their self-doubts and self-recriminations, is at the same time accompanied by an undeniable, if often latent, tendency toward literary self-stylization. In Hesse's oeuvre, self-interpretation along archetypal-mythical lines takes precedence over psychological self-analysis. Perhaps because these self-interpretations are so deeply woven into the fabric of his literary works, they exert such persuasive power over most interpreters that few succeed in freeing themselves from the spell of author-guided interpretation, or even in entertaining the possibility that Hesse may have erred in his self-conceptions or overlooked essential traits. Hesse's dictum (from *Demian*) "*Wir können*

*einander verstehen; aber deuten kann jeder nur sich selbst*” (GW 5, 8) [We can understand one another; but each of us can only interpret himself], seems intended to discourage precisely such interpretive efforts from the outset. Yet the statement is not true—and, indeed, Hesse himself did not adhere to it.

In his *Kurzgefaßter Lebenslauf*<sup>5</sup> from 1925, Hesse indulged in extending the narrative of his life beyond the contemporary present and, following the tradition of Jean Paul, composed a ‘conjectural (auto)biography’. In doing so, he assigned himself the very task that Josef Knecht and his fellow students in Castalia are called upon to fulfill. Such a projection of one’s own life story is only possible if one—like Hesse—embraces a conception of life grounded in the idea of entelechy. It also impressively demonstrates the predominance of the element of ‘fiction’ in Hesse’s autobiographical writing, for the very idea of such an experiment implies that one grants *tyche* (chance) no decisive influence and accords the “so-called reality” (GW 6, 406) only limited relevance to the trajectory of one’s life. Only toward the end of his life did Hesse relinquish this a-historical stance. Notably, in the posthumously published *Fourth Curriculum Vitae* of Josef Knecht,<sup>6</sup> he attempted to give greater consideration to the power of *tyche*.

The ‘extrapolation’ of biographical developments to the point of anticipating one’s own death—even when, as here, it takes on an ironic-humorous tone—can be highly revealing of an author’s hidden motives. Such projections may contain traces of implicit aspects of the author’s self-conception, hints at a concealed inner personality, for fantasies about one’s future invariably harbor secret desires. Hesse was clearly aware of this dynamic. Speaking of the autobiographical exercises in Waldzell, he observed that they were “not merely stylistic exercises and historical studies, but also wish-images and heightened self-portraits” (GW 9, 119). Literary-psychological interpretations, unsurprisingly, tend to pay particular attention to such projections into the future.

Anyone who calls Hesse’s literary works autobiographical because they reflect his inner development in the medium of literary fiction must not overlook that they are often also *conjectural* autobiographies—particularly in those instances where they extend beyond the phase actually attained in the author’s real life. This is most clearly evident in the *Märchen*

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<sup>5</sup> The German title is rather dry, literally meaning no more than ‘Brief Curriculum Vitae’. In English, the work is usually published as *My Life: A Conjectural Autobiography*.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 146. Published in: *Prose from the Literary Estate*. Ed. by Ninon Dolbin. Frankfurt am Main, 1965.

[Fairy Tales], in *Klein und Wagner* [Klein and Wagner], in *Demian*, and in *Siddhartha*. Hesse, it seems, was unable to content himself with an open ending or a view into an uncertain future. Time and again, his novels and stories conclude with a kind of mystical apotheosis, especially when the protagonist dies. The lived experience of seeking then culminates in a fantastical anticipation of finding. His narrative works almost always follow a structure that builds toward a climax at the end. Perhaps this rising arc reflects the pietistic devotional image of the broad road to perdition and the narrow path to salvation (Matthew 7:13–14)—a picture that once hung in Hesse’s childhood room.<sup>7</sup>

Particularly revealing, as previously mentioned, are the conjectural sections of the *Kurzgefaßter Lebenslauf*, which follow the rupture that separates present from future (GW 6, 406). In these passages, the already blended ratio of fiction and truth shifts decidedly in favor of fiction. In this “heightened self-portrait,” Hesse announces that he will turn from writing to painting, magic, and music. Most of all, he would like to compose an opera like *The Magic Flute*—but since that already exists, he will instead devote himself to magic, both white and black.

It is worth noting that an (unrealized) autobiography was to bear the title *Aus dem Leben eines Zauberers* [From the Life of a Magician]. The opening of this planned life story survives under the title *Kindheit des Zauberers* [Childhood of the Magician] (GW 6, 371–390). There, becoming invisible is called the “*aufs innigste begehrte*” [most ardently desired] art. The artist, cast in the role of the magician, might be interpreted as protesting the increasing disenchantment of the world — not by means of explicit critique, but through counter-magic, through denial of so-called reality. Magical thinking, which Hesse defines as harmony between inner and outer worlds, can, from a developmental psychological perspective, be understood as a form of ‘wild thought’, following the prerational pathways of early childhood—a function of the primary process, expressing a desire to remain in the childlike belief in the omnipotence of thought.

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<sup>7</sup> See Johannes Cremerius, ‘*Schuld und Sühne ohne Ende. Hermann Hesses psychotherapeutische Erfahrungen*’. In: *Literaturpsychologische Studien und Analysen*. Ed. by Walter Schönau. Amsterdam, 1983, p. 187. See also *Hermann Hesse. Sein Leben in Bildern und Texten*. Ed. by Volker Michels. Frankfurt a.M. 1979, p. 24, and in: *Hermann Hesse 1877–1977. Stationen seines Lebens, des Werkes und seiner Wirkung*. Ed. by Bernhard Zeller. München 1977, p. 29. See also Alice Miller, ‘*Das “Verdorbene” in der Kinderwelt von Hermann Hesse als Beispiel des konkreten “Bösen”*’. In: Alice Miller, *Das Drama des begabten Kindes und die Suche nach dem wahren Selbst*. Frankfurt a.M. 1979, p. 153f.

Hesse goes on to recount that, after receiving two honorary doctorates, he will be brought to trial and imprisoned “wegen Verführung eines jungen Mädchens durch Zauberei” [for seducing a young girl through sorcery]. There, in the fictional past tense with which he narrates his imagined future, he paints a landscape on the wall of his cell in which one sees a small train entering a tunnel. One day, when the guards come to summon him for a hearing, he breaks free from the “Wahn der Wirklichkeit” [delusion of reality], boards the train, and disappears into the tunnel. This self-portrait as a delinquent, faintly reminiscent of Faust, may once again evoke memories of the “broad path” from the edifying image that hung above his childhood bed. In that image, one sees high in the mountains, near the end of the ‘broad path’ to ruin, a small train in an alpine landscape, above which a thunderstorm is breaking.

In this symbol-laden episode—where he imagines his own death—Hesse draws on a Chinese legend motif,<sup>8</sup> which Dieter Wellershoff, in his essay *Das Verschwinden im Bild* [The Disappearance into the Image],<sup>9</sup> interprets as a typical artist’s fantasy. Wellershoff reads the scene—based on the old legend of the death of the famous painter Wu Tao-Tzu—as an allegory for the experience of the true artist’s total immersion in his work: “In the physical identification with the artwork, the artist completes the self-sacrifice that was his life”. Hesse would surely have agreed with this interpretation, especially since the notion of self-sacrifice was familiar to him and constitutes one of the central themes of *The Glass Bead Game*. In that novel, the character of the Rainmaker—the protagonist of the first of Knecht’s fictional biographies—ends his life in voluntary sacrifice for the welfare of his tribe. Similarly, Josef Knecht’s death by drowning can also be understood as a form of self-sacrifice.

Yet the story of the magical merging of creator and creation also has another dimension, as Wellershoff rightly points out: the artist here appears as an omnipotent magician who dazzles us with his superhuman feat of illusion. In crossing the boundary between reality and fiction, he dissolves “the distance that protects us from fantastic regression, ego-loss, and delusional fusion”. What at first may appear as humility—as the modest retreat of the person behind the work—is, “in the language of unconscious fantasies, a triumphant act of self-aggrandizement”. Precisely because Wellershoff, in his essay, references many literary texts without mentioning Hesse at all, his psychological interpretation of this fantasy motif gains particular credibility. It

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<sup>8</sup> Martin Pfeifer, *Hesse-Kommentar zu sämtlichen Werken*. München 1980, p. 309.

<sup>9</sup> Dieter Wellershoff, *Das Verschwinden im Bild. Essays*. Köln 1980, pp. 235–283.

proves highly pertinent to a deeper understanding of Hesse's world of imagery, articulating with striking clarity a defining feature of the 'appeal structure' of Hesse's oeuvre: a peculiar coexistence of unsparing self-accusation, confessional fervor, and a latent, grandiose-narcissistic self-elevation.

The motif of disappearance into a mountain cave exemplifies one of the many only lightly veiled escape fantasies in Hesse's work—fantasies whose regressive orientation is indeed recognized but seldom problematized. The archetypal image of return—to the mother, to the earth, to childhood, to homeland, to paradise—an inheritance of both Christianity and Romanticism and in full accord with the life-philosophical ideas of the era, seems to press itself upon Hesse most insistently at precisely those narrative junctures where one might otherwise expect the emergence of a new, more advanced stage of personal development. The "*neue Bindungen*" [new bonds] of which the late poem *Stufen* [Stages] speaks—bonds into which we are to enter "*in Tapferkeit und ohne Trauern*" [bravely and without sorrow]—turn out, in the narratives that attempt to give this conjecture shape, to symbolize the oldest bond of all: the symbiotic unity of mother and child.

The ambivalent endings in the *Fairy Tales*, in *Klein and Wagner*, in *Demian*, in *Siddhartha*, and in several other texts nearly always occur at the conclusion of a symbolically shaped process of individuation. Given their position in the linear, climax-oriented narrative structure, the reader can only interpret them as the culmination of a development fraught with crisis—as the finding that follows the seeking. Yet the symbolic language of the imagery conveys an entirely different message: not progression, but regression is suggested here; not the attainment of a mature stage as the culmination of a difficult journey, but a retreat into the maternal realm, into the paradisiacal security of symbiosis. This regression serves not the ego but the *grandiose self*.

This strange contradiction—between the apotheosis of fulfillment or enlightenment suggested by the narrative structure and the regressive escape impulse revealed in the images and scenes—seems to me a key phenomenon of Hesse's work. The recurrent narcissistic fantasy of mystical dissolution (psychoanalytically: symbiotic fusion) that pervades his stories of self-realization may in fact be one of the reasons for Hesse's enduring global appeal. He fascinates by presenting the secretly desired withdrawal as if it were the attainment of the goal. He tells of a self-realization that culminates in self-dissolution. What appears as maturation through renunciation and asceticism ends, ultimately, in the fulfillment of childhood desires.

Along similar lines, Josef Rattner speaks of Hesse's narcissism as a "key to his life's destiny and to the character of his work."<sup>10</sup> He rightly emphasizes that this concept, contrary to popular opinion, includes components such as self-hatred, entanglement in oneself, impaired capacity for love, fear of surrender of any kind, and excessive 'inwardness'.

## II. *Iris* as Anti-Fairy Tale or a Bit of Iriscopy

The fairy tale *Iris* (written in 1917/18, published in 1919; GW 6, 110–129) allows for a more precise demonstration of the characteristic tension between the significance of the 'linear' structure of the narrative—which tends toward mystical enlightenment and culminates in the fulfillment of a quest—and the unconscious meaning of the 'radial' structure of the image-symbols, which refer back to the pre-oedipal and preverbal realms.<sup>11</sup>

Of the approximately eleven fairy tales written by Hesse, *Iris* is considered the most famous,<sup>12</sup> the most significant,<sup>13</sup> and the most finely crafted.<sup>14</sup> Hugo Ball, Hesse's first biographer, counted it among the most beautiful works in his oeuvre.<sup>15</sup> Such evaluations may justify treating the text as exemplary. The fairy-tale form offered Hesse a traditional narrative framework through which he could shape and articulate his inner experiences and imaginative life. Most of his fairy tales were composed during the crisis years of 1916–1919, after which he turned to other literary forms. This period encompassed the death of his father, the psychological breakdown of his wife, their subsequent separation, the collapse of his family life, and his own extended psychotherapy for severe depression.

*Iris* includes—among other dimensions—a romanticized and mythologized portrayal of Hesse's troubled relationship with his first wife, Maria Bernoulli, to whom the printed edition

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<sup>10</sup> Josef Rattner, 'Hermann Hesse: Andeutungen zu einer Psychographie'. In: *Jahrbuch für Verstehende Tiefenpsychologie und Kulturanalyse* 2 (1982), pp. 143-159.

<sup>11</sup> On the distinction between 'linear' and 'radial' structure, see Frederick Wyatt: *Anwendung der Psychoanalyse auf die Literatur: Phantasie, Deutung, klinische Erfahrung*. In: *Seminar: Theorien der künstlerischen Produktivität*. Ed. by Mechthild Curtius. Frankfurt a.M. 1976, pp. 351f.

<sup>12</sup> Theodore Ziolkowski, *Der Schriftsteller Hermann Hesse. Wertung und Neubewertung*. Frankfurt am Main, 1979, p. 44.

<sup>13</sup> George Wallis Field: *Hermann Hesse. Kommentar zu sämtlichen Werken*. Stuttgart 1977, p. 168. See also by the same author: *Hermann Hesses moderne Märchen*. In: *Hermann Hesse heute*. Ed. by Adrian Hsia. Bonn 1980, pp. 204–232.

<sup>14</sup> Ralph Freedman: *Hermann Hesse. Autor der Krisis*. Frankfurt a.M. 1982, p. 250.

<sup>15</sup> Hugo Ball: *Hermann Hesse. Sein Leben und sein Werk* (1927). Frankfurt a.M. 1977, p. 115.

is dedicated (“Für Mia” [For Mia]). Maria, who suffered from mental illness, underwent multiple psychiatric hospitalizations. As noted, Hesse later separated from her. In *Iris*, this separation is anticipated in a fictionalized, conjectural-biographical form.

The tale recounts the story of Anselm, whose name suggests an intertextual reference to *Der goldene Topf*, just as the central symbol of the blue flower—the iris—recalls Novalis and also Hoffmann. Anselm undergoes the triadic life pattern so characteristic of Hesse: from a paradisiacal childhood in the mother’s garden, in perfect harmony with nature; through a phase of disenchantment and alienation; to a moment of epiphany, a mystical vision of unity and return to the blissful world of childhood—his ‘home’. As a child, Anselm frequently dreams of the chalice of the iris flower.

*Er (...) sah ihn ungeheuer groß vor sich geöffnet wie das Tor eines himmlischen Palastes, ritt auf Pferden, flog auf Schwänen hinein, und mit ihm flog und ritt und glitt die ganze Welt leise, von Magie gezogen, in den holden Schlund hinein und hinab, wo jede Erwartung zur Erfüllung und jede Ahnung Wahrheit werden mußte. (GW 6, 113)*

[He (...) saw it enormously large, opened before him like the gate of a heavenly palace; he rode in on horses, flew in on swans, and with him the whole world glided—gently drawn by magic—into that gracious throat and downward, where every expectation turned to fulfillment and every inkling into truth.]

This floral chalice is consistently anthropomorphized and appears as a symbol of the mother and the maternal womb. The paradisiacal quality of early childhood is revealed in Anselm’s cyclical experience of time—his delight in the changing seasons, his ability to communicate with animals, plants, and stones, and his synesthetic perception, which prompts in him a subtle form of sensitivity training:

*Mit Bewunderung beobachtete er die bedeutsamen Farbenfiguren, die bei geschlossenen Augen ihm oft aus purpurfarbenem Dunkel erschienen, Flecken und Halbkreise von Blau und tiefem Rot, glasig helle Linien dazwischen. Manchmal empfand Anselm mit froh erschrockener Bewegung die feinen, hundertfachen Zusammenhänge zwischen Augen und Ohr, Geruch und Getast, fühlte für flüchtige Augenblicke Töne, Laute, Buchstaben verwandt, (...) oder wunderte sich beim Riechen an einem Kraut (...), wie sonderbar nahe Geruch und Geschmack beisammen waren (...). (GW 6, 114)*

[He watched with wonder the significant color figures that would often appear behind closed eyes, emerging from a purplish darkness: blotches and semicircles of blue and deep red, with glassy-bright lines between them. Sometimes, with joyful astonishment, Anselm sensed the delicate, manifold correspondences between eye and ear, smell and touch; for fleeting moments, he felt tones, sounds, and letters to be related (...), or was surprised, while smelling an herb (...), by how curiously close scent and taste lay to one another (...).]

After a conflict-free childhood without a father figure, Anselm becomes a professor—an unhappy intellectual who has lost all sense of childhood unity. He proposes to Iris, the sister of a friend; she responds not with acceptance, but with a conditional task—a familiar motif in many fairy tales. Whenever Anselm hears her name, he is vaguely reminded of something long forgotten. Now, before he may marry her, he must attempt to recover this forgotten element. In the symbolic language of the tale, this entails rediscovering the path into the iris flower's chalice—meaning the journey inward, and at the same time, a return to the mother. Because Hesse always interweaves narrative and interpretation, the reader is hardly in doubt as to what Anselm is searching for—only Anselm himself believes he does not know. Psychologically, Iris's task represents the undoing of infantile amnesia—an essentially impossible endeavor.

After Iris dies from an illness, Anselm continues his quest, having realized that her mission has become his own desire—the sole purpose of his life. Although the promised reward is now gone, he still seeks to complete the fairy-tale trial. He gives up his professorship and becomes an eccentric loner, a vagabond. Eventually, after years of aimless wandering, he rediscovers the longed-for iris flower of his youth. Despite the warning of an old gatekeeper, he enters a cleft in the rock—a “ghost gate”—and there he finds once more the iris-world of his childhood paradise. What many interpreters fail to fully acknowledge, however, is that this rediscovered paradise is actually the final vision of a dying man succumbing to hypothermia in the snow—one of those near-death experiences, like the one described in *Knulp*, whose protagonist is another of Hesse's vagabond figures. Such experiences are now widely studied across psychology, neuroscience, and religious studies.

*Es war Iris, in deren Herz er drang, und es war die Schwertlilie im Garten der Mutter, in deren blauen Kelch er schwebend trat, und als er still der goldnen Dämmerung entgegenging, da war alle Erinnerung und alles Wissen mit einem Male bei ihm, er fühlte seine Hand, und sie war klein und weich, Stimmen der Liebe klangen nah und vertraut in*

*sein Ohr, und sie klangen so, und die goldnen Säulen glänzten so, wie damals in den Frühlingen der Kindheit alles ihm getönt und geleuchtet hatte.*

*Und auch sein Traum war wieder da, den er als kleiner Knabe geträumt, daß er in den Kelch hinabschritt, und hinter ihm schritt und glitt die ganze Welt der Bilder mit und versank im Geheimnis, das hinter allen Bildern liegt.*

*Leise fing Anselm an zu singen, und sein Pfad sank leise abwärts in die Heimat. (GW 6, 128f.)*

[It was Iris whose heart he entered, and it was the sword-lily in the mother's garden into whose blue chalice he floated. And as he moved quietly toward the golden twilight, all memory and all knowledge returned to him at once. He felt his hand—and it was small and soft—and voices of love rang close and familiar in his ears. They rang out just so, and the golden columns gleamed just so, as everything had once sounded and shone for him in the springtimes of childhood.

And his dream returned as well—the one he had dreamed as a little boy: that he was stepping down into the flower's chalice, and behind him the whole world of images followed, gliding and slipping with him, and sank into the mystery that lies behind all images.

Softly, Anselm began to sing, and his path descended gently into home.]

What happens here is thus the self-delusion of a dying outsider—illusion and mirage, not the attainment of a harmonious stage of maturity crowning the process of individuation. The longed-for reunion with the mother occurs only in death. Psychoanalytically, this means that the forbidden impulse (the incestuous wish) is fantasized—and simultaneously repressed and punished with death. Without this repression, the symbolism of the maternal womb could not have carried such intensity.

That Anselm enters the motherly cave singing suggests that he has now rediscovered the pre-verbal world of sound from his earliest years. For the reader, this is a significant textual element that draws attention to the specifically German spiritual and cultural background against which the story unfolds. Hesse himself provided the most fitting commentary—in *Steppenwolf*, where he recognized “the at once touching and fatal relationship to music as the fate of all German spirituality”. Harry Haller's reflections may be read as a courageous and self-critical interpretation of many elements in this fairy tale:

*Im deutschen Geist herrscht das Mutterrecht, die Naturgebundenheit in Form einer Hegemonie der Musik, wie sie nie ein andres Volk gekannt hat. Wir Geistigen, statt uns mannhaft dagegen zu wehren und dem Geist, dem Logos, dem Wort Gehorsam zu leisten (...), träumen alle von einer Sprache ohne Worte, welche das Unaussprechliche sagt Wir Geistigen alle waren in der Wirklichkeit nicht zu Hause, waren ihr fremd und feind, (...). Nun ja, oft hatte ich diesen Gedanken durchgedacht, nicht ohne zuweilen eine heftige Sehnsucht danach zu fühlen, einmal Wirklichkeit mit zu gestalten, einmal ernsthaft und verantwortlich tätig zu sein, statt immer bloß Ästhetik zu treiben und geistiges Kunstgewerbe. (GW 7, 324f.)*

[In the German spirit, the matriarchal principle reigns—our bond to nature takes the form of a hegemony of music such as no other people has ever known. We intellectuals, instead of resisting this with manly resolve and obeying the spirit, the logos, the word (...), all dream of a language without words, one that speaks the unspeakable. We spiritual ones—all of us—were never at home in reality; we were alien to it, even hostile (...). Well, yes, I had often reflected on this idea, not without at times feeling a fierce longing to help shape reality for once, to act seriously and responsibly, instead of always merely engaging in aesthetics and spiritual arts and crafts.]

Insights such as these—found in *Steppenwolf*, but also in Hesse's letters and essays—make him an author one can engage with for a lifetime, despite (or because of?) certain reservations.

The archetypal motif of the “ghost gate”, behind which the ultimate value of life—sought over a lifetime—lies hidden, is also taken up by Kafka in his famous parable *Vor dem Gesetz* [Before the Law] (1915), from the cathedral chapter of *Der Prozeß* [The Trial]. Kafka's story is, in nearly every respect, the mirror image of Hesse's fairy tale. Kafka wrote a paternal story: the Law the man from the country seeks to enter clearly represents a paternal principle, and the doorkeeper is a threatening father imago. Hesse's tale, by contrast, tells of the return to the mother, with Iris appearing as *mater rediviva*. Anselm appears to have no father at all—he is simply absent, perhaps because as a rival he would disturb the intimate mother-child bond. This corresponds with Rattner's diagnosis that Hesse never assimilated the “world of the father” and remained a mother's child.<sup>16</sup> Kafka's text is philosophical, a parable-like thought-construct,

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<sup>16</sup> Josef Rattner, ‘Hermann Hesse: Andeutungen zu einer Psychographie’. In: *Jahrbuch für Verstehende Tiefenpsychologie und Kulturanalyse* 2 (1982), p. 147.

whereas Hesse's is psychological, unfolding as a narrative of feeling. In Kafka, the seeker heeds the doorkeeper's warning and never enters. In Hesse, Anselm ignores the old man's warning and steps into the opening without hesitation.

The content of the fairy tale also reveals unconscious fantasies about the author's unhappy marriage. As previously noted, *Iris* offers a conjectural representation of this relationship, which implicitly conveys far more than the stylized portrait of Maria Bernoulli. In a fundamental deviation from conventional fairy-tale structure, the tale tells the story of a fatal love: Iris's assignment sends Anselm toward death, for in the realm of the living he cannot possibly find what he is meant to seek. Conversely, Anselm harbors death wishes toward his beloved. His reaction to the trial imposed upon him reveals profound ambivalence (he refers to it as a "*verrückte Weiberlaune*" [wacky woman's whim], GW 6, 121), and in a telling symptomatic gesture, he absentmindedly crushes an iris during a conversation with her—an act that afterward strikes him "*wie ein schwerer Vorwurf ins Herz*" [like a heavy reproach in the heart], as though he had guessed the meaning of this revealing lapse (GW 6, 120).

Of our fairy tale, Hesse wrote in a letter dated 12 July 1919 that it tells "not of an imagined finding, but of an experienced search."<sup>17</sup> Strictly speaking, this is not true—unless one regards the apotheosis at the end of Anselm's journey not as an "imagined finding," but as what it also covertly represents: one of the many escape fantasies that we find in Hesse's work, here appearing as a variant of the legendary motif of magical disappearance. Anselm, although not an artist but a scholar, disappears into the image conjured by his dying mind. On the 'realistic' level of the story, like Knulp, he lies alone in the snow as his consciousness fades. This motif of vanishing into a transcendent or imagined space finds a parallel in Hesse's source—the legend of the magical end of the Chinese painter Wu Tao-Tse—which notably describes a cave that closes once the protagonist has vanished inside.

Like the thematically and temporally related tale *Der schwere Weg* [The Difficult Path] (1917), *Iris* is the product of the mid-life crisis during which Hesse began a lengthy course of psychotherapy with Dr. Josef Bernhard Lang in Lucerne, a student of C.G. Jung. Accordingly, *Iris* and *Der schwere Weg* have been described in Hesse scholarship as attempts to shape initial

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<sup>17</sup> Letter to Els Bucherer-Feustel. In: *Gesammelte Briefe*. Ed. by Ursula and Volker Michels. Vol. 1. Frankfurt a.M. 1973, pp. 406f.

psychoanalytic experiences through the medium of the (Neo-)Romantic *Kunstmärchen* [literary fairy tale], in the tradition of Novalis, Tieck, and E.T.A. Hoffmann.

*Der schwere Weg* is a story that resembles a parable more than a fairy tale: the account of a mountain ascent intended to represent the therapeutic process, with the figure of the mountain guide taking on the traits of a patient and understanding therapist. The story ends in a moment of literal overreaching at the summit, with a leap into the depths—half-imagined as a dreamlike ability to fly, modeled after the bird and the guide who accompany the first-person narrator:

— *Es schwang sich der Vogel jäh vom Ast, warf sich stürzend in den Weltraum.*

*Es tat mein Führer einen Sprung und Sturz ins Blaue, fiel in den zuckenden Himmel, flog davon.*

*Jetzt war die Welle des Schicksals auf der Höhe, jetzt riß sie mein Herz davon, jetzt brach sie lautlos auseinander.*

*Und ich fiel schon, ich stürzte, sprang, ich flog; in kalte Luftwirbel geschnürt, schoß ich selig und vor Qual der Wonne zuckend durchs Unendliche binabwärts, an die Brust der Mutter. (GW 6, 73)*

[— The bird suddenly launched itself from the branch, hurled itself into the void. My guide leaped and plunged into the blue, fell into the quivering sky, flew away. Now the wave of fate had reached its crest, now it tore my heart away, now it broke apart without a sound.

And I was already falling, plunging, leaping, I was flying; strapped into cold whirlwinds, I shot blissfully, twitching with the ecstasy of rapture, down through the infinite, to the mother's breast.]

Concealed within this dream image may be a processing of one of Hesse's earliest childhood memories, as recounted by Hermann Lauscher, the *alter ego* in his first autobiographical book. At the age of three, during an excursion to an old ruin, a young uncle lifted him so he could peer over a ledge into the depths below. Seized by vertigo, he began to cry and tremble, and only calmed down once back in his own bed at home. The gaze into the abyss returned in many harrowing anxiety dreams (GW 1, 218f.).

The ‘psychoanalytic’ element in *Iris* is surely, above all, Anselm’s “struggle for memory,” to use Alexander Mitscherlich’s expression for the analytic process.<sup>18</sup> This corresponds closely with the discovery of *Deckerinnerungen* [screen memories], as described by Freud:

*Es war ihm öfter und öfter vorgekommen, daß hinter dem, was er bisher Erinnerungen genannt, noch andre Erinnerungen lagen, wie auf einer alten bemalten Wand zuweilen hinter den alten Bildern noch ältere, einst übermalte verborgen schlummern* (GW 6, 123f.).

[It had occurred to him more and more often that behind what he had previously called memories, there lay still other memories, just as behind old images on a painted wall older, once-overpainted ones may slumber, hidden.]

More broadly, one might also regard the artistic and interpretive engagement with one’s own fantasies and dream images—albeit shaped here by the narrative structure of the fairy tale—as ‘psychoanalytic’. However, anyone with even a basic familiarity with psychoanalysis will recognize that neither tale offers a meaningful representation of the analytic process. Instead of reflecting actual experience, they are fantasies about a possible future course of therapy—colored by the kind of grandiose expectations regarding its goals that often arise in the early stages of treatment. They should not be mistaken—as some Hesse interpreters are inclined to do—for legitimate literary representations of the adventure of self-exploration. Hesse’s understanding of psychoanalysis too readily equates the therapeutic process with a pietistic path to salvation—as a psychological version of the familiar “narrow way.” Johannes Cremerius has convincingly demonstrated this.<sup>19</sup> Hesse liked to speak of the gaze into the chaos of the unconscious, into which psychoanalysis leads the patient, as a heroic initiation:

*Jeder wach gewordene und wirklich zum Bewußtsein gekommene Mensch geht ja einmal, oder mehrmals diesen schmalen Weg durch die Wüste - den andern davon reden zu wollen, wäre vergebliche Mühe.* (GW 6, 402)

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<sup>18</sup> Alexander Mitscherlich: *Der Kampf um die Erinnerung. Psychoanalyse für fortgeschrittene Anfänger*. Munich 1975.

<sup>19</sup> Johannes Cremerius, ‘*Schuld und Sühne ohne Ende. Hermann Hesses psychotherapeutische Erfahrungen*’. In: *Literaturpsychologische Studien und Analysen*. Ed. by Walter Schönau. Amsterdam, 1983.

[Every person who has awakened and truly come to consciousness walks this narrow path through the desert once—or more than once. To speak of it to others would be a futile endeavor.]

And yet, he did not shy away from that futile endeavor—he did want to speak of it. From a psychoanalytic perspective, what stands out is the narcissistic grandiosity of his discourse on therapy—something that apparently was not addressed in his own analysis, assuming it was ever even attempted. The few surviving notes from his sessions suggest that his therapist, J.B. Lang—a somewhat eccentric scholar, contemporary, and friend of Hesse, who himself lived and thought entirely within the archetypal-mythical imagery of the unconscious—did not manage to engage with his patient’s narcissistic issues. In any case, there is no indication that the grandiosity of Hesse’s “exalted self-images” was recognized as a defense against profound self-doubt and identity conflict. Hugo Ball included a few fragments of Lang’s notes in his biography:

*23.X.17. Du wirst hören die Stimme, die aus den Urtiefen der Erde ruft, verkünden werde ich Dir die Gesetze des Magmas, in dessen Quellen ich thronen, vernehmen sollst Du von mir die Gesetze der Toten, welches sein werden Satzungen der neuen Zeit.*

*25.X.17. Wo bist Du heut?*

*Dir unbewußt arbeite ich in Dir, durchbrechend die harte Kruste, die auf meinem Verliese lastet, damit ich das Eis Deiner Seele durchdringen kann. Gehe ruhig zur Ruhe, ich bin Dir immer nahe, sende aber oft des Tages und während der Nacht die Strahlen Deiner Gedanken in den finsternen Schacht Deiner Seele, wo ich mich Dir zu nahen suche, um Berührung zu gewinnen. (...) <sup>20</sup>*

[October 23, 1917: You will hear the voice that calls from the primal depths of the earth; I will proclaim to you the laws of the magma in which I dwell; from me you shall learn the laws of the dead, which shall become the statutes of a new era.

October 25, 1917: Where are you today?

Unknown to you, I am at work within you, breaking through the hard crust that weighs upon my dungeon, so that I may break through the ice of your soul. Go calmly to rest; I

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<sup>20</sup> Hugo Ball: *Hermann Hesse. Sein Leben und sein Werk* (1927). Frankfurt a.M. 1977, p. 123.

am always near you. But often, during the day and at night, send the rays of your thoughts into the dark shaft of your soul, where I strive to approach you, to make contact. (...)]

The solemn, religious-prophetic tone of these entries—entirely in the style of certain visionary writings by C.G. Jung and reminiscent of passages in Hesse's *Demian*—may give us an idea of what might be understood by Hesse's psychoanalytic experiences and the nature of the relationship between the Jungian analyst Lang and the analysand Hesse. It allowed Hesse to speak of his therapy in the conceptual frameworks familiar to him since youth: revelation, awakening, conversion, and calling. It seems likely that Lang, perhaps out of misplaced reverence for Hesse's literary stature, quickly entered into a kind of fraternal friendship with his patient—resembling the pairs Govinda and Siddhartha or Narcissus and Goldmund—rather than maintaining therapeutic abstinence and professional distance. The fact that the relationship between therapist and patient later seems to have reversed, as biographers have reported, also points in this direction. In *Demian*, through the character of the organist Pistorius—a figure absorbed in theological speculation—and in *Die Morgenlandfahrt* [Journey to the East], through the character of Longus, Hesse erected literary monuments to his therapist. Sinclair, after initial enthusiasm, ultimately distances himself from Pistorius when he realizes that what the older man has to offer is “*so verflucht antiquarisch*” [so damned antiquated] (GW 5, 123):

*er war ein Sucher nach rückwärts, er war ein Romantiker. (...) Er hatte mich einen Weg geführt, der auch ihn, den Führer, überschreiten und verlassen mußte. (...) Wir blieben Freunde, aber das Verhältnis war geändert.* (GW 5, 124/127)

[he was a seeker looking backward, he was a romantic. (...) He had led me along a path that he, the guide, would also have to surpass and abandon. (...) We remained friends, but the relationship had changed.]

Of Longus it is said:

*Er sah mich nicht, er malte versunken seine bunte Schlangenschrift, (...). Er hörte mich nicht, meine Welt war ihm fern, er war versunken.* (GW 8, 340f.)

[He did not see me, he was absorbed in painting his colorful serpentine script, (...). He did not hear me, my world was distant from him, he was lost in his own.]

Johannes Cremerius has described in detail the various, ultimately—in his view—not genuinely successful psychotherapeutic experiences of Hermann Hesse. These encompass much more than the sessions with J.B. Lang between 1916 and 1919. Hesse also underwent therapy with

A. Fraenkel, J. Nohl, and C.G. Jung. “Only at the threshold of old age did Hesse let go of the therapist’s hand.”<sup>21</sup> Based on the available documents, Cremerius concludes that Hesse never truly worked through his core psychological conflict: the recurring cycle of guilt and the compulsion for atonement, rooted in the overly strict and religiously driven child-rearing methods of his parents. Thus, the superego-terror, as a legacy of this ‘conditioning’ of conscience-examination and sexual repression, could persist, albeit with changing rules and prohibitions. Many themes, motifs, and aspects in Hesse’s work can be understood as reaction formations to the ‘black pedagogy’ of Pietism. Alice Miller, in *The Drama of the Gifted Child*,<sup>22</sup> was able to illustrate her views in part through Hesse’s childhood. The idealization of early childhood and the intimate bond with the mother in *Iris* serve, from a psychobiographical perspective, as a defense against traumatic experiences in the relationship with the parents. Freedman’s biography, which balances empathy with critical distance, paints a detailed picture of this far-from-happy childhood.<sup>23</sup> Hesse’s *Kinderseele* [Childhood of the Soul] (1919) already presents a very different version of childhood from the one in *Iris*. The struggle for memory had evidently begun to yield new insights:

*Immer wieder fiel man mitten aus den trotzigsten und adligsten Entschlüssen und Gelöbnissen plötzlich unentrinnbar in Sünde und Lumperei, in Alltag und Gewöhnlichkeiten zurück! (...) Wie konnte es sein, daß man morgens im Bett auf den Knien oder nachts vor angezündeten Kerzen sich mit heiligem Schwur dem Guten und Lichten verbündete, Gott anrief und jedem Laster für immer Fehde ansagte - und daß man dann (...) an diesem selben heiligen Schwur und Vorsatz den elendesten Verrat üben konnte, (...).* (GW 5, 171f.)

[Time and again, one would fall—suddenly and inescapably—out of the proudest and most noble resolutions and vows straight back into sin and baseness, into the mundane and the ordinary! (...) How could it be that one, kneeling in bed in the morning or before lit candles at night, allied oneself by sacred oath with the good and the luminous, invoked

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<sup>21</sup> Johannes Cremerius, ‘Schuld und Sühne ohne Ende. Hermann Hesses psychotherapeutische Erfahrungen’. In: *Literaturpsychologische Studien und Analysen*. Ed. by Walter Schönau. Amsterdam, 1983, p. 194.

<sup>22</sup> Alice Miller, *Das Drama des begabten Kindes und die Suche nach dem wahren Selbst*. Frankfurt a.M. 1979.

<sup>23</sup> Ralph Freedman: *Hermann Hesse. Autor der Krisis*. Frankfurt a.M. 1982.

God, and declared eternal war on every vice—only to (...) betray that very oath and resolution in the most wretched manner, (...).]

Hesse's quintessential theme—the never-ceasing, desperate search for the right path in life, through which he exerted such profound influence on readers around the world—thus also appears, in this light, as a defense against the dark sense that, from the outset, only one path had been predetermined for him by the will-breaking ideology of his Pietist upbringing: the narrow and arduous road to salvation, as depicted in the devotional image that once hung above his bed in his youth. The protagonists of his works are always tempted to stray from this narrow path onto the broad one; they are constantly journeying through this symbolic landscape. At times—as in *Siddhartha*—a stretch along the broad road moves the hero forward as well, but only because the possibility of crossing back remains open.

Cremerius's account of Hesse's psychotherapeutic treatments, which repeatedly brought about improvement yet never reached the core conflict, makes the covertly narcissistic character of Hesse's writings—especially where they become conjecturally autobiographical—more intelligible. Again and again, these “heightened self-portraits” are invaded by notions of grandeur; time and again, the narrative tends toward grandiose, mystically unreal visions of unity. Even the protagonist of Hesse's mature work, which seems to transcend the solipsism of earlier phases—Josef Knecht—ends in a suicidal death by drowning, whose latent character of escape, though not consciously intended, becomes clear when compared with similar endings, such as in *Klein and Wagner*.

It would seem, then, that Hesse—the globally celebrated poet of individuation and the quest for self-realization—shied away from portraying the final stage of maturity, a credible reconciliation between inner and outer reality. This is related to the fact that many of his stories do not end with a farewell to illusion but—soberly considered—rather with a flight into illusion. Although the fairy tale *Iris* incorporates several elements of the individuation process, following C. G. Jung's theory with surprising fidelity—such as the confrontation with the Anima (Iris), the growing insight into the relative value of the Persona (the professorship), and the appearance of the archetype of the wise old man (the gatekeeper)—its depiction of the goal

diverges significantly from the theory.<sup>24</sup> It is as if Hesse wanted to suggest to his readers that those who follow the arduous path of individuation to its end are rewarded with liberation from isolation. Neither Freud nor Jung ever made such a claim. Likewise, Anselm's inability to reconcile his quest for the blue flower with the fulfillment of his professional duties—his immediate transformation from professor to vagabond—fundamentally contradicts Jung's concept of successful individuation. One might counter that literature is not tasked with illustrating psychological theory, and that Hesse safeguarded his poetic freedom. The issue, however, is that this freedom, particularly as expressed in the fantasized representation of the goal, originates from an inner unfreedom—a compulsion to repetition, obeying unconscious patterns.

Nonetheless, Jung does not appear to have taken issue with this internal contradiction. Regarding *Demian*, he wrote to its author on December 3, 1919: "*Ihr Buch hat ein bestmögliches Ende, nämlich da, wo alles Vorausgegangene auch wirklich ein Ende hat, und wo alles das wiederum beginnt, womit das Buch begonnen hat, nämlich mit der Geburt und dem Aufwachen des neuen Menschen.*"<sup>25</sup> [Your book has the best possible ending—namely, where everything that precedes truly comes to an end, and where everything begins again with what the book itself began: with the birth and awakening of the new human being.] Yet a life of self-responsibility within society is not depicted. Rather, the ending seems to suggest: where there was *Ego*, there shall be *Id*.

The story of Anselm and Iris, tending toward allegory, does contain fairytale motifs and partially follows the narrative structure of the folktale, but at its core it is also a kind of bleak anti-fairytale. Its utopian and elitist psychology stands in stark contrast to the optimistic and populist psychology of the folktale, as represented, for example, by Bruno Bettelheim.<sup>26</sup> The folktale teaches that and how difficulties can be overcome. *Iris* does not teach that or how one might mystically flee from them. The folktale stands entirely in the service of life, whereas *Iris*, covertly, concerns the lure of the death drive. In the highly ambiguous 'happy ending' of Anselm's tale, Hesse diverges both from the model of the Grimms' folktale and from that of the

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<sup>24</sup> Unfortunately, the most recent account of the connections between Jung's thought and Hesse's literature (Günter Baumann: *Der archetypische Heilsweg. Hermann Hesse, C.G. Jung und die Weltreligionen*. Rheinfelden 1990) was not accessible to me.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in Siegfried Unseld: *Hermann Hesse, eine Werkgeschichte*. Frankfurt a.M. 1973, p. 61.

<sup>26</sup> Bruno Bettelheim: *Kinder brauchen Märchen*. Stuttgart 1977.

Romantic *Kunstmärchen*, such as Novalis's *Hyazinth und Rosenblütchen*. A story in which the hero does not marry the princess, but instead returns to the mother, and in which an entire life is narrated without a father figure, is far removed from the spirit of the folktale. On this point, Freud and Jung, Bettelheim and Von Franz would surely agree.<sup>27</sup>

This also applies to the circular structure of the story, in which the vision of entering the spirit-gate at the end repeats the childhood dream of descending into the iris chalice. This circling around the mother-imago signals fixation rather than development. Mileck remains completely under the spell of Hesse's self-interpretations when he writes that it is "not a regression to that innocent harmony (...), but rather a progression from the disharmonies of the transient external world to the unity of his inner world." And on what does he base his view that this is not "a regained lost paradise, but the discovery of a new one"?<sup>28</sup> One could just as well argue that the attempt to escape the compulsive cycle of guilt and atonement—of which Cremerius has observed that it knows only the alternatives of suicide or flight from the world<sup>29</sup>—is here fantasized as an overcoming of that alternative: world-flight as suicide.

When Hesse wrote of his fairy tales that one should simply read them "*wie sie im Moment zu Ihnen sprechen, einfach den Bildern und der Musik nach, ohne Suchen nach einem 'Sinn'. Denn dieser ist wohl darin, aber er nimmt für jeden ein anderes Kleid an*"<sup>30</sup> [as they speak to you in the moment, simply follow the images and the music, without searching for a 'meaning.' For there is meaning, to be sure, but it takes on a different form for each reader], he underestimated the suggestive power of his own texts. As these works concern themselves with nothing so much as the search for meaning, they are hardly suited to a reading that merely follows 'the images and the music'. The author seems to hope that readers will content themselves with such a 'simple' reading and not dare to venture into in-depth interpretation. However, the search for meaning, as Hesse himself teaches us repeatedly, does not become

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<sup>27</sup> Cf. C.G. Jung: *Zur Phänomenologie des Geistes im Märchen*. In: C.G. Jung: *Bewußtes und Unbewußtes. Beiträge zur Psychologie*. Frankfurt a.M. 1957, pp. 92–143. – Marie-Louise von Franz: *Symbolik des Märchens*. Newly revised edition in 4 volumes. Zürich 2015–2018. – The adoption of folktale motifs and their psychological interpretation is discussed by D.L. Ashliman in: *Hermann Hesse's Fairy Tales and Their Analogs in Folklore*. In: *Wegbereiter der Moderne. Festschrift für Klaus Jonas*, ed. by Helmut Koopmann and Clark Muenzer. Tübingen 1990, pp. 88–113.

<sup>28</sup> Joseph Mileck: *Hermann Hesse. Dichter – Sucher – Bekenner*. Munich 1979, p. 115.

<sup>29</sup> Johannes Cremerius, 'Schuld und Sühne ohne Ende. Hermann Hesses psychotherapeutische Erfahrungen'. In: *Literaturpsychologische Studien und Analysen*. Ed. by Walter Schönau. Amsterdam, 1983, p. 201.

<sup>30</sup> Letter to Georg Reinhart, June 25, 1919. In: *Gesammelte Briefe*, vol. 1, see footnote 15, p. 404.

meaningless simply because that meaning may take a different form for each person. Indeed, it is precisely in this variability that the texts' significance resides. Mark Boulby makes a similar argument, which, if taken strictly, could be read as a prohibition on thinking, when he claims: "the psychoanalytic approach to this work (...) would destroy *Iris*, without understanding it. (...) *Iris*, in the last resort, lives in its own symbols, Hesse's symbols."<sup>31</sup>

In *Iris*, the dynamic of the search—intended to symbolize the process of psychological individuation—collapses into the fantasy of abolishing the *principium individuationis* through delusion, ecstatic vision, and death. The tale thus glorifies, through Romantic imagery, the return of the repressed, rather than—what its structure would lead one to expect—analyzing it. The central symbol of the descent into the iris chalice is interpreted in the text itself as a journey inward. This interpretation is likely, among other things, a rationalizing defense against the manifestly sexual-incestuous connotations of the image. Hermann Burger, in an essay, has attempted to explain Hesse's flight from the present as stemming from a culturally instilled fear of sexuality.<sup>32</sup> *Iris* provides the illustrative material for this thesis.

While the protagonists of German *Bildungsromane* in the tradition of *Wilhelm Meister*, like the patients of psychoanalysis, gradually learn to renounce and eventually let go of their delusions of grandeur—managing, in most cases, to adapt themselves to societal realities — Hesse's narratives typically culminate in grandly stylized withdrawal from society, in mystically veiled regression, in Romantic longing for death.

This phenomenon must not be understood merely as an expression of the author's 'narcissistic' conflict and fantasy structures. It also possesses, as a literary expression of the *Lebensphilosophie* [philosophy of life] of Neo-Romanticism, a historically typical dimension. The irrationalism of the *Lebensphilosophie* cultivated ecstasy, dream, and mystical immersion in the stream of life as avenues of escape from the suffering of isolation. The moment of death was particularly emphasized as the ultimate conscious experience of liberation from the *principium individuationis*. Since isolation can be overcome only in the moment of death, *Lebensphilosophie* fixates on death and its glorification. In his study of the cult of childhood in

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<sup>31</sup> Mark Boulby: *Hermann Hesse. His Mind and Art*. Ithaca, N.Y. 1967, p. 127.

<sup>32</sup> Hermann Burger: *Eine Stunde hinter Mitternacht. Zum Ästhetizismus in Hesses Frühwerk*. In: *Ders.: Als Autor auf der Stör*. Frankfurt a.M. 1987, pp. 141–157.

literature around 1900,<sup>33</sup> Wolf Wucherpennig has worked out the *Lebensphilosophie*-based foundations of the motifs—so favored by Hesse as well—of a yearning retreat from social engagement into dream and play, into intoxication and death, into the security of childhood. Especially the anti-intellectual writings of Ludwig Klages constitute an astonishingly precise philosophical counterpart to the underlying meaning of Hesse’s narratives, as it emerges from the suggestive, conjectural-biographical endings of his stories.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Wolf Wucherpennig: *Kindheitskult und Irrationalismus in der Literatur um 1900. Friedrich Huch und seine Zeit*. Munich 1980, esp. pp. 208–241.

<sup>34</sup> Originally published in German as: Schönau, Walter. *Hesses grandiose Konjunktural-Autobiographien. Zum Märchen Iris*. In B. Götz, O. Gutjahr, and I. Roebing (eds.), *Verschwiegenes Ich. Vom Un-Ausdrücklichen in autobiographischen Texten*. Pfaffenweiler, 1993, pp. 187–206. Translation and abstract by Maria Kardaun, authorized by the author in July 2025.