On Hesse’s Der Steppenwolf: how creatively actual a modern literary artwork can lively be?

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Abstract
Having in mind Hermann Hesse’s Der Steppenwolf and most specifically “Harry Hallers Aufzeichnungen” and “Tractat vom Steppenwolf” as true examples of the creative relationship between inner actual life and literature, this papers reflects on the influence of the unconscious upon the conscious in what it refers to the creation of symbols whose totality summons the multiple meanings an archetype can dispose of to concentrate on how the psychic phantasy energy is capable of giving birth to a literary artwork whose modernity lies on the interaction between individual symptoms and universal symbols lying in everyone’s psyche.

Keywords: Unconscious-conscious, symptom-symbol, psychic energy, archetype, modern literary artwork-depth psychology

1.
Along the preface to “Harry Hallers Aufzeichnungen”, Hesse prepares the addressee of the by then unexpectedly not yet applauded (Unseld, 1973, p. 112) novel Der Steppenwolf (1927) to accept the autobiographical records of a midlife, unsocial writer self-named Steppenwolf (Hesse, VII, 1982, pp. 183, 198, 201). His artwork core values underline a close relationship between art and real life because any addressee can share the hero’s response to life demands and challenges (Gajek, 1977, pp. 186-7, 192).

Let us not forget the severe economic depression Germany lived during the Weimar Republic: hyperinflation, unemployment, currency depreciation, industrial production under Ford-Taylor method (Vogt, 1997, pp. 362-4) to understand the hero’s behaviour amidst the civilisation contextualization better too. On account of this historical situation, one can from the start be alert thus to a kind of general neurosis lived by many after the Great War while attending directly to Haller’s report of his depression (Hesse, 1982, VII, p. 202). His crossing hell’s fire, plunging into chaos, deeply suffering from all evil life contains (Hesse, 1982, VII, pp. 203-4). Hesse’s narrative skills offer his primal message: symbolic meaning just behind a thinly woven prosaic detail net (Leary, 1977, pp. 33-4) while asking and answering to how does such a crisis and spiritual healing come about (Hesse, 1982, XI, p. 53).

As a matter of fact Haller’s records prove how an artwork is the result of the phantasy driven creativity typical of an “idealistic” artist who incorporates every longing, intuition, dream to metamorphose himself such as the one Hesse defines in “Phantasien” (1918) (Hesse, 1982, X, pp. 63-4, 66). A fantasy-imagination outcome (pathologische Phantasie) wherein chaos and cosmos act mutually inside the hero was written to reach every reader’s soul: not as a typical single ill-minded patient’s outcome but as a whole generation’s. A kind of facts “translation” (Hesse, 1982, VII, pp. 203-4) its author presents while giving form to what concerns the individual transpersonal reality so that the singular addressee can wonder about that general neurosis common to many survivors of the Great War and therewith attend to humanity’s universal constants (Kirchhoff, 1977, pp. 17-8, 27-28). Therefore such a narrative cannot immediately be identified with the need to express the hero’s inner voice - modern artist’s or patient’s unconscious – because it expresses a transitivity by which every modern artwork promotes an in-depth dialogue with its recipient beyond its apparently empirical features record (Ribeiro, 2003, p. 81). As a matter of fact, this single soul’s biography gets its universal extent whenever its single hero features reveal their archetypal nature (Kirchhoff, 1977, p. 18). Every literary artwork always keeps a peculiar relationship to reality; moreover, the interaction between these two entities is always as much rich as the relationship between literature and truth since it owes everything to improbability. That is why an autobiographical report such as Haller’s must be understood as an actual piece of literary narrative whose sincerity is but the result of an irony fiction-exercise in order to get the addressee’s attention, counting then on his generosity to understand the artwork beyond its immediate significance.

Le rapport entre littérature et vérité est toujours aussi improbable que le rapport de littérature à réalité. Il
2.

The addressee assimilates Haller’s half-wolf half human self-definition relevance by learning about the psychic conflict which tears the hero apart. Attending to the psychotic symptoms explanation (Jung, 1979, p. 151-7) he witnesses the hero’s how-off-the-how solution to put an end to his devastating inner struggle between his feeling-emotion-animal and his reason-understanding-human divided soul. “H. Haller’s records” clarify his neurotic attitude; but shall this artwork create a fictitious reality which goes beyond personal feelings too, or does its creativity lie in the strangeness, in the originality of the chosen images whose abstract sense (Jung, 1979, pp. 81, 89) turns as broad and complex as nature itself is? Hesse himself, in “Künstler und Psychoanalyse” (1918) states how a great poet listens carefully to every fantasy and fictitious “hints” he can recover from his remote unconscious collective layers so that his attitude towards truth, self and social commitment gets more and more engaged (Hesse, 1982, X, p. 49, 51, 53). Does, in fact, such a never-ending process of associations - illustrated along every literary artwork discourse - make such images autonomous enough from the conscious and allow us to define them as symbols or are they but symptoms (Jung, 1979, p. 81-3)? Wouldn’t it be better to understand this literary artwork as a result of a in status nascendi psychic process such as an “autonomous complex” (Jung, 1979, p. 90) and a sort of training exercise carried out to transform everyday language into a piece of art as Hesse asks in “Sprache”? (Hesse, 1982, XI, pp. 183, 197).

3.

Hesse’s main goal is not but to “open the world of the soul to his epoch”, as he declares in “Bekenntnis des Dichters” (1929) (Hesse, 1982, XI, p. 244). He knows how to foster magic using the literature essentials - as he asseverates in “Magie des Büchern” (1930) – since writing and reading have been, “as secret arts”, disposing ever since of magic, ancient, infinite codes to offer mankind’s singularity and indispensable its energy is: under such a psychic environment an individual generates thoughts, sensations, feelings, and intuitions with all the benefits for his future development (Jung, 1981, p. 500). Such a “document” belonging to the material assets occasionally found by the hero functions like a narrative double meta-discourse:

1. to be used by the hero himself
2. as a means of lightening up the narrative discourse
3. concerning Haller’s individuation process interpretation.

Some of its relevant parts display the value of those symbols drawn from the deepest layer of the human soul and prove how creative they are to reform every individual’s life while valuing fantasy’s role within the conception of modern literary artwork.

The Treatise becomes, thus, an example of mise en abyme proving by then how “H. Haller’s Records” is a well-structured piece of autobiographical literary discourse whose deepest singularity is dependent on such a key to be creatively understood. Harry Haller, the protagonist, gets finally his literary, fictional, profile surpassing a mere memory report of an individual past life phase (Oster, 1997, pp. 132-5):

All of Hesse’s techniques [...] suggest a concept of the imagination which combines the nineteenth-century reconciliation of opposites with a twentieth-century meaning of psychological conflict. (Freedman, 2003, p. 35).

4.

Imagination gets its leadership, making one’s mental activity powerful enough to turn every artist into the architect of a new reality to be built using his libido - his “psychic energy”, according to Jung’s definition (Jung, 1981, p. 490). As a victim of major depression (Hesse, 1982, p. 211) Haller illustrates perfectly how the artist’s soul reacts in such a situation just as Jung clarified:

1. every psychic element also arises from the
individual unconscious since memories search to be understood and explained with the help of rational discourse (Jung, 1981, pp. 493-4); 2. every creative artist translates such psychic elements derived from his most in-depth life experience into a peculiar form whenever he feels how every underlying meaning always asks for the right interpretation (Jung, 1981, p. 496).

The Treatise describes Haller’s psychic situation (Hesse, 1982, VII, pp. 226-7) which is common to every artist’s solitude, sufferings and need for autonomy (Hesse, 1982, VII, pp. 226-7, 237), but it also comments the situation accurately under an allegory which is a form of systematization of the hero’s neurosis symptoms and solution too (Hesse, 1982, VII, p. 234).

Feeling half beast (wolf), Harry takes into account the right “ideal internalised as a feeling surrounding a repressed desire” shared by every Harry’s contemporary typical hyper-civilised European1. The narrator expresses his non-acceptance of the destructive path his contemporary European civilisation has chosen to follow.

At a first impression we might support this thesis: “H. Haller’s records” is an autobiographical narrative. Its preface defines it as the result of the author’s crisis; nevertheless, the addressee must not be confined to Haller’s personal experience which is above all meant to be a paradigm of his epoch social contradictions.

Moreover the preface author introduces the record’s autobiographical hero as an “idealist” artist depicting reality beyond usual time and space borders while also revealing “unintentionally” the lying paradox amidst his soul and the need to interpret and overcome it most conveniently while exemplifying Jung’s theorisation on modern abstract art according to the example of Picasso (Jung, 1979, pp. 153-4). Besides that, the Treatise author even considers Harry himself a fiction: “simplifying mythology” (Hesse, 1982, VII, p. 240).

On the one hand, the reader deals with the specific Haller’s case on the other with his paradigmatic social and psychic value. The latter is of utmost importance: the treatise’s unidentified author underlines the psychic value of his soul multiple pair of opposites (Hesse, 1982, VII, p. 241), the need to plunge into chaos and to assimilate and to practice humour as well (Hesse, 1982, VII, p. 238). Such psychic elements taken out of the personal experience become material to be invested with peculiar energy so that they reach the addressee’s conscience with clarity. In fact, every chosen life-fact carrying an emotional meaning is driven out of the chaotic and incomprehensible situation in which they move by the modern artist so that by his artwork a meaningful revelation might be transformed into a collective symbol - revelation or a concretisation of his fantasy (Jung, 1981, p. 55). Instead of a simple vision worked out by anamnesis - recalling a well-known situation common to both creator’s and addressee’s understanding (Jung, 1979, pp. 104-5) – one is offered a primal vision where peculiar animate or inanimate elements gain their new original and symbolic features as soon as the hero recovers his mythological features as Jung asserts along “Psychologie und Dichtung” [Psychology and Literature] (Jung, 1979, pp. 108-110).

The Treatise presents then a creative solution since if Steppenwolf’s character is not but a “fiction”, a “lie” (Hesse, 1982, VII, p. 240) - anything wouldn’t be better than fight it back with another “fiction”; and so every soul’s life is then compared to a stage drama wherein each soul feature corresponds to its character, in opposition to the unity of body which must be disguised to play the convenient character (Hesse, 1982, VII, pp. 242-3).

Is it not an outcome of the active imagination to compare every individual’s soul to an onion or a piece of cloth, whose different layers or threads correspond to the thinnest film where one’s deepest emotions are engraved? Instead of a surface-aesthetics (Oberflächenästhetik) (Hesse, 1982, VII, p. 243) one is asked to attend to a deep-surface-aesthetics by means of which the way to totality is offered by:

1- man’s psyche seen as a stage theatre where mother-nature versus spirituality “characters” goes on playing-fostering psychic energy all the time (Hesse, 1982, VII, p. 243); 2- the immortality path one chooses while accepting suffering, self-transformation under the guidance of Buddha or any other totality symbol and example of humble boldness (Hesse, 1982, VII, p. 246).

Stage theatre, onion or Buddha are actual examples of symbols in opposition to wolf-human allegory: they help configure a correct and prospective vision of the soul as a response of one’s active imagination to overcome the desperate psychotic phase he experiences. Using artwork every fictionalised element causes the literary narrative to be understood as part of a broader - therefore a fragment - and hidden narrative flowing in the collective unconscious within which:

1- the hero becomes a mythological hero, and certain symbols reveal their archetypal meaning, 2- the artwork shows itself as an all times narrative and primal vision paradigm (Jung, 1979, p. 113). The dynamics of this creative process exemplifies the unconscious leadership (Jung, 1979, p. 86) during the creation process of every modern literary discourse wherein symbols constantly play

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a decisive and vivid role. As part of the collective culture, they develop such a complex nature provided with a hidden and remote meaning that all the psychic functions are called to dispose of an adjusted interpretation proving that every symbol is not but an accumulation of several meaning layers juxtaposed through humanity eras and cultures (Jung, 1981, pp. 518-20).

By the Treatise end, Haller ought to imagine another symbol: a garden whose vegetable species are important enough to make these essential either to the garden or to the gardener. The latter will become riper after learning the value of every species; the former more balanced since nature itself will attain that equilibrium by means of which only totality can be the best result of unity within diversity. New psychic energy will make eternity thereafter be as constant as serenity will be the signal for every human being living under a live humour (Hesse, 1982, VII, pp. 249-50, 238-9).

Symbolic meaning cannot, therefore, be immediately understood because the energy born out of the unconscious (Jung, 1980, p. 78-79) gathers so many associated meanings that the intellect becomes unable to apprehend all of them at a time - since only the unconscious disposes of that innate capacity to give chance to a synthesis independent enough of the individual experience to create symbols whose roots emerge out of the collective unconscious proving the vast creativity our phantasy can afford - according to Jung's “Analytische Psychologie und dichterisches Kunstwerk” [Analytical Psychology and Literary Artwork] (Jung, 1979, p. 93).

5.

This process arises whenever a modern artist like Haller sees himself no longer as the hero of his record's artwork but above all the paradigm of humanity - therefore not a projection of its creator anymore. The latter feels all the more the need to supply that element which becomes a symbol with abstract meaning what reveals that meaning and energy are accompanied by an essential latent emotion whose density helps turn the symbol into an archetype. As long as Haller feels that conscious life arrives closer to a dead end and becomes inoperative and indifferent to his opposites struggle, he notices that psychic energy is not allowed to express itself. Every sort of response offered by his unconscious is then restrained, or unaccepted, inducing then a ferocious activity of the unconscious which becomes as much active as the need to propose a solution to solve that restraint is urgent: out of this energy surplus there appears an outbreak of engendered forms whose value as synthesis-symbol is decisive for the individual's further life- as a matter of fact such a symbol is of capital importance for the further life of the individual cause it contains a creative solution send by the unconscious to overcome the psychic crisis he is in (Ribeiro, 2007, pp. 183-4). Such symbols like the ones already pointed out show how welcome is to reunite contradictory features provoking an interaction between the conscious and the unconscious and making it essential to overcome such psychic stage charged with paradox meaning (Jung, 1981, p. 520-1, 512-3). If Haller wouldn't be living a psychic disturbance, and his unconscious wouldn't be responding as a compensation (Jung, 1981, p. 486) and “self-regulating” process, there wouldn't arise any solution to make him reconquer his psychic balance as it happens with the garden symbol whose message includes the ability to regain one's place back into the community and one's individuality too. Artwork such as the “H. Haller’s Records” will be staging the performance of a dynamic process typical of the collective psychic instability/inaadaptability in any individual's soul (Jung, 1979, pp. 95-6), showing how paradigmatically real and useful such a fiction might become. Its author needs not to identify himself with the work he wrote nor with the fragment - Treatise - he included in his “Records” anymore (Jung, 1979, p. 83). He shows instead how vital his artwork is to promote aesthetic fruition of the entire narrative: he stimulates a latent criticism without proposing any direct meaning. It becomes clear how Steppenwolf’s nature parabolic meaning is surpassed by Buddha’s mythological features every time the narrator makes such an analogy. The garden symbol reinforces the latter's compensatory character – this time an image borrowed from the collective unconscious on account of either the individual’s or the collective’s soul profit emotionally triggered. Neither Haller's records nor the Treatise result indeed from Haller's neurosis (Jung, 1979, p. 77, 82) although they might as fiction narrative present imaginary characters as the Steppenwolf or scenes or images created by phantasy: they do not even prove how an artwork can be a response to a psychic crisis (Jung, 1979, p. 82). A psychic activity may certainly feed modern artworks; this, in turn, will allow us to analyse it under the depth psychological patterns (Jung, 1979, p. 76), because by means of its symbols emotions are so determinant that their meaning might be better understood with the help of a language wherein creativity proposed by the unconscious narrative will indeed bear unprecedented originality.

6.

The powerful garden metaphor is then an appeal to fantasy; only everyone’s creativity can draw the right archetypal image nature can offer during such cases of psychic distress. Such a totality symbol
(Jung, 1981, pp. 512-3) reveal how intelligible psychic reality can be in order to promote the addresses’ completeness (Ribeiro, 2011, p. 141) because the archetype’s content only reveals how the unconscious dynamics should be preserved in order to keep the Self active and alive and pushing life creatively forward. By comparing the garden and its fountain to the temenos with its fountain of life whose water - energy - “emerges” out of the “instinct world” (Jung, 1975, p. 143, 148), Jung praises such inner contributions without which no realisation of the Self can exist (Jung, 1975, pp. 143-5, 148). The garden, initially taken as a space, symbolises the way to acquire that wisdom every individual needs to overcome disquiet and anxiety and obtain psychic balance and peacefulness (Kirchhof, 1977, pp. 17-8) i.e. immortality, because instead of any static space it is meant a dynamic time - long path towards human individuation - superior personality (höher Mensch) (Hesse, 1982, VII, p. 248).

7.

Gardens have from ancient times been a sign of man’s mastery over nature (Zuylen, 1994, p. 47). This is perhaps because the garden had become the metaphor for “God Almighty[’s]” first creation, as Francis Bacon (1561-1626) wrote in 1597, in his essays entitled “Of Gardens” (XLVI). Also because gardens have always been a paradigm of civilisation’s progress as being at the same time a sign of grandeur and elegance, Ver perpetuum [perpetual spring] and of “greater perfection” too (Bacon, 1908, pp. 211, 224-5). A century later, H. Walpole (1717-1797) also referred the art of gardening as one which was to achieve the same effects nature has in all its seasonal splendour over the attentive promenader (Walpole, 2000, p. 69).

The effect of harmony liberated from the predominance of magnificence, dignity and the exact and limiting proportion of the value of each part thus enabling him to contemplate and feel the simplicity imagined by the artist (Walpole, 2000, pp. 59, 62-3, 69, 71). It was important to attain the balance between internal and external organisation in order to feel, according to the acclaimed Russell Page, a psychic pleasure: “faire d’un jardin une oasis dans lequel un simple moment revêt une autre dimension” (Page, 1994, p. 63) and, stimulating his creativity by producing a work of art (Page, 1994, pp. 62, 95) that enhanced the limited space of the garden, making it seem infinite through the exuberant dissimilation of its respective limits (Page, 1994, pp. 60, 79, 77, 72, 74, 84, 89, 95-7).

Gardens are to be perceived as living experiences wherein life itself is wisdom practice and symbols of the paradise centre a sign of the tamed nature and cosmos miniature - one’s understanding of nature’s rhythm and a symbol of a superior personal metamorphosis too (Chevalier, 1969, pp. 531-33). Modern garden metaphor highlights that primal axiom: simplicity within complexity as long as opposites’ union shows how artwork phantasy is decisive to stimulate human psychic wholeness as a result from the interaction between the transcendent (transzendent) and the living (lebendige) function enabling every reader to deal with the contradictions by which modern life harasses him constantly (Jung, 1971, pp. 521-2).

8.

Hesse re-enacts then a myth common to tradition so that, in his age of incipient globalisation, literature while playing the resilient part could point out the need to change one’s way of feeling and acting. He represents such paradox features provoking the addressee to emulate a hero: a modern myth holder of other moral values. In 1926 he defended, in “Moderne Versuche zu neuen Sinngebungen”, a “new awakening of metaphysical desideratum, spirituality’s formation, life’s interpretation” (Hesse, 1986, p. 366). The addressee would project himself into the hero’s behaviour to feel how aesthetics unites itself with ethics getting closer to the main target: literature as the representation of soul’s life creatively recall of the values present in phantasy-magic features everyone is provided with (Schärf, 2004, pp. 90-91).

Instead of “manoeuvring” language and making the narrative unintelligible as modern narrative also claims, Hesse makes use of phantasy-magic features to reinforce its scope (Schärf, 2004, pp. 93-4). By applying modern depth psychology principles to his artwork, Hesse reacts against his epoch technological optimism, bringing forth values that emerge from the unconscious sphere straightening thus the ties between hero-addressee-narrator (Huber, 2004, p. 197). He reinvents a literary platform by which good and evil interact symbolically and offers an adjustable solution (Huber, 2004, pp. 198-9) to his time uniting thus tradition to modernity (Huber, 2004, p. 197). Being a true neo-romantic, Hesse uses a simple language and the traditional bildungsroman structure narrative representing his hero in constant opposition to his society (Huber, 2004, p. 177, 181), succeeding in attaining his psychic goals: the realisation of the Self. Hesse puts then forth another principle of his artwork modernity: modern man’s identity results not only from a personal self-achievement but also from his ability to dominate and to understand the symbolic discourse by which the “nerv[e] mystic” also speaks out loud (Bahr, 2004, p. 156). Acting so Hesse moves away from naturalist, art for art’s sake and from any other avant-guard literary movements (Huber, 2004, p. 178, 181). Nevertheless Hesse’s spirit of modernity
remains in this novel: he rejects routine, renews old standards of creation while “hunting the secrets of human nature” and enacts self-scrutiny (Gay, 2009, p. 2-5), recreating emotions and worlds experienced by the narrator’s and his characters’ psychic dynamics whose relevance he attaches to the subjectivity which modern artwork discourse cannot do without (Vieira, 2007, pp. 22-3, 27-30).

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