New Media, Virtual Reality, Flawed Utopia? Reflections on Thomas Mann’s *Der Zauberberg* and Hermann Hesse’s *Der Steppenwolf*

Concentrating specifically on *Der Steppenwolf*, this paper analyses the novel as a narrative that can rightly claim a place alongside German novels of high modernism by authors such as Thomas Mann, Alfred Döblin and Robert Musil. Several remarkable parallels with *Der Zauberberg* are noted. *Der Steppenwolf* as a work of fiction may be less well constructed than *Siddhartha* and *Narziss und Goldmund*, but nor does it offer easy, schematic solutions to the issues that preoccupied Germany’s modernist writers. It is pervaded by a deep sense of cultural crisis, by a no less intense self-consciousness, and by the perception that only a utopian resolution can counter the malaise of the present. It takes an extremely detailed look at the effects of a culture that had its origins in the 1920s, with its shallow enthusiasm for the cinema, the radio and gramophone. What distinguishes Hesse from the cultural pessimists of his time is that the novel presents not so much a lamentation of the cultural losses necessitated by this process, but endeavours to diagnose the ills of the present and struggles to find a means of validating the new experiences as a redemptive form of virtual living.

The German novel of the 18th and 19th centuries is something of a Cinderella who is very rarely to be seen at the European literary ball – that ball that is so full of lively texts that in one way or another enshrine and exemplify European realism. Yet in the 20th century the situation changes radically. Between 1924 and 1933 German culture produces five novels that are absolute classics of European High Modernism. They are Thomas Mann’s *Der Zauberberg* (1924), Hermann Hesse’s *Der Steppenwolf* (1927), Alfred Döblin’s *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1929), Hermann Broch’s *Die Schlafwandler* (1932), and Robert Musil’s *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* (1933). All these novels share three concerns: an acute awareness of cultural crisis, a high degree of narrative self-consciousness, and an urgently expressed utopian aspiration which, while present throughout the novels, can be felt with particular intensity in the closing sections of the texts in question.

In their different ways, all these novels engage in an intertextual debate with the tradition of the German *Bildungsroman* as a humanistic project. That is to say, an attempt is made to clear a space in the confusions, tensions and distortions of modern culture for a vindication of the human subject in his or her wholeness. Thereby they remain true to that tradition because it is possible to argue that the *Bildungsroman* was constantly imbued with the need to defend humanity against the inroads of contemporary thinking that threatened to
diminish the human self. Wieland’s *Agathon* seeks to validate the notion of human autonomy in an increasingly materialist, reductionist culture. Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister* project explores the complex modalities at work in the transition from aristocratic to bourgeois culture, stressing both the liberation of creative energy and the constriction of human selfhood that the era of specialisation brings in its wake. Stifter’s *Der Nachsommer* is the utopian response to the mayhem of unleashed subjectivity which, for Stifter, was incarnated in the 1848 revolution. The world of the ‘Rosenhaus’ is one in which the empirical, often scientific exploration of the material world becomes assimilated to a resolutely conservative culture of scrupulous estate management. Keller’s *Der grüne Heinrich* explores the dangers that flow from that instrumentalising of the imagination that is at the heart of capitalism.

In the 20th century the agencies that threaten the human self derive from a combination of disciplines, chiefly from physics, from the insights of Rutherford, Planck, Bohr, Einstein, and Heisenberg, but also from anatomy, physiology and biology. In a lecture given in 1927, the Cambridge mathematician and astronomer Arthur Eddington said:

> The external world of physics has become a world of shadows. In removing our illusions we have removed the substance, for indeed we have seen that substance is one of the greatest of our illusions.¹

The categories here – substance and shadow – will concern us again very soon. The inroads of modern science, radicalised by the subversive energies of Nietzsche’s and Freud’s thought, generate a climate of cognitive slippage which extends into the political realm. In this vacuum of values, this Vanity Fair of ideas and ideologies, the quest for a positing of the human self in its full endowment becomes as urgent as it is problematic, perhaps even chimerical. In Hesse’s *Der Steppenwolf* (SW4, Pp.5–203) the crisis stems from the intense Americanisation and commercialisation of culture that is so offensive to Harry Haller. At every turn foxtrot, shimmy, boston and tango are being danced. Posters abound, advertising such entertainments as ‘Damenkapelle – Variété – Kino – Tanzabend’. A hedonistic drug culture arouses and instrumentalises human cravings. In response to these threats, Hesse seeks to mount a last-ditch defence of human wholeness.

In order to keep *Der Steppenwolf* in the context of the modernist novel, I shall refer to Mann’s *Der Zauberberg* throughout this paper.² At key points both novels specify particular instances of modern culture; at issue is the threat, appeal and omnipresence of the new media. Two passages from *Der Zauberberg* are especially pertinent in this context: one is the description of the visit to the cinema in the chapter entitled ‘Totentanz’. The film is an exotic love

² Page references given in brackets after quotations are to the edition Thomas Mann: *Der Zauberberg*. Frankfurt/M. 1996.