The Search for Stability and the Inevitability of Change in the Writings and Life of Hermann Hesse

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Abstract

How can human beings, whose main characteristic is to change constantly, find stability or internal stillness? This is a question that concerned Hermann Hesse his whole life. His answer to this question of stability itself changed over time. Hesse started with the belief that stability was acquired by dwelling on a farm, and ended with the conviction that stability as “stillness” is something human beings can never achieve. Hesse’s final answer is that we are wanderers, constantly incomplete, always in process of more.

In this project, I look closely at Hesse’s progress of thought from his first answer to his final answer. Hesse asks this question in his first novel Peter Camenzind (1904) and provides a final answer in one of his last novels, Narcissus and Goldmund (1930). I conduct my analysis through the close reading of these two novels, together with a study of Hesse’s historical background from his childhood to his mid-fifties. His historical background is necessary to understand the metamorphosis of his thought.

As a way of elucidating Hesse’s ideas, I compare them to Martin Heidegger’s and Jean-Paul Sartre’s philosophical theories. Hesse’s first answer is surprisingly similar to Heidegger’s belief that the way in which we, human beings, are in the world is by “dwelling.” Dwelling is our essence. His second answer leaves Heidegger aside, and mirrors instead Sartre’s theory that a person is what she makes of herself through her actions; there is no one specific essence that corresponds to the human being, and we are, in Sartre’s words, condemned to invent ourselves constantly.
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Introduction

The first book from Hermann Hesse I read was *Siddhartha*, a book he wrote in 1922 after a trip to India. My first encounter with him was astonishing. It was as if someone knew exactly what I was feeling and what I was searching for. Paulo Coelho, author of *The Alchemist*, wrote for a 2008 edition of *Siddhartha* these words. He describes perfectly what amazed me about this book:

Its simple prose and rebellious character echoed the yearnings of a generation that was seeking a way out of conformity, materialism and outward power. In a world where we could see the many lies of governments and the incapacity of leaders to propose a real alternative, Siddhartha emerged as a symbol; the symbol of those who seek the truth – their own truth. Hesse sensed ... this unrest, this intrinsic necessity of youth to unravel its path, the necessity we all have to claim what is truly and rightfully ours: our own life (Hesse, *Siddhartha* viii).

My curiosity about Hesse emerged from this novel. This curiosity led me to Bernhard Zeller’s book *Hermann Hesse: The Classic Biography*. I learned there that Hesse not only put words to my experience, but that he also spoke to thousands of young readers who lived during his time and thereafter.

The great impact Hesse’s writings had while he was first publishing his books did not last long, in part because Hesse’s books were prohibited in Germany for many years (during the First World War and then also during the Nazi Germany). Only during the 1970s, when Hesse’s works were translated and gained recognition in other countries, did scholars begin
studying his books again. Today, Hesse’s books, and especially his best-known novels, *Siddhartha, Demian* and *Steppenwolf*, continue in print and are read around the globe. Although few scholars have written about Hesse and his legacy in the last three decades, he has not been forgotten. He is a well-known writer and continues influencing readers. However, the shortage of contemporary analysis of his works prevented Hesse from being known as more than a good writer. The lack of scholarship on his writings has, I believe, led to a lack of attention on Hesse as a thinker and a guide for modern society. Hesse’s name is almost never mentioned in books and articles discussing existential issues. Hermann Hesse does not receive the attention he should receive today. This is one reason I am inspired to write about his novels. His is not a well-known name in existentialism, in contrast, say, to Franz Kafka or Albert Camus. Perhaps this is because he writes in a simple and accessible way. If this is true, I have a second motive to focus on Hesse’s works. I admire the ability to express deep realities in simple, creative ways. Hugo Ball, a close friend of Hesse, supports this theory. He wrote a biography of Hesse for his fiftieth birthday. There, he states, “this author does not love voluminous and sophisticated books; nor for others nor for him. He believes having talent is being able to conceal it. The art of writing consists in eliminating and saving, in reducing” (Ball 26).

I did not only choose to work on Hesse’s novels because I feel he should receive more attention and because of his simple way of writing. I also selected his novels because I share his concerns. Hesse was worried about a modern world that wants to homogenize its individuals. He grew up as a person who was never able to fit in, and suffered from that to the point of considering suicide. After accepting himself as different – or authentic – he
acknowledged the pressure he had suffered during his childhood and youth. He had almost abandoned his dream of becoming a writer because of this pressure. Hesse used his books to try to awaken society to what he had discovered: we can choose our own way of living life. Through his writings, he reminds us that, even when we think we are choosing, we are probably not. Social pressure, consumerism and capitalism, can make us think we are choosing. Hesse showed how spirituality, nature, art and poetry can help us awaken to reality – the real world and the real us. I share this concern, not only for society but also for myself. Hesse reminds me to continue working to make my life meaningful.

After reading *Siddhartha* and Zeller’s biography, I continued my journey as a Hesse follower. I read *Peter Camenzind*, the first published novel Hesse wrote shortly after overcoming his chaotic youth. I also read *Demian*, a novel inspired by the psychoanalysis that helped him clarify his childhood and youth in his early adulthood. I next read *Steppenwolf* and *Kurgast*, two novels Hesse wrote as a mature adult. And finally, I read *Narcissus and Goldmund*, a novel he wrote in his fifties, and his last and most coherent work, *The Glass Bead Game*. This last book earned him the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1946.

Having read books from each period of Hermann Hesse’s life, I summarize the main message of his works in this way: life flows, like a river. This statement is not new. Many philosophers have used this analogy before. The pre-Socratic Heraclitus of Ephesus, for example, used the image of a river to develop a theory about change, stability and flow in life. Heraclitus argued that we cannot step into the same river twice, because the river is constantly changing. The flow of the water of the river mirrors the constant change in an individual’s
reality: we are and we are not, we are the same and we are different at each moment of our lives.

Another example is Martin Heidegger, who defined the human being as a “being-possible.” In his analysis of death in Part I Division II of Being and Time, Heidegger argues that individuals need to recognize death as the ultimate and only certain possibility. By doing so, the individual realizes that being a person means “being incomplete,” always in process of more, or “being-possible,” because the only moment of completeness is death. Death is the only possibility we know without a doubt that will happen. In contrast to death, any other possibility in one’s life is unknown. Therefore, when we acknowledge the possibility of death, we open our eyes to two facts. First, the mystery of life. Until death, anything could happen. And, second, the power we have over our own life, in contrast to the lack of power we have over death. While we live, we can make possibilities come true through our choices. To Heidegger, an individual is a pure potentiality of possibilities.

As with Heraclitus and Heidegger, Hesse was interested in the changeability of human life. However, he focused on an aspect they did not consider: human being’s desire for permanence. Hesse wondered, how can a creature who is pure change and possibility be so desperate about finding stability? I think he implicitly formulates this question in his first novel Peter Camenzind. This question follows Hesse all of his life. In this period of his youth, when he was feeling completely lost and yearning for a place to dwell, he wrote:

    Across the sky, the clouds move,
    Across the fields, the wind,
    Across the fields the lost child
Of my mother wanders.

Across the street, leaves blow,
Across the trees, birds cry –
Across the mountains, far away,
My home must be (Hesse, Poems 5).

In this 1902 poem “Across the Fields…” Hesse wrote, at the age of twenty-five, a word about his desire for stability. Home is only an image. What Hesse really wanted was internal stillness. In this stage of life, Hesse’s models were peasants and farmers, who, he believed, were the only ones able to live in a still and stable way. He even tried this lifestyle himself with his first wife. He felt satisfied at first, “here for the first time I permitted myself the pleasant dream of being able to create and earn such a thing as a place to call my own” (Zeller 59). But, after a year, Hesse started to feel unsettled with this type of life: “It is pleasant to sit at a strong table, a sound roof over one’s head, a dependable wine to drink, a large and well-filled lamp burning, and in the next room, door open, a woman playing the piano, sections from Chopin, and candlelight… But suddenly I wonder: Are you really happy?” (Zeller 60). It took Hesse decades to accept the fact that he was not born to live like a peasant, and then many years more to understand that not even peasants live a stable life: human beings have no place to rest their heads. Hesse realized that, if he wanted to find stillness and rest, he would have to work all his life to be constantly updated with himself. All individuals experiment with changes throughout their lives. Stability comes from acknowledging these changes. Stability does not mean lack of change. Hesse’s originality lies in his focus on the paths and conflicts of the
individual – an individual who, like him, is brave enough to accept the changes within himself.

In his own words, “From Camenzind to Steppenwolf and Josef Knecht, they can all be interpreted as a defense (sometimes also as an SOS) of the personality, the individual self” (Zeller 158).¹

In the present work, I will analyze the development of and answer to the question Hesse posed in his youth and that followed him all of his life. That is, how can human beings, whose main characteristic is to change constantly, find stability or internal stillness?

What does stability mean for a being that, in Heidegger words, is a “being-possible”? Hesse first answered this question in his novel Peter Camenzind, where he argued that to find stability he needed a place to dwell, a home. Twenty-five years later, in Narcissus and Goldmund, he provided a completely different answer: there is no one, clear way of finding meaning or stability. In his youth, he understood stability incorrectly, as merely external. In contrast, Hesse then discovered stability does not depend on an external place to dwell, but in the capacity to feel always at home within yourself. The way of creating this internal home, is by constantly updating ourselves with our changes. Stability is a never-ending process. This is why happiness or meaningfulness are not something we acquire once and retain forever, but something we need to work on constantly. Through these questions Hesse explored the meaning of fundamental concepts, such as home, roots, education, art, poetry, and authenticity. These topics appear repeatedly through all his novels.

¹ Camenzind is Hesse’s main character in Peter Camenzind, Steppenwolf is the nickname Hesse gives to his main character Henry Heller in Steppenwolf, and Josef Knecht is the protagonist of his last book The Glass Bead Game.
With an aim of showing Hesse’s process of thought regarding these questions, I will look at two of his novels: his first published novel Peter Camenzind, written in 1904, and one of his last big works, Narcissus and Goldmund, completed in 1930. I chose these two novels for several reasons. First, Hesse wrote them in completely different periods of his life, the first one at the age of twenty-seven and the second one in his fifties. Peter Camenzind presents the ideas and concerns of a young Hesse. This young Hesse has a romantic and idyllic image of himself and of the still unknown world. On the other hand, Narcissus and Goldmund expresses the experiences and findings of a mature Hesse. From 1904 to 1930, for instance, Hesse went through two divorces, the death of his parents, the First World War and several meaningful trips, all of which shaped his perspective of life. The second reason why I chose these two books is that, as I already mentioned above, I believe it is in Peter Camenzind where Hesse first formulates the question about change and stability in a human being’s life. This question is central in Narcissus and Goldmund as well, where the author presents a completely different conclusion than the one he presented in Peter Camenzind twenty-five years before. Hesse discovered in his fifties that possibility and stability are not opposites but, on the contrary, complementary and dependent on each other. The last reason for my selection is the resemblance between the two main characters of these novels. These main characters represent Hesse himself at different stages of his life. Goldmund and Peter are both Hesse, but changed by time and experience.

Hesse’s works are, without doubt, “Existential Literature.” His thought was shaped by several existential philosophers and poets from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, especially Nietzsche and Goethe. Also, he lived during a period of crisis in Europe.
Existentialism flourished as an answer to this crisis. What I mean with the classification "Existential Literature" is that all his books and poems deal with issues explored by existential philosophers. Because of this influence of existential philosophy on Hesse, I will refer in my work to two existentialists, as they helped me both to illuminate and support Hesse’s ideas: Martin Heidegger and Jean Paul Sartre. In the first chapter of this essay, I explore whether the thoughts of Heidegger and Sartre were known and intentionally considered by Hesse, as a German writer, or if the resemblances are the product of his living in the same period. I also examine in Chapter One how Hesse’s historical background can help explain his concern with existential issues.

In Chapter Two, I explore Hesse’s awakening to his reality of “being-possible” and the beginning of his lifelong question: how can I find stability if I am always changing? I explore the reasons why Hesse’s answer to this question in this stage of his life is in tune with Martin Heidegger’s concept of “dwelling.”

Finally, in Chapter Three, I analyze Hesse’s shift of perspective regarding the question of stability. Hesse concludes in *Narcissus and Goldmund* that a place to dwell is not the answer to the problem of change. Instead, the answer is that change is not a problem, but a human reality. I show how the transformation of his thought is already evident in *Siddhartha*, but arrives to its zenith in *Narcissus and Goldmund*. In the end, Hesse’s understanding of life is closer to Jean-Paul Sartre’s “existence precedes essence” than to Heidegger’s “being-dwelling.”
Chapter 1: Hermann Hesse, the Existential Writer

In this first chapter, I will explore the personal and historical aspects that might have contributed to transform Hesse into an existential writer. I divide these aspects into two sections. First, I consider Hesse’s family, social environment, and the important historical facts that took place during his lifetime. Second, I discuss Hesse’s direct relationship with existentialism. Apart from explaining why Hesse is so concerned with existential issues, this first chapter provides historical background useful for understanding the chapters that follow.

Back to Hesse’s Origins

Humiliating though it would be to us, I am nevertheless seriously wondering if we should not put him into an institution or farm him out to strangers. We are too nervous and too weak for him. . . He seems to have a gift for everything: he observes the moon and the clouds, improvises on the harmonium, makes quite amazing pencil and pen drawings, sings very ably when he has a mind to, and he is never at loss for rhymes (Mileck, Life and Art 7).

This is an excerpt from a letter Johannes Hesse wrote in 1883 referring to Hermann, his six-year old son. This letter shows that Hesse had, since his early childhood, a special sensibility that made him open to existential concerns. His mother Marie Hesse also describes Hermann in several of her journal entries, as both difficult and deep. She wrote, for example, “the little fellow is unusually lively, extremely strong, very willful, and really astonishing bright for a four-year-old . . . This inner struggling against his tyrannical spirit, ranting and raging, leaves me quite limp . . .” (Mileck, Life and Art 5).
These notes may also reveal information about Hesse’s relationship with his parents. Since his early years, Hesse was a constant concern for them. The reason for their concern was probably their love for him and also the inevitable expectations many parents have of their children, expectations that were intensified by the fact that two of Hesse’s siblings died as infants. Hesse, who was a very sensitive boy, most likely felt this concern as a rejection from his parents. His relationship with them was never easy. Hesse also worried them constantly, because he was problematic at school since his first years. Mileck, in his biography on Hermann Hesse, writes: “A hypersensitive, lively, and extremely headstrong child, Hesse proved to be a constant of annoyance and despair to his parents and teachers” (Life and Art 5). After a couple of years of improper behavior, he finally became more manageable, “by 1886, however, when his family returned to Calw from Basel, Hesse had become quite manageable. Although school held little attraction for him, and his teachers even less, he was able with almost no effort to stand near the top of his class” (Mileck, Life and Art 7). When Hesse’s attitudes improved, together with the fact that he had outstanding intellectual capacities, his parents began to think he could become a theologian and a priest, as his father Johannes. They encouraged him to prepare for the examinations required to enter one of the most prestigious Protestant seminaries of Württemberg, and Hesse did so well that was accepted to Maulbronn Seminary. His parents were very pleased with him, but Hesse was not able to maintain this lie for more than a year. After a year of living in the seminary, he escaped, and then fell into a crisis. This crisis led him to two suicide attempts. As a small child, Hesse was a free soul, an artist. But his parents managed to “normalize” him. In his adolescence, Hesse was no longer
able to fit their model. His real self wanted to break free. I believe this marks the start of Hesse’s life as a searcher of truth and authenticity.

An experience that harmed him and made him question all that his parents had given him – values, religion, ideals – was the time his parents placed him in Schall’s school for children with mental retardation and emotional problems. His parents made this decision after Hesse’s first attempt of suicide. But for Hesse, this was another act of rejection. He wanted to be at home with them, and instead they sent him away. Mileck describes Hesse’s response: “Infuriated and deeply hurt by what to him was unmistakable parental rejection, fifteen-year-old Hesse began to inveigh against the establishment, his father, adult authority, and religion .. .” (Life and Art 10). His innate sensibility, his complex relationship with his parents and his emotional instability, alienated Hesse from what is commonly defined as the “normal world.” He never felt part of this world, a reason why he was able to contemplate reality as an outsider, detecting the dangers of the modern world around him. Throughout his books, we can acknowledge this outsider standpoint from reality. Hesse had the standpoint of an existentialist. Each of his books from Peter Camenzind to the Glass Bead Game includes criticisms of modern society and the bourgeois life. Hesse was continually critical of the task of fitting into the expectations of others and into the world considered normal in Western Europe.

The history of both of Hesse’s parents and the family into which he was born can also help a reader to understand Hesse’s interest in existential issues. Hesse’s parents were both missionaries and immigrants. They both suffered from uprootedness and developed an ability to adapt to new places. In addition, their work as missionaries necessitated that they were on the move during their entire adult lives. They moved several times after Hesse was
born. By age fourteen, Hesse had already lived in six different places. Their constant migration may explain Hesse’s concern with the idea of dwelling, homelessness, and permanence. It may also help to justify Hesse’s incapacity to feel comfortable in any place other than the family’s particular house in any given location. His family was the only constant each time they moved to a new town. In Chapter Two, I will explore in more detail how this constant uprootedness influenced Hesse.

A second important feature in his family that contributed to Hesse’s inclination toward existentialism was religion. Both of Hesse’s parents were fervent Christians, and Hesse was raised in a rigorist and pious environment. Since childhood, he was acutely aware of what his family called “sin” and “evil,” and he suffered from not being able to control his strong passions to his parents’ satisfaction. By the time he wrote *Narcissus and Goldmund*, he seemed to have overcome this issue completely. But, growing up in this moralist environment clearly shaped his ideas. His family’s intense religiosity may have triggered Hesse’s incessant search for the truth regarding what he saw as the dilemma of two opposing worlds: the world of the senses and the world of the mind. He tried very hard to reject the world of the senses, until he was finally able to reconcile himself with this world, around age fifty. As I will relate in Chapter 3, this reconciliation is evident in *Narcissus and Goldmund*.

Yet another aspect of his life helps a reader to understand his writing and his relation to existentialism. That is, the complex period of time in which he lived. This period was marked by the First World War and by the emergence of several important existential philosophers of the twentieth century. In this project, I will attend in particular to Jean-Paul Sartre and Martin Heidegger.
During the First World War, Hesse moved from Gaienhofen, Germany, to Berne, Switzerland, to work in the Prisoners of War Welfare Organization. His wife and his children stayed in Gaienhofen. Hesse was against the madness of nationalism, and he went to Switzerland to help German prisoners of war. The German press began to call him a traitor, and Hesse had many difficulties publishing his novels in Germany afterwards: “Hesse belonged with the dwindling number of German poets who, from the start, determinedly opposed chauvinism and barbarity, and called for peace. But the result was alienation and hate. The German press called him a ‘traitor’ and ‘wretch’.” (Zeller 81). During these years in service, he dedicated himself to providing prisoners with books and libraries. He went further to edit two journals specifically for German prisoners and published a series of books for them. His experiences during these years affected him deeply. Becoming keenly aware of the prisoners’ lack of freedom, Hesse began to reflect on his own freedom. In this moment of his life, he decided he was going to leave his wife and begin to take responsibility for his freedom, by seeking authenticity. Freedom and authenticity are two values and among the most important virtues shared by existentialists. During these years, Hesse wrote his novel Demian, which is about a man who “frees himself from his childhood and discovers his own limitless interior world . . . he discovers his true personality” (Zeller 85).

Finally, Hesse lived during the apogee of existentialism as a philosophical genre or tradition. In a world where reason, technology, and rapid urbanization were alienating people from their freedom and individuality, many thinkers rose and called for an existential standpoint. The most important existential standpoint is, by my own understanding, to consider and think reality, having the existence of each individual as the starting point. Their main
concerns were freedom, authenticity, individuality, consciousness, meaning, and the anguish of attending to each of these realities. Hesse shared all of these concerns, and he expressed them throughout his writing.

Hesse’s Self-Education Curriculum

Hermann Hesse was never able to finish formal education due to his emotional instability. His last attempt was in 1893, in a school in Cannstatt, the last one of five institutions he tried after Malbrounn Seminary. His parents finally relented, and found him a job as an apprentice in a bookshop. Hesse escaped from this place too, and he was allowed to stay in his parents’ home for six months, helping in his family’s business and garden. These six months were a significant moment in Hesse’s life, as it was in his grandfather’s library that he became passionate about books. When he was ten years old, he had already expressed his desire to become a writer. But now this desire was more serious. When Hesse expressed his wish to pursue a literary career, his parents decided this was not an option for him. When these glorious six months of his life at his family home were over, he started to work as an apprentice in a clock factory: “In early June 1894, after his father had denied him permission to leave home to independently prepare himself for a literary career, Hesse became an apprentice machinist in the Perrot tower-clock factory in Calw” (Mileck, Life and Art 13). This apprenticeship did not last long, and he finally ended in a place he was able endure: a bookshop in Tübingen. 1893 marked the beginning of Hesse’s self-education, a process that continued intensely during his years as an apprentice. He spent at least five years of his life working in these shops for long
hours, and spending all the remaining time reading books. He created his own curriculum, a curriculum that served as the ground for his career as a writer:

During his preceding two years in Cawl he had steeped himself in German literature of the eighteen and nineteenth centuries, and had become well acquainted with many of the major English, French, Scandinavian, and Russian authors of the same period. In Tübingen, he continued his prodigious reading but narrowed its scope drastically. For a time, he devoted himself exclusively to Goethe. Then he fell under the spell of the German romantics and of Novalis in particular (Mileck, *Life and Art* 15)¹.

Most of the writers Hesse was inspired by were philosophers who dealt with the large, thematic questions of human existence. These authors printed a philosophical style in Hesse. Goethe, who was one of Hesse’s main influences, inspired existential thinkers such as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Hegel, and Heidegger. We can also find in Hesse’s books and personal writings direct references to some philosophers; for example, Friedrich Nietzsche, Arthur Schopenhauer, Carl Jung, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Novalis. This suggests he was not only indirectly influenced by existential philosophy, but directly involved as well. Kathryn Punsly, a philosopher interested in Hesse, argues for this in her article “The Influence of Nietzsche and Schopenhauer on Hermann Hesse.” She notes that Hesse employed Nietzsche’s parable of the birds and the prey in his novel *Steppenwolf*, as the metaphor of the wolves and the sheep, and, in *Demian*, as the dichotomy between Cain and society (Punsly 5-6).

¹ “Novalis” was the pseudonym used by the poet, mystic and philosopher Georg Philipp Friedrich Freiherr von Hardenberg.
Two philosophers with whom I believe Hesse shared important ideas are Heidegger and Sartre. While it is difficult to argue that Hesse was directly influenced by them, their philosophical concepts have helped me to understand Hesse’s writing. Jean-Paul Sartre was much younger than Hesse. Sartre was born in France in 1905, when Hermann Hesse was already twenty-eight years old, and Sartre developed his main philosophical concepts and oeuvres after 1940. But, thematically, there is a helpful overlap between the two writers. In Chapter Three, I argue that Hesse’s ideas in *Narcissus and Goldmund* are close to Sartre’s theory that “essence precedes existence.” By the time Sartre published this theory in his book *Being and Nothingness* (1941) and even clearer in *Existentialism is a Humanism* (1946), sixteen years had already passed since Hesse had published *Narcissus and Goldmund*. Consequently, it is impossible to suggest Hesse’s ideas in this book were a direct reference to Sartre’s theory.

We could, perhaps, suggest that Sartre may have read Hesse’s novels, but I have not found such evidence. I suggest that Sartre’s and Hesse’s similarities are, therefore, attributable to the fact of their having lived and read philosophy during the early twentieth century.

In the case of Martin Heidegger, it is not so easy to discard the idea that his philosophy might have been known and directly employed by Hesse, as Heidegger was born in the same country as Hesse and only twelve years later, in 1889. I am interested in comparing Hesse’s ideas to Heidegger’s concepts of “being-possible” and “dwelling” in *Peter Camenzind*. Hesse wrote this book in 1904, when Heidegger was only fifteen-years old, so the similarities I found in *Peter Camenzind* are not directly related to Heidegger’s philosophy. Hesse may have later read Heidegger’s philosophy. Indeed, in later works, Hesse upholds several ideas important also to Heidegger. For example, they both share a criticism of modern society and
the technological world, and an understanding of the importance of death. However, Hesse never made explicit reference to Heidegger’s philosophy. This is confusing, given that Heidegger wrote *Being and Time* in 1927, and that the book was immediately considered one of the main philosophical works from the twentieth century. Hesse also attended a conference at the University of Freiburg in 1923, during the time that Edmund Husserl, considered the father of phenomenology, was a professor. Heidegger was Husserl’s disciple, eventually taking Husserl’s place at the University of Freiburg in 1928. It is impossible that Hesse went to Freiburg and did not know Husserl. And, at the same time, it is impossible that, knowing Husserl, Hesse was not familiar with Heidegger’s philosophy. The answer to this mystery may be Heidegger’s support of German nationalism. Hesse was extremely opposed to nationalism, and this may be the reason why he never accepted agreement with Heidegger’s ideas and texts. I found a detail that supports this hypothesis in one of Mileck’s books on Hesse, showing Hesse’s hostility regarding Heidegger: "When, upon occasion of a visit in Montagnola in the summer of 1954, conversation turned to Heidegger, Hesse could only shake his head slowly in an obvious expression of antipathy" (Mileck, *Hesse Critics* 305).

Hesse’s ideas in his books emerged from his own experiences and reflections. He did not write the well-known classics *Being and Time* or *Being and Nothingness*, but his philosophical inquiries are, I argue, at the level of these two philosophers widely considered to be great figures of the twentieth century.² The lack of attention to Hesse’s contribution to existentialism is part of what has fueled my curiosity about and interest in his writing.

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² *Being and Time* is Heidegger’s major work, and *Being and Nothingness* is Sartre’s major work.
Chapter 2. Young Hesse in *Peter Camenzind*

Peter’s and Hesse’s awakening to their reality of “Being-possible”

All of Hermann Hesse’s novels are implicitly autobiographical. This means readers can learn about Hesse’s life through his books. Also, readers can have a deeper understanding of Hesse’s books by knowing about Hesse’s experiences at the time he was writing each novel. Ralph Freedman, in his book *Hermann Hesse: Pilgrim of Crisis*, states: “It was this finely tuned interaction between his psychological conflict and historical events that was to make him a poet of crisis” (6). All of Hesse’s books emerged from his unique ability to put into words his experiences and crises. During different periods of life, Hesse evoked diverse responses to what was happening around him. His themes and concerns changed through time. But, one concern remained always: the defense of the individual self. What did change is against what or who Hesse was defending his individual self. At the time he was writing *Peter Camenzind*, he was defending his individual self from the pressure of his parents and his social environment. Therefore, knowing about Hesse’s relationship with his parents and about his experiences of youth is fundamental to understanding the topics he develops in *Peter Camenzind*.

Hesse started writing *Peter Camenzind* in 1902, at the age of twenty-five. He published the novel in 1904. This was the novel that made him famous, as Zeller writes: “*Peter Camenzind* brought its author immediate fame and marked the beginning of his reputation as a great writer” (Zeller 52). After *Peter Camenzind*, Hesse was able to stop working in bookshops and start dedicating his time to his writing. It was through *Peter Camenzind’s* literary and monetary success that he proved to his parents his dream of becoming a writer was not just a
childish aspiration. During this time, Hesse wrote: “Now, at last, after so many troubles and sacrifices, I had achieved my goal: impossible though it had once appeared, I was now a writer and had won my long and arduous battle with the world ... even the relatives and friends who earlier had not known what to make of me smiled on me approvingly” (Zeller 54). Hesse suffered from his parents’ expectations all his childhood and youth. After Peter Camenzind, he finally freed himself from the ghost of failure.

Unlike Hesse, the main character of Peter Camenzind – a young man from the mountains named Peter – feels free to be whoever he wants. Peter does not care about traditions and obligations, even though he is from a very narrow-minded and homogeneous town in the Swiss mountains: “what our community lacked was a frequent infusion of fresh blood and life. Almost all the inhabitants, a passably vigorous breed, are the closest cousins; at least three-quarters of them are called Camenzind” (Hesse, Peter 4). He discovers his freedom at the age of ten, when he reaches the top of a mountain for the first time. At the zenith of the mountain, Peter has two experiences that make him acknowledge that he was the only one responsible for his own life. The first experience is his encounter with the horizon. Peter had never seen a horizon before, as his town was in the middle of a valley. At this moment, he discovers the immensity of the world and the possibilities within it:

When you have lived for ten years surrounded by mountains and hemmed in between mountain and lake, you can never forget the day you see your first wide sky above you, and the first boundless horizon. . . So that was how fabulous the world was! And our village, lost in the depth below, was merely a tiny, light-
colored speck ... I guessed that I had had only a glimpse of the world, not a full view at all (Hesse, Peter 17).

The second experience that opens Peter’s eyes, is the absence of echo: “Once recovered from my initial astonishment, I bellowed like a bull with joy and excitement, into the clear mountain air ... I expected a loud echo, but my voice died away in the peaceful heights like the faint cry of a bird. Then I felt abashed and was silent” (Hesse, Peter 18). This scene represents Peter’s discovery of his individuality. Up in the mountain, he could shout his dreams openly, with no echo quashing his voice. Peter is surprised not to receive an echo in response to his shout. In his town in the valley, the mountains surrounding the town acted as walls, containing the voices and generating echoes. The mountains represent the boundaries imposed on Peter, and the echo represents the limitations of his dreams. In the real world, in contrast, Peter discovers that there are no boundaries and no limitations. He can be whoever he wants to be. He can be himself. At the top of the mountain, Peter discovers freedom for the first time. And he is brave enough not to forget his discovery.

After this experience, Peter becomes a dreamer. All he wants to do is to be with nature, to climb, to see the horizon and the clouds passing by (Hesse, Peter 19). But, for his father and the people in the village, doing this was being lazy. Even Peter himself starts believing that his cardinal characteristic is lassitude (Hesse, Peter 20). His father stops believing Peter could succeed in life because of his lack of interest in work: “realizing this, my father finally gave up on me” (Hesse, Peter 20). Hesse felt this rejection from his father too. He was also a dreamer and a wanderer. He was unable to study and grew tired of jobs very quickly. Since childhood, the only dream he had was becoming a writer. But, he never received the
support of his parents for doing that, as there was no formal training for becoming a writer. His dream seemed too illusory to them.

There is a third experience in Peter’s life that leads him to confirm his freedom and his capacity to define himself. This third experience is the death of his mother. When Peter is ten or eleven, a monk from the Abbey of Nimikon, Camenzind’s town, discovers Peter’s talent in writing. The monk insists on taking Peter as a student. Peter starts studying at the Abbey, but he gets tired quickly. Apart from attending class and doing homework, he has to help his father with the tasks of the house. So, he does not have any time to go hiking, climbing or boating. In addition, his father is not proud or supportive of him. Peter’s initial enthusiasm evaporates rapidly: “It enraged and exhausted me to observe how the common daily life callously demanded its due and devoured the abundance of optimism I had brought with me” (Hesse, Peter 39). Peter is about to give up the new life school is offering to him, when his mother dies. He is with her the night she passes away, and experiences her death in a very personal way. This episode awakens him for a second time, like his experience at the top of the mountain. Without knowing why, Peter suddenly starts to feel excited about his possibilities in the world as a student: “Learning, creating, seeing, voyaging – the abundance of life flared up in a fleeting silver gleam before my eyes. And once again, as in my boyhood, something trembled within me, a mighty, unconscious force straining toward the great distances of the world” (Hesse, Peter 43). Hesse does not explain why the death of Peter’s mother has such an impact on him. He compares Peter’s experience at the zenith of the mountain as a young boy with the death of his mother. But, he does not offer a further explanation of the comparison.
Martin Heidegger’s ideas on death may clarify this lack of explanation. Hesse during his youth, shared Heidegger’s concerns regarding modern society and the alienation of its individuals. Consequently, Heidegger’s theories can help clarify many of Hesse’s ideas from this period. For Heidegger, the way that we acknowledge our possibilities in the world is through awareness of death. Before death, we realize that we are limited and that our life can end at any moment. The awareness of our finitude reconfigures reality for us, because when we realize there is a limited time to live, we open our eyes to what life is offering – to all our possibilities in the world. When we encounter death in any form, we also realize dying is something nobody can do for us. Dying is absolutely individual. So, death highlights that we alone are responsible for our lives and not others. Peter was responsible of choosing what to do with his life, not his father. Peter rediscovers this fact, which he affirmed as a child on the mountain, through the death of his mother.

The scenes of the mountain and of Peter’s mother death, and what these scenes represent, confirm that Hesse, at the time he was writing Peter Camenzind, was struggling and trying to free himself from the limitations and expectations imposed on him. In contrast, his character Peter is not afraid of being himself. Being himself to Hesse meant not being what others wanted him to be. It meant disappointing others, especially his parents. Hesse was only able to overcome the apparent failures of his youth once he succeeded as a writer with Peter Camenzind. He freed himself from the family and social pressures once he proved to them he was not “useless.”

By the time Hesse was writing Peter Camenzind, he was still harmed by the fact that he did not succeed as a scholar. His parents wanted him to pursue a career as a theologian,
even as a priest. But Hesse was not able to meet their expectations. This harmed him deeply.

All his youth consisted in going from one school to another. After trying to study in at least five different educational institutions, Hesse’s parents gave up and found him a job as an apprentice in a bookshop. Hesse struggled with this job too, and ended leaving the position. What he wanted to do was to be at his parent’s home, helping his father with the family business and having time to write. That was not an option. After spending two years as an apprentice in a clock workshop, he finally found, in 1895, a job he was able to tolerate: an apprenticeship in a bookshop in Tübingen. Hesse managed to stay there and finished his three-years training, even though he had many crises and almost left the job several times.

Tübingen was a college town, full of students and academic life. The fact that Hesse chose to live in a college town, is another proof that he was still suffering from not having been able to fit in this environment. Hesse expresses this sorrow in Peter Camenzind.

Peter, the young boy from the mountains, makes a huge effort to finish school and continue his studies in another town. Like Hesse, Peter is a dreamer. But, unlike Hesse, Peter succeeds as a student. Peter is, in many ways, what Hesse would have liked to be at this stage of his life. Peter is not only what Hesse would have liked to be, but he also represents Hesse’s ideal regarding the future – an idea I will develop in the following section of the chapter.

In 1903, the year that he was working on Peter Camenzind, Hesse also wrote the poem “Glück” (Happiness). Corckhill mentions this poem in his book Spaces for Happiness in the Twentieth-Century German Novel: Mann, Kafka, Hesse, Jünger. Corckhill argues that this poem summarizes Hesse’s belief about how Western society conceives the pursuit of happiness. He states, “Hesse’s own Taoist-influenced reservations concerning the Western fixation on the
pursuit of happiness, as opposed to the Eastern embrace of a deteleologized notion of quietistic happiness, is inscribed in a short poem entitled ‘Glück’” (Corckhill 84). This poem expresses Hesse’s critique to the Western way of conceiving happiness. Together with Peter Camenzind, the poem “Glück” is another sign that one of Hesse’s main concerns during his early adulthood was social expectation. He was, as a person and as a writer, concerned with the manipulation and homogenization of society and the suppression of individuality. Hesse argues in this poem that, if individuals spend all of their life chasing what someone else has told them happiness is, they will never be happy. Happiness is not something we should chase, but something we should build.

Glück (Happiness)

As long as you chase after happiness
You are not yet ripe for it
Even if all the loveliness were yours

As long as you lament what is lost
And have goals and are restless
You know not yet what peace is

Only when you renounce every wish
No longer know any goal or desire
No longer call happiness by name
Then the flood of thing past will
No longer reach your heart
And your soul will find repose (Corckhill 85)

At the time Hesse wrote this poem and Peter Camenzind, he believed that the first step to finding real happiness and peace is to realize we are conditioned by our surroundings. Once we acknowledge these conditionings, we have the opportunity to free ourselves from them. Real freedom is not easy to acquire nor to preserve. I believe Hesse did not free himself completely from his parent’s and environment’s expectations until Peter Camenzind became a great success. However, in this novel, we can already recognize his desire to free himself. One example is the fact that Peter chooses to pursue an academic career against his father’s will. A second example is how the novel ends: Peter returns to his birth town in the mountains. He chooses to return. It would not have been the same if he had stayed from the beginning, because in that case he would not have chosen. Peter decides to come back after knowing and trying other possibilities. In his book Wandering, Hesse writes about the difference between the individual who never leaves home, and the traveler who returns. The traveler “loves more intimately, and he is freer from the demands of justice and delusion. Justice is the virtue of the ones who remain at home, an old virtue, a virtue of primitive men. We younger ones have no use for it. We know only one happiness: love; and only one virtue: trust” (Hesse, Wandering 75). By “justice,” Hesse was referring to mandates or obligations. And by “trust,” he was referring to the virtue of the ones who discover the world and free themselves from fixed mandates. These individuals have self-confidence and are not afraid of being true to themselves. After returning to his birth town, Peter lives a simple life for the rest
of his days. He finds meaning in life by taking care of a person who has a crippling illness, who he learns to love genuinely. Home, simplicity and love are the foundations of the stability Peter finds in his late thirties. From 1904 onwards, Hesse tried to find stability through these means too.

To summarize, Hesse discovered in his early twenties that human beings are a potentiality of possibilities. There is no one way of living life, and nobody can tell you how to live your own life. Life is an individual and original task. In the next section I will develop his second discovery or belief: in order to find peace, the individual needs to achieve some sort of external stability. Hesse had been moving around for twenty-five years, and he was certainly not at peace. He expressed all these concerns in Peter Camenzind and other works he wrote during the same period, like the poems “Glück” and “Across the Fields.”

From “Being-possible” to “Being-dwelling”: Hesse in relation to Heidegger

The last name “Camenzind” is a German-Swiss word that probably refers to the occupation of the one who keeps the fireplace on. “Kamin” in German means “fireplace” or “chimney,” and “zind” might be a variation of the German verb “zünden” that means “ignite,” “to burn” or “to set on fire.” The fact that Hesse titled his book “Peter Camenzind,” indicates this word was significant to him and the story. The translation I found makes sense within the context of the novel. A Camenzind is a person who works as a fireplace keeper. He or she has to be at home to take care of this task. Also, there is not much expertise required. Camenzinds are

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1 I cite this poem in the Introduction
simple people, who live calmly, contemplating the fire, coexisting with nature. Even Peter, who ventures into the world in search of an owned existence, ends finding sense to life in being at home. Martin Heidegger calls this being at home “dwelling,” and he asserts that “the manner in which we all humans are on earth, is buan, dwelling. To be a human being means to dwell” (Building 349). Heidegger was worried that modern society was eradicating homes. This lack of homes makes human beings unable to ask “The Question of Being” and to live meaningfully.² In his essay “Why Do I Stay in the Provinces?” Heidegger claims that only by staying at home in relation with the people who live in that specific soil, can one be authentic and open to “The Question of Being” (28). During his early twenties, Hermann Hesse believed the same thing.

At this stage of life, Hesse started questioning the imposed rules. He began to be proud of being different – of not being able to fit in the world. Who determined that there is only one way of living life? With Peter Camenzind, Hesse started his defense of his individual self. He realized that his suffering had come from his struggle against authenticity. He decided he wanted to stop struggling and to start accepting himself. Hugo Ball, Hesse’s close friend who wrote the first biography about Hesse, writes:

Peter Camenzind is the step into the world, into another nature. A sort of brutalization and of self-incrimination, but also the discovery of himself and a writing inspired in what is no longer bound to an example and a given model. In

² To ask the “Question of Being,” for Heidegger, is to ask about our own existence: why are we in the world? What is our role in the world? How can we exist? Which are our possibilities?
Peter Camenzind, there is no more pietism, nor paternal house with mandates and doctrines; the pure nature governs now (102).³

Dwelling and nature became Hesse’s new allies in the defense of his personality. He realized he had been moving around all his life. With his family, at the age of four, he moved from his birthplace in Calw to Basel, following his parents’ Christian missions. Then from Basle back to Calw at the age of nine. From Calw he moved to a preparatory school in Göppingen. From the preparatory school, he moved to the Maulbronn Seminary at the age of thirteen. After he escaped from the Seminary, he tried to succeed in five schools in three different towns. Unable to succeed as a student, he tried to work in two different shops as an apprentice, until he finally ended in a bookshop in Tübingen, where he stayed four years. After Tübingen, he moved to Basel, where he wrote Peter Camenzind. He finally moved to Gaienhofen in 1904, at the age of twenty-seven, where he lived eight years with his first wife: his own record of permanence. The only place in which Hesse was able to feel at home was Calw, his birthplace, which he idealized all his life: “I was familiar with every corner of my hometown, with the hen runs, the woods, the orchards, the workshop of the artisan, the trees, the birds, the butterflies; I could sing songs and whistle through my teeth, and many other things, too, that contribute to the quality of life. . .” (Zeller 20). In addition to moving his whole life, Hesse was never culturally attached to one specific place. His parents were both immigrants, with very different backgrounds. His father was born in Estonia and was citizen of

³ Translated from Spanish: “Peter Camenzind es el paso hacia la vida, hacia otra naturaleza, más densa. Un embrutecimiento, si se quiere, y una autoinculpación, pero también un descubrimiento de uno mismo y una escritura de lo que ya no está ligado al ejemplo y el modelo. En Peter Camenzind ya no hay pietismo, ni casa paterna con mandatos y doctrinas; aquí reina la pura naturaleza.”
both the German and the Russian Empires, and his mother was born and spent her childhood in India. In addition, both of them worked as missionaries, so they traveled all their life. Hesse’s family was an amalgamation of cultures and backgrounds, which contributed to the feeling of rootlessness that stayed with Herman all his youth.

After Hesse overcame the crisis of his youth and began to accept who he was, he started to believe that, if he wanted to find stability, he needed to stop moving. This belief came, in part, from the negative impact that the constant moving during his childhood and youth had on him. From his experience, he concluded that constant change cannot bring stability. He needed external stillness to find himself. He needed to find a place of his own, where he could separate himself from a world that was trying to control and manipulate him. To the question “how can I defend my individual self from the world?” Hesse’s answer is “a place to dwell.” Bernard Zeller presents in his book a description Hesse writes of his character Peter. Peter represents Hesse at the time he was seeking for his own place in the world. In 1951, in a letter to a student who was studying Peter Camenzind, Hesse wrote:

Camenzind tries to get back to nature, away from society and the world. . . But, and this is the distinguishing character of this early piece of writing, he does not belong to the boy scouts or any of the other youth organizations: on the contrary, for nowhere would he fit in worse than with these ingenuous and noisily self-conscious groups that either play guitars around the campfire or spend the night in argument. A man is not at his best as a member of an association, a participation in a conspiracy or a voice in a choir. Instead of community, camaraderie and classification, he seeks the opposite; he
does not want the path of many but – obstinately – only his own path; he does not want to run with the pack and adapt himself, but to reflect nature and world in his own soul, experiencing them in fresh images. He is not made for life in the collective but is a solitary king in a dream world of his own creation (Zeller 53).

Shortly after Hesse finished writing *Peter Camenzind*, he materialized his longing for a place to dwell. In 1904, he married his first wife and moved to a farm house in a small town. “The wedding was celebrated in Basel. By common agreement they decided to live in the country and ‘lead a simple, natural, unurban, unfashionable and country life’” (Zeller 58). Three years later he even built his own house. During this period of life, Hesse worked on his books, had children, and enjoyed the life in the countryside. A very important aspect of his life was his garden: “Almost more important than the house was the garden. I had never had a garden of my own and it followed naturally from my country convictions that I should lay it out, plant it and care for it myself; and so, I did” (Zeller 61). Through the garden, Hesse felt he was in touch with the real world, the natural world. At this moment of his life, this is what he believed. This simple and “natural” life was necessary if he wanted to be himself – authentic and happy. A couple of years later, he realized life was not that simple. Living a modest life in the countryside was not making him happy any more. What was he doing wrong? Many years and experiences will be necessary for him to find an answer. In 1919, he left his wife and started a new life in Montagnola, Switzerland. I will develop this crisis and the new questions that emerged from it in Chapter Three. But, first, in the last section of this chapter, I will analyze Hesse’s understanding of reality during the period of *Peter Camenzind*. I call this Hesse “the extremist,”
because his ideas during this time are very one-sided and critical. The world, for Hesse, was either black or white.

Peter and Young Hesse: The Extremists

Peter represents who Hesse wanted to be when he was in his early twenties. Peter finishes school, attends University, travels, solves his problems with his father and, most importantly, finds a home – a place to dwell – far from the vices of the world. Hesse was already too old to try formal education again, but at least he could achieve the cardinal must-do from Peter’s list: create a home, his own shelter against the world. One of the main objectives of his novel *Peter Camenzind*, is to invite people to do the same thing:

I wanted to teach people to find the springs of joy and the waters of life through the affectionate familiarity with nature: I wanted to preach the art of observation, walking and enjoying, of finding pleasure in what is at hand... I wanted to make you ashamed of knowing more about wars, fashion, gossip, literature and the arts than you do about the spring who displays vigorous life outside your towns (Hesse, *Peter* 146).

Young Hesse was passionate and extremist. He was passionate about the idea of freeing himself – and also helping others to free themselves – from the enslavement the modern world was inflicting on him. His extremism, expressed in *Peter Camenzind* and other works from the same period, was twofold. On the one hand, it consisted in a deep criticism of the technological world, the modern educational system, and the bourgeois life. On the other hand, Hesse’s extremism resided in an idealization of peasants’ way of living, the relationship
with nature, and love. As a mature adult, Hesse acknowledged the extremism of his ideas during this period of his life (20-25 years old), but he also defended his attitude as the one of a person who was worried about defending his individual self, and the individual self of each person, from the modern world. He was an extremist, but in the interest of promoting and defending authenticity, that for Hesse meant freeing himself from external pressure and being originally himself.

I will start by developing Hesse’s criticisms of education, bourgeois life and technology. At first glance, one could assume that Hesse’s problem with modern education came from his incapacity to succeed as an academic. Taking into account Hesse’s comments and background, I believe we should contemplate the problem the other way around: Hesse was unable to fit and succeed in the educative environment because of modern education. This education – and especially the Christian form of modern education during this time – did not take individuality into account. It aimed to make all individuals alike. If you did not fit into the model, then formal education was not for you. For an individual like Hesse, who had struggled since childhood to become who he wanted to be and not who his parents expected him to be, succeeding in such educational system would have meant being totally inauthentic. Bernard Zeller states regarding Hesse’s escape from the Seminary, “Hesse was struggling to discover and assert himself; and to protect his identity from the inroads of the stubborn religious attitudes and traditions of his family and from the powerful complex of authority by which he saw himself surrounded” (31). The program of self-education Hesse designed for himself, when he started working as an apprentice in the first bookshop, is another sign that his incapacity to
succeed as a student was due to the homogenizing structure of the modern educational system, and not because Hesse was intellectually incapable.

Hesse clearly believed modern education was flawed. He thought people overestimated formal education: “Academic study is not ideal, but rather is circumscribed and incomplete, like everything on this earth... It is up to the individual to see that he learns something, becomes something, that he finds freedom, and that he reserves his interests for what is true and noble” (Zeller 36). Hesse was convinced that education depends on the individual, and that formal education cannot guarantee that students will become better human beings. He also considered education to be a loss of time in most of the cases, as it does not help students awake to the really significant aspects of life. He expresses this belief in Peter Camenzind. Towards the end of the novel, Peter puts an end to his academic life and returns to his hometown. Once back home, he states: “My few flings in the realm of intellect, and the so-called world of culture, can be compared to my uncle’s famous sailing episode – except that they cost me more in money, effort, and precious years” (Hesse, Peter 199). Peter refers here to an episode from the beginning of the novel, in page 7. In this episode, his uncle Konrad tries for the first time a sailboat he had built from scratch. The experiment ends being a total failure, and Konrad loses all the money and time invested on the project. This is how Peter, and Hesse, consider academic life or “the world of culture” to be: time and effort badly invested. In his article “Presupposing Self-Reflection,” Jeremiah P. Conway, a contemporary scholar who studies education today and uses Hesse’s books in his classes, expresses a similar concern regarding higher education: “speaking with students, I realized with a kind of dull thud that higher education itself bears considerable responsibility for the indifference to self-reflection.
Institutions of learning promote themselves far more in terms of helping students make livings than in helping them make lives” (42). Conway poses here an interesting question: “how can we respond to the possibility that we may well have developed the greatest school societies of all times and, at the same time, the most thoughtless?” (42). This current example illustrates the problem of education already acknowledged by Hesse. Sadly, the modern world does not need reflective people to function, but just workers – thoughtless or not.

Hesse’s second criticism was regarding the bourgeois type of life. This rejection of a luxurious and comfortable way of living was related to both his criticism of education and of technology. As I explained in the previous paragraph, Hesse’s main concern regarding modern education was that students were not given the opportunity to reflect and to be themselves. In Peter Camenzind, for example, Peter describes his acquaintances from the academic life as inauthentic people characterized by “a slippery, protective envelope of illusions and lies” (Hesse, Peter 148). Peter believes that academics’ main concern is how they appear to others. They show themselves as unique and original, but nobody really knows their innermost nature – not even themselves (Hesse, Peter 148). In contrast, Peter describes a simple family of carpenters from his hometown in the opposite way: “These people had no time for refinements, for posturing and sentimental charades. Their harsh and demanding life was much too dear for them to adorn it with pretty phrases” (Hesse, Peter 152). The bourgeois life, for Hesse, is a life of lies and inauthenticity. Hesse also equaled the bourgeois form of life with living in the technological world. The technological world is the opposite of the natural world. It is an artificial, unreal world. During this time of his life, Hesse believed that the only way to be authentic is to distance ourselves from the technological world. The bourgeois life is a pure
technological life, in which individuals are not able to distinguish between reality and illusion. Nature is forgotten, and all that matters is material wealth. Certainly, Hesse’s perspective regarding the bourgeois way of living at this time of his life was very biased. In both bourgeois and simple lives, one can find people who live authentically and people who do not. This is why I call Hesse “extremist” during the Peter Camenzind period.

The last, related, criticism I will present is Hesse’s disapproval of the technological world in which modern man lives. The technological world he refers to consists of cosmopolitan cities, constant consumerism, and the new material necessities modern man has invented. For Hesse, these new realities are dangerous, because they create a world of thoughtless and unoriginal people. Hesse constantly expresses this idea in Peter Camenzind, especially during the years when Peter moves to a city and lives among academics. An example is the description of Peter’s feelings after going to the parties organized by one of his scholar friends: “I lied along as well as I could, but it gave me no pleasure and I found this chitchat boring and humiliating … After one of these evenings, however, I usually stopped by a wine-hall and slaked my parched throat, drowning my unspeakable boredom in draughts of wine” (Hesse, Peter 111). Hesse’s beliefs regarding the technological world at this moment of life were similar to the concerns Heidegger presented four decades later. In his interview with Der Spiegel, Heidegger expressed the same deep concern:

S: Why should we be so thoroughly overpowered by technology?

H: I did not say overpowered. I am saying that we still have no way to respond to the essence of technology. Technology tears men loose from the earth and

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4 A German weekly news magazine, founded in 1947. It is still one of Europe’s most influential magazines.
uproots them. I do not know whether you were frightened, but I at any rate was frightened when I saw pictures coming from the moon to the earth. We don’t need any atom bomb. The uprooting of man has already taken place. The only thing we have left is purely technological relationships. This is no longer the earth in which man lives (Heidegger, Interview 105).

Heidegger, as Hesse, was worried that “this is no longer the earth in which man lives” (Interview 105). In his intent to distance himself from the technological world, Heidegger also refused to live in a big city – he even rejected a position at the University of Berlin to stay in his little town of Freiburg – in order to live closer to the natural world.

In his trip to India in 1911, Hesse had an encounter with the people from the mountains while he was climbing, and he realized how different he was from them. He had thought he was different from the people of the world, but he was not. In his journal entries from this trip, Hesse states: “we found the homely, simple, childlike peoples of paradise. But we ourselves don’t fit in at all, we feel foreign and out of place; we lost paradise a long time ago and the new one we want to possess and build is not to be found on the equator or among the warm seas of the East, but lies within us” (Zeller 73). This trip made him realize that the world is already fully technological and that we cannot change the technological world now. What we can do is change ourselves. We can build the paradise within us. The extremist Hesse started to realize little by little that “paradise” cannot be recovered externally, and that the life he was having in the countryside was not guaranteeing he was living an authentic life. This discovery is the beginning of his change of perspective regarding homes and dwelling, a process I will analyze closely in Chapter 3.
Finally, I want to refer to Hesse’s idealizations during his youth. His first strong idealization is the admiration he had of the way farmers and peasants lived. He was so convinced this was the right way of living that he tried this lifestyle himself. In *Peter Camenzind*, Hesse presents a clear contrast between the life in the cities and the life in the mountains. Peter not only is constantly criticizing the inauthentic way of living of the people in the cities. He also ends going back to Nimikon – his hometown in the mountains - where he finally finds the peace he was looking for. Hesse was convinced that individuals cannot find happiness and meaning while living in the cities.

Hesse also idealized nature in a way that connects to his idealization of rural, farming life. For him, nature was the connection to reality. Through nature, individuals find themselves; and, outside nature, everything is just falsely seen as real. Individuals can live in a technological world all their lives, and they will never know what the real world is. This, for Hesse, causes unhappiness and meaninglessness.

Hesse’s last idealization at this stage of his life, was of love. This idealization probably emerged from the fact that he had not yet experienced a real loving relationship. His first loving relationship was at the age of twenty-five, with his first wife. By the time he was finishing *Peter Camenzind*, he has married her. This first marriage ended in divorce, in 1919. Perhaps his idealization of love and his idealization of the rural life made him pursue marriage in the first place. The way in which Hesse presents loving relationships in *Peter Camenzind* can help us understand how he conceived love. The most important loving relationship in this novel is the love for Bopi. Bopi is a person with a crippling disease who Peter meets in his middle thirties, once he returns to his birth town, tired of the academic life. In Nimikon, Peter selflessly
decides to take care of Bopi, even though he was not even a member of his family. Love takes the form of taking care of a suffering stranger. At the same time, Bopi’s response to Peter’s love is of total gratitude. Bopi is a blessing for Peter: he just smiles, treats Peter with love, and does not complain at all. The idealization of love is present in both Peter’s way of loving Bopi and Bopi’s response to his love. The ease with which Peter takes care of Bopi – as if he was the only important aspect of his life – is hard to find in the real world. If it is very difficult to take care of a sick person from your own family, it seems it would be even more difficult to take care of a suffering stranger. Bopi’s considerate response to Peter borders on the unreal. He is never angry, never complains and never acts thoughtlessly, even though he is in agony and knows he is going to die soon. If Hesse considered loving relationships to be this easy, his intention to find stability through love is understandable. With his first wife, a real person rather than a fictionalized ideal, he realized love is not so simple.

From *Peter Camenzind* to *Narcissus and Goldmund*

Good luck to the farmer! Good luck to the man who owns this place, the man who works it, the faithful, the virtuous! I can love him, I can revere him, I can envy him. But I have wasted half my life trying to live his life. I wanted to be something that I was not. I even wanted to be a poet and a middle-class person at the same time. I wanted to be an artist and a man of fantasy, but I also wanted to be a good man, a man at home. It all went on for a long time, till I knew that a man cannot be both and have both, that I am a nomad and not a farmer, a man who searches and not a man who keeps… The way to salvation
leads neither to the left nor the right: it leads into your own heart, and there alone is God, and there alone is peace (Hesse, Wandering 6).

This paragraph is an excerpt from a book titled Wandering, a collection of short lyrical descriptions Hesse wrote during his migration from Gaienhofen in Germany to Montagnola in Switzerland, in 1920. After divorcing his first wife in 1919, Hesse moved to Montagnola to begin a new life. This book expresses Hesse’s feelings and thoughts during his attempt to start over. The excerpt stated above, exhibits the beginning of Hesse’s transformation. Until 1919, Hesse had tried to be a farmer. After 1919, he started trying to be himself.

In his writings, Hesse constantly highlights the contradiction between the world of the senses, or the technological world, and the world of the mind, or the natural world. He expressed this contradiction clearly in his novel Narcissus and Goldmund. In this book, Hesse continued arguing the contradiction between the two worlds cannot be annulled. But, he offered a new notion: both ways of living can fulfill the individual, as long as each individual chooses the way he wants to live with awareness and authenticity. Discerning the way of living life that will fulfill us does not come from external revelation, but from self-knowledge and self-understanding. Hesse made this clear in Narcissus and Goldmund. Narcissus and Goldmund, the main characters of this novel, meet each other in a monastery. Narcissus was already in the monastery when Goldmund arrives, and he realizes when he first meets Goldmund, that his new friend was not in the monastery by his own choice. Goldmund was there because his father told him he was supposed to be a monk. Goldmund, however, is convinced that he had chosen freely. Little by little, Narcissus helps Goldmund to awaken and to rethink his choices.
Narcissus helps Goldmund open his eyes to the truth of his inauthentic self, but he does not tell him who he is supposed to be. This is Goldmund’s task. “Narcissus looked at him gravely: ‘I take you seriously when you are Goldmund. But you’re not always Goldmund. I wish nothing more than to see you become Goldmund through and through’” (Hesse, N&G 41).

In *Narcissus and Goldmund*, a novel Hesse wrote in 1930 at the age of fifty-three, Hesse’s perspective had changed. Now, as a mature adult, Hesse believed external stability is not possible, and authenticity is not so easy to acquire. He discovered that in order to find meaning in life, he must accept that he is a wanderer, and find stability *in* change. His discovery is that stability is a constant and never-ending endeavor. In the next chapter, I will analyze *Narcissus and Goldmund* in light of Hesse’s historical background, to explain how Hesse arrived at these conclusions and what they mean. I will illuminate Hesse’s new perspective by way of Jean Paul Sartre’s philosophy. Jean Paul Sartre spent a great part of his life trying to understand authenticity in the age of Existentialism. His theories have helped me clarify Hesse’s discoveries, especially Sartre’s belief that “essence precedes existence” and that the human being is condemned to invent himself, condemned to be free.
Chapter 3: A Step Further in *Narcissus and Goldmund*

*Siddhartha*: the breaking point

Home, or a basic sense of being rooted in the world, seemed the answer to Hesse’s most basic questions. This answer, however, did not satisfy Hesse for long. Hesse’s divorce from his first wife in 1919 and his new start in Montagnola, Switzerland, were a breaking point in his life. Hesse thought he had found stability. He had achieved what was supposed to give him meaning in life, what his heroic character Peter Camenzind achieves: the experience of loving and being loved, and a place to dwell outside the technological world.

After some years, Hesse realized this type of life was not fulfilling. He could not lie to himself. He would have to make changes, even if this meant choosing an arduous path. In 1919, he admits “my lot is to follow my inner voice even when I fail to recognize its meaning and its goal, and even when it leads me even farther away from the paths of joy into the dark and the partially known (Zeller 71). Hesse had thought a “place to dwell” was the answer to the painful feeling of homelessness he had experimented with all his life. Dwelling was also his answer to the question: How to find internal stillness, peace, and meaning. At the age of forty-five, he concluded he was wrong, or at least he was understanding the idea of “dwelling” incorrectly.

Hesse traveled to India alone in 1911. It took him almost ten years to clarify and write down what he had learned from this trip. Circumstances of life, and especially the First World War, forced him to focus on other issues rather than his crisis with countryside life and with his wife. From 1911 to 1919 he wrote several books concerning these issues. In 1919, Hesse left his family and moved from Germany to Switzerland alone.
New country, new start. From 1919 to 1922 Hesse worked on *Siddhartha* (the book he is now best known for writing), a novel in which he finally put words to what he had learned in India a decade before. In *Siddhartha*, Hesse awakens the dormant question from his youth: How can I – a being who is constantly changing – find stability in life? *Siddhartha* is the bridge between the answer Hesse gave to this question in *Peter Camenzind*, and the new answer he provided twenty-five years later, in *Narcissus and Goldmund*. In *Siddhartha*, a close reader of Hesse may start to acknowledge the metamorphosis of Hesse’s thoughts.

As is the case in each Hesse novel, the main character of *Siddhartha* – the gifted son of a Brahmin (who leaves his hometown and family in search of the meaning of his existence) – represents Hesse. Hesse was, at this point, forty-five years old, divorced, alone in a new country and experimenting a huge crisis of meaning. The name of his character clearly describes Hesse during this time:

Hesse gives to this work the original name of Buddha Shakyamuni (the Buddha of the Shakyamuni tribe) *before* he had achieved his legendary enlightenment.

Thus, the title, *Siddhartha*, indicates that the novel is not a story about an ‘enlightened’ mind. Instead, it is a story of one who yearns for wisdom, who stumbles constantly in an attempt to gain it, yet whose failures prove necessary and instructive, allowing the search to develop and deepen (Conway 48).

Hesse was seeking an authentic way of living that could give him peace. In this stage of his life, he was not defending his individual self from outside pressures of his parents and environment – as he was doing in *Peter Camenzind*. Instead, Hesse was defending himself from himself: his structures, his rigidity and his conformity.
In the first pages of the novel *Siddhartha*, Hesse narrates the process of awakening of his character. Siddhartha awakes to the discovery that he is the only one responsible of finding the truth of his existence. No one else could teach him how to find enlightenment, as each person finds meaning through different paths. When he discovers this, he decides to leave all doctrines and masters, and to experience the world by himself:

> The teachings of the enlightened Buddha embrace much, they teach much – how to live righteously, how to avoid evil. But there is one thing that this worthy instruction does not contain; it does not contain the secret of what the Illustrious One himself experienced. That is what I thought and realized when I heard your teachings. That is why I am going on my way – not to seek another and better doctrine, for I know there is none, but to leave all doctrines and all teachers and to reach my goal all alone – or die (Hesse, *Siddhartha* 28).

Siddhartha’s acknowledgment of his individuality and responsibility for his own existence shows the connection between *Siddhartha* and *Peter Camenzind*. Hesse came back to the questions of his youth: How can I defend my individual self from the world? How can I find meaning and stability? In *Siddhartha*, the answer to this question is different. Hesse no longer believes the answer is a “place to dwell.” In *Siddhartha*, and, later, in *Narcissus and Goldmund*, Hesse focuses in the path rather than the goal. Meaning is something a person builds each day, and not something a person acquires once to retain forever.

There are two details in the novel *Siddhartha* that Hesse moves beyond in *Narcissus and Goldmund*. This is the main reason I believe *Narcissus and Goldmund* better illustrates Hesse’s final answer to his question concerning stability. The first detail is that, at the
end of his life, Siddhartha finds enlightenment: “From that hour Siddhartha ceased to fight against his destiny. There shone in his face the serenity of knowledge, of one who is no longer confronted with conflicts of desires, who has found salvation, who is in harmony with the stream of events, with the stream of life” (Hesse, Siddhartha 106). In Siddhartha, Hesse still believes that a person can acquire a definite and permanent state of meaning and happiness. In Narcissus and Goldmund, neither of the two main characters arrives at enlightenment. Not even Goldmund when he is about to die.

The second detail is the fact that the “life of the world” (Hesse, Siddhartha 59) is considered by Siddhartha to be a necessary evil that made him learn and grow, but not an adequate path in itself. During a period of his life, after he decides to leave the master Buddha, Siddhartha tries the “life of the world.” He follows the lessons of a courtesan and a businessman, and experiments with love, passion, and wealth. Siddhartha calls this way of living “Samsara”: “This game was called Samsara, a game for children, a game that was perhaps enjoyable if played once, twice, ten times – but was it worthy playing continually?” (Hesse, Siddhartha 66).  

The novelty of Narcissus and Goldmund, is that one of the two main characters, Goldmund, finds his path in the “mundane world.” Goldmund’s way of existence is not less authentic, nor less adequate, than Narcissus’ way, who lives in a monastery all of his life.

In Narcissus and Goldmund, Hesse went a step further than in Peter Camenzind, and even than in Siddhartha. Hesse expressed in Narcissus and Goldmund three new beliefs.

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1 “Samsara” Asian traditions – especially Hinduism and Buddhism – refers to the endless cycle of birth and reincarnations. Reincarnations occurs if the individual has not yet achieved enlightenment, and therefore, refers to an imperfect or mundane way of existence.
He concludes that individuals can acquire sense and authenticity through either of the two worlds: the world of the senses or the world of the mind. Hesse also argues that a human being can never stop being a “Siddhartha” – a wanderer or searcher for the meaning of life. The moment a person stops seeking, he ceases to be able to find meaning. Enlightenment, for a mature Hesse, is not the end of change. Enlightenment is the understanding that the only way of finding stability is by embracing change each day. And, finally, Hesse highlights that, even though neither of the two worlds can free the human being from change, it is possible to find permanence in art. In this chapter, I will show how Hesse arrived at these conclusions.

**Narcissus or Goldmund: The Two Worlds**

Certainly, seen from the point of view of the cloister, from the point of view of reason and morality, his own life was better, righter, steadier, more orderly, more exemplary ... It was much purer, much better than the life of an artist, vagrant, and seducer of women. But seen from above, with God’s eyes – was this exemplary life of order and discipline, of renunciation of the world and of the joys of the senses, of remoteness from dirt and blood, of withdrawal into philosophy and meditation any better than Goldmund’s life? Had man really been created to study Aristotle and Saint Thomas, to know Greek, to extinguish his senses, to flee the world? Had God not created him with senses and instincts, with blood-colored darkness, with the capacity for sin, lust and despair? (Hesse, *N&G* 295).
In this paragraph, Narcissus, the obedient monk from the cloister, asks himself whether there is a better way of living. Narcissus has loved Goldmund his entire life, regardless of Goldmund’s choices. He sincerely believes Goldmund is more authentic outside the cloister, in the mundane world. But, despite his unconditional love for Goldmund, Narcissus has always thought of his own world as more sacred, more agreeable to God. In this scene, towards the end of the novel, Narcissus arrives at a different conclusion: God made us free, why should a certain way of life be more perfect than the other? As long as each individual follows his path in truth, there is no one better path. “In truth” means with consciousness of who we are. There is no better choice that what is clearly true to oneself. This was Hesse’s new belief.

The freedom with which Hesse wrote in this novel about passion, sex, and love affairs, among other themes, is surprising when compared to the suppressed Hesse of Peter Camenzind. Hesse’s open-minded view of reality is also shocking when placed in contrast with Hesse’s pious and moralist background. The child who was once taken by his mother to an exorcist because he was misbehaving in class, was now able to talk openly about topics once prohibited. This is evidence of the fact that Hesse experienced a real transformation of perspective and beliefs. Joseph Mileck, a Hesse scholar and biographer, highlights this unique transformation in his chapter on Narcissus and Goldmund, by recalling the young Hesse: “Sensuality sullied, spirituality edified. For young Hesse, the world was a wretched detraction, sexuality a questionable urge, and both were heroically renounced for art and spirituality” (207).

In Narcissus and Goldmund, Hesse offered a meticulous description of the two worlds that he believed divide the real world. Narcissus is the main representative of the world
of the mind, and Goldmund represents the world of the senses. The world of the mind is also
the world of the spirit, and, as such, of morality and of productiveness. Narcissus is a monk and
a scholar, and his main objectives in life are to pray, produce ideas and control his passions. The
cloister is his world, and outside his world there is a more imperfect world – the world of the
senses. Goldmund not only is part of the “mundane world,” but he is the most profligate that a
man can be in this mundane world. Goldmund’s world is the one of the wanderers and artists,
who meander aimlessly along on earth. These worlds seem to be completely opposite, but
Hesse reconciled them through the friendship of his characters. This friendship represents, on
the one hand, Hesse’s new belief that these two poles of life are interdependent. And, on the
other hand, it shows Hesse’s longing to heal his interior conflict with these two aspects of his
life. Zeller describes *Narcissus and Goldmund* as a parable with the intention to reconcile the
common contrast between the two worlds, between the artist and the thinker. This contrast is,
according to Zeller, “resolved into harmony and higher unity” (112). He continues, “both
characters fulfill themselves: Goldmund in experiencing and tasting the world of the flesh, and
Narcissus through his strict adherence to the spirit (Zeller 112).

Through Goldmund’s and Narcissus’s mutual love, Hesse was trying to spread a
message: nobody is more perfect or less perfect, and no life can guarantee happiness. Each of
Hesse’s characters have moments of happiness, one in the cloister and the other in the
mundane world. Both of them also have moments of anguish and despair. But, most important,
both of them live consciously, deciding who they want to be, and acting in accordance with
their decisions. Their way of confronting life is what makes both of their lives meaningful, even
though they are opposite: “Narcissus was dark and spare; Goldmund radiant youth. Narcissus
was analytical, a thinker; Goldmund, a dreamer with the soul of a child. But something they had in common bridged these contrasts: both were refined; both were different from the others because of obvious gifts and signs” (Hesse, N&G 15). The gifts and signs Hesse refers to are Goldmund’s and Narcissus’ introspection, or, put differently, their love for the truth, and their commitment to living meaningfully. Goldmund and Narcissus are passionate about each of their worlds. No other in the mundane world is as mundane, or as much a wanderer, and as artistic as Goldmund; and, no other in the intellectual world is as ascetic and as devoted as is Narcissus:

Now Narcissus was bent down in front of the altar on tired knees, prepared and purified for a night of prayer and contemplation that permitted him no more than two hours’ sleep, while he, Goldmund, was running off to find his Lise somewhere under the trees and play those sweet animal games with her once more. Narcissus would have said remarkable things about that. But he was Goldmund, not Narcissus. It was not for him to go to the bottom of these beautiful, terrifying enigmas and mazes and to say important things about them. For him there was only giving himself and loving, loving his praying friend in the night-dark church as much as the beautiful young woman who was waiting for him (Hesse, N&G 79).

In his book Understanding Hermann Hesse, Lewis W. Tusken argues that Hesse’s aim in Narcissus and Goldmund is to investigate the question “how do intellect and sense work together in the search of God?” (131). It is true that Hesse mainly identified himself with Goldmund, the wanderer. But, he also had many of Narcissus’ characteristics. Indeed, his life had been a constant dilemma of how to live in the correct world – the world of Narcissus –
while being a wanderer. Then, Tusken’s argument makes sense. In *Narcissus and Goldmund*, Hesse was trying to free himself from the feeling of dissatisfaction he had regarding his way of living. He was part of both worlds. This was a virtue, rather than a flaw.

The Never-Ending Process of Self-Invention: Hesse in relation to Sartre

In *Narcissus and Goldmund*, Hermann Hesse presented what I believe to be a more helpful understanding of human existence than Heidegger’s idea of human being as a “being possible.” Heidegger’s theory, as I described in Chapter 2, is that individuals are not complete until death. Human beings are a potentiality of possibilities during their lives. However, for Heidegger, possibilities come with some restrictions. Each individual is born in certain family, society and historic period. His or her possibilities are infinite, but within a context. Heidegger believed that, if we leave this context of our existence, we alienate ourselves from our own, individual, inner truth. We can only ask “The Question of Being” by being rooted in our specific soil, by being externally “dwelling.” These ideas are in line with Hesse’s thought during the period of *Peter Camenzind*. In contrast, in *Narcissus and Goldmund*, Hesse’s ideas are closer to Jean-Paul Sartre’s theory that “l'existence précède l'essence” (existence precedes essence).

Sartre was even more radical than Heidegger regarding human possibilities, to the point of stating that we are “condemned at all times to invent men” (Sartre 29). Sartre formulated his famous statement “existence precedes essence,” to explain existentialists’

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2 Sartre usually makes reference to human beings – men and women – as “men.” But this does not mean his philosophy excludes women.
opposition to the common belief that “essence precedes existence.” When essence precedes existence, individuals are born already with the purpose of life. Someone created us, thought about us – as an artist thinks about his work of art before painting it. We existed in the mind of this creator before coming into existence, and this creator gave us a reason of being – to serve God’s will, for example. The statement, “essence precedes existence,” is also sustained by people who do not believe in God, but believe in human nature as innate to every man. Sartre gives the example of Kant’s works, where “this universality extends so far as to encompass forest dwellers – man in the state of nature – and the bourgeois, meaning that they all possess the same basic qualities. Here again, the essence of man precedes his historically primitive existence in nature” (22). Another example is Plato, who argued that the highest and most specific reason of being for men is to think, and thus to gain knowledge. To fulfill such a natural or given purpose is to become what one is supposed to be. To fail in fulfilling this given purpose is to condemn oneself to live incomplete. For Sartre, there is no God, and there is no such thing as a human nature or natural law telling us who we are supposed to become. Instead, the human being comes to existence as a “tabula rasa,” and absolutely everything is a choice.\(^3\) The choices we make define who we are: “Man is nothing other than his own project. He exists only to the extent that he realizes himself, therefore he is nothing more than the sum of his actions, nothing more than his life” (Sartre 37). The human being comes into existence in a situation of total “abandonment,” meaning that “it is we, ourselves, who decide who we are to be” (Sartre 34). This abandonment entails anguish, as there is no ground where we can stand and no path

\(^3\) “Tabula rasa” is John Locke’s concept. It means that every human being is born without a prior knowledge, and gains this knowledge through own experience. In a similar way, Sartre believes individuals are born without a prior essence, and that they become men through their acts and choices.
determined for us to follow. Each path is individual, and ours to choose. Embracing this abandonment is, for Sartre, the only way of finding real meaning.

In *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Sartre tried to defend his understanding of existentialism from the critics that were labelling this philosophy as pessimistic and grim. His response was that existentialism is the opposite of pessimism. Existentialism argues that a human being can become what she wants to become through action, and that we are each responsible for our own lives. Sartre states, “No doubt this thought may seem harsh to someone who had not made a success of his life. But on the other hand, it helps people understand that reality alone counts ... no doctrine is more optimistic, since it declares that man’s destiny lies within himself” (39-40). For Sartre, there are no such things as a fixed destiny or divine retribution.

Sartre’s theory that existence precedes essence resembles and helps to highlight ideas that Hesse developed in *Narcissus and Goldmund* and other writings from the same period. Before explaining these aspects they share in common, I will first consider two seeming contradictions between Sartre and Hesse. I argue that these contradictions are more apparent than real, and that they are not relevant enough to belie the fact that Hesse and Sartre shared salient ideas. I find the first contradiction in a scene at the beginning of *Narcissus and Goldmund*. In this scene, it seems as if Hesse believed each individual is more suitable for one sort of life rather than others. I am referring here to the scene on page 28, where Narcissus, shortly after meeting Goldmund, argues that his new friend was not going to find happiness as a monk. This scene seems to suggest that, in contrast with Sartre, Hesse believed there is some sort of essence preceding our existence: Goldmund was born to live in the mundane world,
while Narcissus was born for the cloister. However, the main purpose of this scene is to highlight that Goldmund is not aware of his possibilities. Goldmund is just following his father’s will. Rather than affirming there is one path for each person, Hesse was criticizing a tendency to follow a given path thoughtlessly. I do not believe that Hesse’s purpose is to argue that each individual has a fixed given vocation.

The second difference is that Hesse believed in a God who created us. However, Hesse’s idea of God at this period of his life had little resemblances to the Christian God with whom he grew up. While he was writing *Narcissus and Goldmund*, he was already very familiar with Buddhist and Taoist spiritualties. These religious beliefs are present in this novel in an implicit way. A clear illustration of this mixture of religious beliefs that characterized Hesse in this period of life, is a reflection from his book *Wandering*, written around 1920. In this reflection, Hesse describes trees with admiration, arguing that “nothing is holier, nothing is more exemplary than a beautiful, strong tree (*Wandering* 57). He adds: “In their highest boughs the world rustles, their roots rest in infinity; but they do not lose themselves there, they struggle with all the force of their lives for one thing only: to fulfill themselves according to their own laws, to build up their own form, to represent themselves” (*Wandering* 57). Trees become who they make of themselves. They are the model we should follow. This writing is very similar to the way Hesse writes in *Siddhartha*. The whole novel *Siddhartha* is another proof of Hesse’s mixture of religious beliefs. Hesse’s spirituality was no longer Christian, or at least not completely. Therefore, the fact that Hesse believed in God does not mean that he believed essence precedes existence – a belief that characterizes the Christian thought. Having clarified
these two differences between Sartre and Hesse, I will now present the ideas Sartre and Hesse shared regarding life and human beings.

Goldmund is, throughout the novel, constantly improving his knowledge about himself and the world in which he lives. Goldmund’s process mirrors Hesse’s transformation of thought from his youth to his fifties. At the beginning of the novel, Goldmund does not even consider possibilities other than being a monk. He is totally defined by his father. With Narcissus’s help, he discovers the mundane world is also a possibility, and decides to venture into this world. During his late twenties, Hesse also freed himself from the conditions imposed by his family and social environment, and began to make choices of his own. While living in the mundane world, Goldmund arrives at the conclusion that most individuals who end up settling in one specific place are worried about meaningless aspects of life, such as fame and money. One example is his Master Niklaus, an artist with whom Goldmund works for a couple of years. Goldmund admires Niklaus as an artist, but does not consider his way of living as an example: “Art was a beautiful thing, but it was no goddess, no goal – not for him. Why continue to perfect the hands? Master Niklaus was an example of such perfection, and where did it lead? It led to fame and reputation, to money and a settled life, and to a drying up and dwarfing of one’s inner senses” (Hesse, N&G 184). Niklaus had transformed his art into something useful, into a business. Hesse’s comparison between Niklaus’ life and his past rural life is evident. Goldmund’s criticism of Niklaus’ way of living, mirrors mature Hesse’s self-criticism for having lived so many years in the conformity of the rural life. Mature Hesse believed dwelling is dangerous, as it leads individuals to feel too much stability. Stability can lead to conformity and to an incapacity to embrace change.
Goldmund’s most important discovery comes almost at the end of his life, with Narcissus’s help. Goldmund asks Narcissus “what does it mean to realize yourself?” (Hesse, N&G 278), to which Narcissus answers:

God is perfect being. Everything else that exists is only half, only a part, is becoming, is mixed, is made up of potentialities. But God is not mixed. He is one, he has no potentialities but he is the total, the complete reality. Whereas we are transitory, we are becoming, we are potentials; there is no perfection for us, no complete being. But wherever we go, from potential to deed, from possibility to realization, we participate in true being, become by a degree more similar to the perfect and divine. That is what is means to realize oneself (Hesse, N&G 278-279).

Hesse’s new idea, developed in Narcissus and Goldmund, is that humans are, in Sartre’s words, condemned to invent ourselves always, as each one of us is always in process of becoming (Sartre 29). The human being is not static. The only moment of motionlessness is death. The person who does not change is already dead. As Narcissus states in the paragraph I quoted above, it is through this process of becoming or of changing, that we, human beings, realize ourselves. Mileck’s description of Goldmund, illustrates this final discovery: “Goldmund questions but accepts reality, his life is to live fully and to create, and his goal is self-realization and death” (204). Mileck describes Goldmund as someone who believes life is for him to create. He adds, “and Goldmund manages to reconcile himself with life’s frustrating dichotomy. In Hesse’s recapitulation and synthesizing of the past, a new possibility emerged, an ideal more possible than Siddhartha’s: all in all, a more human coping with the self and with the life” (204).
In contrast to Siddhartha, Goldmund does not find oneness – the reconciliation of all that exists. What Goldmund discovers is that life’s dichotomy exists, but it is not something that should torment him. Instead, it should give him hope: the hope of being and living in a unique way. If there were no dichotomies in life, then the only path would be the same for all. Life dichotomies, the existence of opposite ways of living, are a sign of individuality.

If a human being is defined by constant dynamism, by the fact that one can never stop inventing oneself, is there any way in which individuals can find some sort of rest? At this point, Hesse no longer believed in enlightenment. So, is a human being destined only to wander? In some sense, yes. Hesse acknowledged the difficulty of what he was proposing. I found an example of this acknowledgment in *Narcissus and Goldmund*. When talking about “established proprietors,” Goldmund argues that they “hate him, despise him, or fear him, because they do not want to be reminded that all existence is transitory, that life is constantly wilting, that merciless icy death fills the cosmos all around” (Hesse, *N&G* 193). Hesse’s ideas may have been rejected by many of his readers in the same way that he describes others hating Goldmund’s ideas.

During this period of his life, Hesse’s main concern was to embrace the life of wandering. He believed this was the only way of existence that could guarantee he was living authentically, “my concern is to be unsatisfied and to endure restlessness” (Hesse, *Wandering* 106). Only the individual who lives in the present moment with awareness of its mutability is open to new possibilities. Only the one who allows herself to change, is able to be authentic and find meaning of life, and, paradoxically, stability. Our essence, for Hesse, is to change constantly. Those individuals who live trying not to change in any way end in misery. The
escape from feeling the anguish of living inauthentically is to stop reflecting. Thoughtlessness is the most reliable escape from the anguish of true existence. This is why the world is so full of people who do not decide their own lives. According to Hesse, if we do not feel anguish, we cannot feel happiness deeply or completely. Hesse never arrived at a moment in his life when he felt “fulfilled.” But, he believed his restlessness was good. Restlessness allowed him to experiment the blissful moments of life in a deeper way: “What I never wish, not even in the worst hours, is a middling ground between good and bad, a lukewarm, bearable center. No, rather an exaggeration of the curve – a worse torment and, because of it, the blessed moments even richer in their brilliance” (Hesse, Wandering 99). The answer Hesse found to the question regarding stability is not an easy one. It presupposes difficulty, unhappiness, doubts, pain. But, it also secures a more authentic life. As with Hesse, Sartre also believed there are no solutions to the problem of human being’s state of “déracinement” (rootlessness). Even though it is painful, the individual has to acknowledge her groundlessness and nothingness, and the fact that she has no given essence, in order to become someone.

This way of thinking has implications for truth and sociality, as authenticity may reverberate outward from individual truth. Being aware of the responsibility that each of us has in the invention of ourselves and of humanity is essential for the transformation and preservation of the world. The main threat to humanity comes from the erroneous belief that there is only one absolute truth. Wars and catastrophes emerge from the attempt of different groups to impose their own – which they consider is “The” – truth. Colonialism, inquisition, crusades, genocide. The biggest mistakes of humanity were, I would argue, caused by the wrong understanding of reality as something that must follow a determinate path. By my
understanding, the defense of a truth is the perfect excuse to commit atrocities. Having to think all the time, question, and reconsider, is neither comfortable nor easy. It is easier to follow a given path. One of Hesse’s messages in *Narcissus and Goldmund* is that truth is not comfortable, but that we should never stop searching for it. Our actions and decisions, not only have an impact on ourselves, but on society and the rest of humankind as well. Sartre upheld this belief too. For him, “man finds himself in a complex social situation in which he himself is committed, and by his choices commits all mankind, and he cannot avoid choosing” (Sartre 45).

**Hesse’s Answer to Mutability: Art**

In a world where everything is changing and where we are constantly becoming, Hesse found a kind of permanence in art: “He thought that he, that all men, trickled away, changing constantly, until they finally dissolved, while their artist-created images remained unchangeably the same” (Hesse, *N&G* 155). Poets and artists can create, in the middle of change, static realities. These static realities represent moments, feelings or experiences that do not exist anymore. But there, in the artist’s creation, these moments live forever. Goldmund’s creations throughout the book always represent his feelings, his experiences, the people he loves. Every time he finishes a piece of art, he needs to return to his wandering life, in order to acquire new experiences to embody in his art. Goldmund is inspired by his experiences in the world. Without these experiences, his art would have been empty and not able to fulfill its goal: to transform an ephemeral reality into a permanent one. “To him, art and craftsmanship were worthless unless they burned like the sun and had the power of storms. He had no use for anything that brought only comfort, pleasantness, only small joys” (Hesse, *N&G* 155).
This belief is the reason why Goldmund is so disillusioned about the market of art. After working with Master Niklaus for some months, he discovers that an artist could also create beautiful things out of mere ambition (Hesse, N&G 165).

For Hesse, real art comes from real experience, so it is alive. However, art can also be beautiful without having a soul. This happens when the artist is not interested in the piece of art itself as a manifestation of who he is, but in other mundane interests instead, such as money or fame. Art, for Hesse, is a reality capable of reconciling the opposing worlds, because art comes from both physical and spiritual experiences: “Art is a product of both the flesh and the spirit, and exemplifies their necessary and desirable interaction and interdependence in life as a whole” (Maleck 208). This is Goldmund’s last discovery in the novel. Art not only helps him to find the permanence he cannot find anywhere else, but also to overcome the dichotomy of the two worlds.

According to Lewis Tusken, in Goldmund’s desire to become an artist we can acknowledge “Hesse’s perception of the necessity humankind feels to leave something of itself behind” (134). In other words, art represents a human being’s longing for permanence not only during life, but also for a permanence that can transcend death. In this sense, art manifests human being’s spiritual or transcendent dimension. Art, as faith, manifests the transcendence of the human spirit, a spirit that cannot be satisfied with mortality, but needs to find a way of overcoming death. This idea is expressed by Goldmund himself in the novel:

The root of all art and perhaps everything intellectual is the fear of death. . . . We shudder before transitoriness, we look with sorrow on the wilting flowers and falling leaves and feel in our own hearts the certainty that we too are transitory
... If, as an artist, we create images, or as thinkers, seek laws and formulate ideas, we are doing it to save something from the great dance of death, to produce something that will last longer than ourselves (Hesse, N&G 155).

In *Narcissus and Goldmund*, art is also presented as a form or way of existing.

Hesse was an artist, and his way of being in the world was as an artist. Even though Hesse was a successful writer, he suffered all his life from what he called “the artist’s dilemma”: “the tension between the productive world of commerce and the apparently useless and purposeless existence of the poet and the painter” (Zeller 79). During his youth, he was worried that being a poet was never going to fulfill the expectations his family had of him. He wanted to be successful as well. Afterwards, as a famous writer, he asked himself countless times whether being famous meant that he was not a real artist any more. A true artist does not create to be productive, but because art is his way of existence – the way in which he exists meaningfully in the world. If Hesse’s art was productive, then his essence was in danger. Goldmund suffers from this same dilemma when he becomes an apprentice to Niklaus, the famous artisan. When Niklaus, impressed by Goldmund’s art, offers for him to stay permanently with him in his workshop, a life that would mean working side by side with one of the most famous artists in the region, Goldmund renounces this immediately and returns to the wanderer’s life. He has a great admiration for his master’s ability to create the most beautiful forms of art, but he despises the fact that Niklaus had lost the artist spirit, and, with it, his essence: “Why did Master Niklaus accept all these orders? Why did he listen for hours to those senators and prelates who ordered a pulpit or a portal from him with their measuring sticks in their hands? He had two
reasons: he wanted to be a famous artist flooded with commissions, and he wanted to pile up money” (Hesse, N&G 165).

Hesse suffered all his life from the dilemma of being either a useless and purposeless poet, but an authentic one, or to write for an audience. He never stopped publishing his books, or answering his letters, or attending conferences and events. He could have rejected the Nobel Prize in Literature, as Sartre did. Hesse always kept some distance from society, but also some involvement. This relationship was something he reflected about countless times. Sometimes he would put signs on the door of his house in Montagnola asking not to be disturbed, and other times he would receive a group of students who just wanted to talk about his books. This was another of his dichotomies. I believe that his incapacity to detach himself completely from the world, comes mainly from his desire to awaken people to what he had discovered through his life. As I have shown in this project, his books are a constant reminder that life is individual and ours to choose. Why would he write such meaningful messages if he were not sincerely interested in the recipients of his writings?
Conclusion

My conclusion for this project is twofold. First, in order to provide closure to my analysis of Hesse’s progress of thought from *Peter Camenzind* to *Narcissus and Goldmund*, I will consider Hesse’s poem “Stages.” In this poem, Hesse summarizes in a mere twenty lines all his lifelong development of thought and the main messages of his work. Second, I will discuss several reasons why the philosophical analysis of literary works is so relevant in today. These reasons inspired me to carry out this project, and they explain the significance of engaging in a close reading of Hermann Hesse’s works.

While working on this project, I found myself constantly quoting Hesse’s words from his poems, books, and even his personal writings. I struggled many times trying to paraphrase Hesse’s writings in my own words, usually concluding that I should not deprive the readers from reading his own words. Hesse had, without doubt, a unique gift to express realities, feelings, and experiences through words. This is why I have decided to let Hesse conclude this project, through his poem “Stages.”

Hesse wrote the poem “Stages” between 1940 and 1943, in his seventies. The poem is a part of his last novel, *The Glass Bead Game*. In the novel, Hesse presents this poem as written by the main character of the book, Joseph Knecht. Once again, Hesse created a character who represents himself. By this period of his life, Hesse had reached a more definitive understanding of reality. In other words, he was no longer looking for new answers to the question regarding stability. After *Narcissus and Goldmund*, he did not develop new ideas, but simply tried to make his ideas clearer. This poem is a concise summary of his final thoughts:
“Stufen” (Stages)

As every flower jades as all youth
Departs, so life at every stage,
So every virtue, so our grasp of truth,
Blooms in its day and may not last forever.
Since life may summon us at every age
Be ready, heart, for parting, new endeavor,
Be ready bravely and without remorse
To find new light that old ties cannot give.
In all beginnings dwells a magic force
For guarding us and helping us to live.

Serenely let us move to distant places
And let no sentiments of home detain us.
The Cosmic Spirit seeks not to restrain us
But lift us stage by stage to wider spaces.
If we accept a home of our own making,
Familiar habit makes for indolence.
We must prepare for parting and leave-taking
Or else remain the slaves of permanence.

Even the hour of our death may send
Us speeding on to fresh and newer spaces,

And life may summon us to newer races.

So be it, heart: bid farewell without end (Hesse, TGBG 444).

In the first paragraph of the poem, Hesse refers to the changeability of life, “as every flower jades as all youth departs, so life at every stage,” and to the changeability of each individual, “so every virtue, so our grasp of truth, blooms in its day and may not last forever.” Hesse also encourages the individuals to be open to new possibilities: “be ready bravely and without remorse to find new light that old ties cannot give.” This first paragraph is a summary of Hesse’s discoveries during his youth, during the Peter Camenzind period. At this time of his life, he had discovered the flow of life and all the possibilities within it.

In the second paragraph, Hesse exposes the dangers of having a home, of dwelling, “if we accept a home of our own making, familiar habit makes for indolence.” These are Hesse’s beliefs after 1919, after he had left his wife to start a new life in Switzerland. Hesse never again believed in the necessity of external dwelling – as Heidegger believed. Only wanderers are free and authentic: “we must prepare for parting and leave-taking or else remain the slaves of permanence.”

Finally, the last paragraph expresses Hesse’s belief that there is no moment of stability in a human being’s life, no moment of rest. Even during the hour before death, individuals are inventing life anew: “even the hour of our death may send us speeding on to fresh and newer spaces, and life may summon us to newer races.” Death is the only moment of completeness. Before that, individuals, to use Sartre’s concept here, have to be constantly inventing themselves. Our heart must “bid farewell without end.” This last line means that only
a heart open to change can be authentic, because “changing” is how we, human beings, exist in the world. Change is our essence. And, as Hesse discovered during his mid-fifties, only by embracing change we can find the stability we so desire. Hesse’s poem “Stages” is the brilliant summary of a lifelong learning process.

Literary works sometimes deal with philosophical ideas. This is the case of Hesse’s books. However, in most literary non-philosophical works, the reference to philosophical concepts is not immediately clear. That Sartre’s No Exit, Kierkegaard’s Fear and Trembling and Nietzsche’s Thus Spoke Zarathustra are literary works dealing with philosophical issues, is easy to appreciate. But not only philosophers write about the fundamental questions facing human beings. Non-philosophical books can sometimes contain deep philosophical analysis, though, as Rickman expresses in his book Philosophy in Literature, most of the times “this is far from self-evident, and we might be even shocked to be told that our enjoyment of a play on the stage or of a novel read on the train could have been enhanced if we have consulted philosophical texts” (17).

Heidegger and Nietzsche used to call poets and writers “thinkers” or “geniuses.” These “thinkers” are not common in the modern world, where most people live inauthentically and do not think for themselves. Both philosophers described these “thinkers” as individuals who are capable of realizing, and expressing, the current crisis of meaning and originality. In her analysis of Heidegger’s understanding of poetry and its relationship with philosophy, Angelina Nuzzo, a Heidegger scholar, states that philosophical thought (“denken”) must go back to its original unity with poetry (”dichten”) so that “the destitution of the times can become
apparent, and the world’s night, the abyss of the world, can for the first time be experienced and endured” (38). This is the reason why Heidegger believed that poets are so necessary during this period: they see the truth – the dangers of the modern world – and point them out. Hermann Hesse is clearly this kind of poet. Philosophers can think, but poets express these thoughts in a way that may be read and experienced by people who normally would not turn to philosophy. So, one of the main advantages of using literature in the treatment of philosophical topics resides in the capacity of literary works to reach a wider audience than philosophical works may reach. Readers who find philosophy too abstract or complicated might be more willing to read, and, also, more prepared to understand, a philosophical analysis of a concrete book they enjoyed.

In his book on existentialism, *Irrational Man*, William Barret provides us with another reason why poets and writers have a central role today in the formulation of existential questions that once belonged to philosophy. Philosophy, he argues, is a profession, and to profess “is to confess or declare openly, and therefore publicly; consequently, to acknowledge a calling before the world” (Barret 4). The problem is that, in the modern world, professions are social tasks individuals perform to earn money to survive, and philosophy had become one of these tasks. Too frequently today, philosophy only has a place in a corner within universities, a corner not all students have access to, unless they decide to take a course within the “Department of Philosophy.” At least, in the past, philosophy was considered basic knowledge all student should have. Today, this knowledge is no longer considered important to each person and her questions about life. Before the absence of philosophers in the world, poets and
writers had earned a fundamental role in the awakening of individuals to the essential questions of existence.

The limitations of philosophy today, and the increasing importance of writers and poets for an individual’s access to her own existential questions, are the reasons why I believe a close reading and philosophical analysis of Hermann Hesse’s novels and poems is so relevant. Hesse’s books deal with deep issues, as the ones discussed in this project. But, at the same time, he writes in such an accessible way. His books can be read and understood by people outside of specific departments or specialties dealing with something called “existence.” Perhaps not all of Hesse’s readers can appreciate all of the philosophical themes Hesse discusses in them, but at least some may find these themes helpful in their own search. Hesse tends to express his main messages in a direct, straightforward form. Each person who reads one of Hesse’s books may learn something new, something meaningful to their own quest for authenticity.
Bibliography


