

Burckhardt, Hesse and Nietzsche: Which Pathway?

ABSTRACT

*This article will touch on the critique of the modern liberal project by Burckhardt, Nietzsche, and Hesse—such a critique of liberal modernity tends to be seen as a form of conservatism. But, Burckhardt, Nietzsche, and Hesse understood the meaning of conservatism (each and all drawing from the classical ethos and tradition) in different ways and for different reasons. Each of them, also, had a concern for what it meant to care for the human journey (*philanthropos*) in diverging ways and for different reasons. This essay will reflect on their shared questioning of the modern project and its notions of the self and society but their diverging answers and prognosis to doubts and diagnosis of the modern and, in our ethos, postmodern project.*

The classical tradition held high the notion of *“philia”* as a way of knowing the self and bringing into being a just society (or *polis*). But such a way of friendship presupposed an understanding of what it meant to be human (*“anthropos”*). The caring, being the midwife or actualizing the potential of the deeper meaning of the family (*“oikos”*), larger community (*“paraoikos”*) and civic virtues (*“politikoi aretēs”*) in the city state (*“polis”*) meant there was a deeper common unity that humanity shared simply because they participated in being human. The meaning of *“philia”* when wed and united with *“sophia”*, so the classical vision proposed, evoked the notion that friends drawn to and guided by Lady Wisdom, would enrich and clarify the meaning of the human longing and a *“telos”* or focus for our all too human journey. So, *philanthropos* presupposed *philosophia*, a decided upward ascent and overcoming of lower desires and appetites for a higher and greater good and end. The coming to be of liberalism as an ideology (birthed by the protestant reformation) brought into being a creed of sorts of the centrality of liberty, equality, individuality and, to some degree, an open-ended version of the self. Many thinkers of a more thoughtful conservative bent realized such a credo would, in time, lower standards, lead to fragmentation and breed a dumbing down of levels of being. There were three philosophers, historians and literary thinkers that embodied and dared to critique the rise of liberalism as the emerging orthodoxy of the West (Jacob Burckhardt, Friedrich Nietzsche and Hermann Hesse) and it is

to these three thinkers this essay will reflect upon. Each of these thinkers was committed to understanding, in their different ways, what it meant to be both *philanthropic* and *philosophic*. If time and space were fuller, I would sit with Werner Jaeger's unpacking of the Greek notion of "*paideia*" and highlight how classical Christianity internalized such notions as "*eunomis*", "*sympnoia*" and "*synkrasis*". These classical ideas are spelled out in a compact manner in Jaeger's *Early Christianity and Greek Paideia*. But, to Burckhardt, Nietzsche, and Hesse I now turn.

Hermann Hesse mentioned, in the final paragraph of his "Foreword" to *If the War Goes On...*,¹ a suggestive lead to understanding his life journey and a portal of sorts into those things that held him. And, I quote:

I must say: three strong influences, at work throughout my life, have made me what I am. These are the Christian and almost totally unnationalistic spirit of the home in which I grew up, the reading of the great Chinese thinkers, and the last not least, the work of the one historian to whom I have ever been devoted in confidence, veneration, and grateful emulation: Jakob Burckhardt.²

Hermann Hesse, also, from his earliest writings, in an implicit and explicit way, to his final tome, *The Glass Bead Game*, grappled with the challenge and significance of Friedrich Nietzsche, Nietzsche being Fritz Tegularius in Hesse's final magnum opus, just as Father Jacobus was a modified Burckhardt. Jacobus was a Roman Catholic monk but deeply grounded in history as a Benedictine as was Burckhardt (although obviously not a Benedictine monk). Nietzsche tends to be much more in the ascendant these days, whereas Hesse and Burckhardt have waned somewhat, but literal fashion shows come and go as do intellectual fashion shows. Hesse spent much of his life threading the needle between Burckhardt and Nietzsche and this essay will examine how he did this and, in the process, welcoming once again, Hesse and Burckhardt onto the stage of the broader public dialogue of the political and public good and how to think and live it in an age dominated by polarized ideologies, fragmented liberalisms and rising reactionary nationalisms.

It should be noted, at the outset, that Burckhardt (1818-1897), Nietzsche (1844-1900) and Hesse (1877-1962) were each and all suspicious of the emerging and aggressive political nationalism of Otto Von Bismarck (1815-1898) and Germany in the mid-late 19th century. The notion that a unified nationalism emanating from Berlin would shape and guide the future of

1 Hermann Hesse, *If the War Goes On: Reflections on War and Politics* (London: Pan Books, 1971).

2 Hesse, *If the War Goes On*.

Europe was an anathema of sorts to Burckhardt, Nietzsche, and Hesse. This is why, in many ways, Burckhardt spent most of his mature days in Basel and, in time, Nietzsche (who was German, parted paths with Bismarckian German nationalism and taught in Basel with Burckhardt for almost a decade) and Hesse (being also German and Swiss) made Switzerland their home rather than Germany. The more decentralized and canton approach to politics in Switzerland, needless to say, ran counter to the centralized approach of Bismarck and the consolidated nationalism of Germany, statist herdism being at decided odds with such classical humanist thinkers. But there is much more to ponder about why Burckhardt, Nietzsche, and Hesse challenged the drift and direction of European intellectual, cultural, spiritual, educational, economic, aesthetic, and political history than merely the worrisome impact of Bismarck; their concerns grounded, rather, in the problematic protean notion of the self, culture and principles at the core of liberalism.

The highly secularized French revolution, rise of science, the significance of rationalism as a way being, secularism as an emerging ideology, and a questioning of religion (in this case Christianity) were part and parcel of the emerging progressive liberalism of the time, Hegel being the prominent philosopher of dialectical progressivism. Who was questioning such an emergent liberal orthodoxy (which we call the modern project or modernity)? And, for those who deconstructed such a project, whose version and turn to history would be used as a diagnosis and prognosis? Burckhardt has often been misread and misunderstood but he was certainly on front stage in raising some pertinent questions, his older and deeper historic sense ever suspicious of “terrible simplifiers” of complex historic ideas and politics.

Burckhardt was a virtual contemporary of Bismarck, and Nietzsche was younger than Burckhardt (even though he imbibed significant aspects of the Burckhardtian distinction between three sources of authority: state, religion, and culture (the latter being favoured and trumping the other two)). Hesse grappled with the state, religion/spirituality, and culture tensions in a way that Burckhardt did not, and Nietzsche often excessively reacted against, pitting these three spheres of human experience against one another, culture often becoming, as with Matthew Arnold, the new religion. But let us first discuss Burckhardt, ponder the Burckhardt-Nietzsche pro-contra, then Nietzsche-Hesse, and conclude with Burckhardt-Hesse.

There are two fine PhD-turned-books on Burckhardt more than worth the reading as primers on Burckhardt and one book on Burckhardt of much fullness and significance: *Jacob Burckhardt and the Crisis of Modernity*,³ Basel

3 John Roderick Hinde, *Jacob Burckhardt and the Crisis of Modernity* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000).

in *the Age of Burckhardt: A Study in Unseasonable Ideas*,⁴ and *Jacob Burckhardt's Social and Political Thought*.⁵ It is, of course, best to actually read Burckhardt, but helicopter tours over the forest can offer often a much needed overview of a perspective by an important cultural thinker. There are, perhaps, five points to note in Burckhardt's thinking that made him a significant cultural historian. First, Burckhardt held high, as a civilizational and cultural model, the immense productive and creative output of classical Athens (more on this later) and Renaissance Italy. Second, he thought, with the coming to be of the modern notions of liberty and equality, a dimming and dumbing down of the deeper meaning and significance of creative individualism (that demanded of the creator effort and struggle) had been lost and sacrificed. Third, he thought that the collective violence of the French Revolution, that turned against the past and in a rational, calculating, utopian, and violent manner naively assumed human willing could and would make history in a positive way, a worrisome feature of modernity: past versus future, wisdom versus making, hierarchy of virtues and creativity versus equality of potential and output. Needless to say, the actions by the state in the French Revolution made him suspicious of an uncritical attitude towards the state. Fourth, Burckhardt's turning of the back, for the most part, on Christianity and an idealizing of Classical Athens-Renaissance Italy made for an either-or approach to western civilization. I should note, though, that Burckhardt's more reflective and contemplative read of western cultural history (and history reading us) made him, in many ways, sensitive to significant aspects of western and Christian history (although, by day's end, this was not his north star)—the conservative humanism of Burckhardt makes him a significant guide for many. But Burckhardt's *The Age of Constantine the Great*⁶ does give the nod to the ascetic and heroic tendencies of the early Christian monks (agon and hierarchy being the reasons) as does Hesse in his "Three Lives" in *The Glass Bead Game*⁷ (but for different reasons). Fifth, Burckhardt thought that with the coming of Socrates (and his excessively rationalist, logical and dialectical ways), the classical tragic Athenian way of "agon" (and the vital and creative struggle which is part of it) had lost its way by reducing culture and thought to logical arguments (rather than a vitalistic and creative aestheticism)—we can see the Apollonian and Dionysian

4 Lionel Gossman, *Basel in the Age of Burckhardt: A Study in Unseasonable Ideas* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

5 Richard Franklin Sigurdson, *Jacob Burckhardt's Social and Political Thought* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004).

6 Jacob Burckhardt, *Die Zeit Constantins des Großen* (Basel: Schweighauser'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1853); English translation: Jacob Burckhardt, *The Age of Constantine the Great* (1949; Milton: Routledge, 2018).

7 Hermann Hesse, *Das Glasperlenspiel: Versuch einer Lebensbeschreibung des Magister Ludi Josef Knecht samt Knechts hinterlassenen Schriften* (Zürich: Fretz & Wasmuth, 1943); English translation: Hermann Hesse, *The Glass Bead Game* (United States: Stellar Classics, 2013).

either-or contrast at work in this analysis of the tensions in classical Athens (whose version should be heeded and why?).

So, in sum, there are five building blocks to Burckhardt's vision of thought, arts, culture and civilization: 1) a certain read of classical Athenian and Renaissance Italy was pitted against modern liberalism and Christianity (Christianity being seen as a forerunner of modern democracy and liberalism), 2) liberal modernity (a sort of secularized Christianity) embodied the decline of the west into the "last man", 3) the French Revolution illuminated for Burckhardt where willing-power and the state, turning against the moderating wisdom of history, could lead to sheer violence under the guise of bringing into being a new utopian order, such as the powerful leader (Napoleon) who incarnated the *ubermensch* and *Gewaltmenschen*, was an anathema to Burckhardt, 4) Burckhardt's more reflective, temperate and contemplative approach to history (even though he had his priorities about which periods of history he preferred) made him somewhat respectful about the role of Christianity within Western cultural history, and 5) Socrates was seen as a problematic and unfortunate representative of the more complex Athenian way (birthing, in a certain manner, a simplified way of knowing—sheer rationalism—such rationalism and the way it has been admired by the west has led to the simplifying of ways of knowing, including the arts and culture). Let us now turn to Burckhardt and Nietzsche.

There have been four tendencies to be recognized when reflecting on the Burckhardt-Nietzsche relationship and such trajectories must be noted. Nietzsche was much younger than Burckhardt and when he came to teach in Basel in 1869 (where Burckhardt taught and where Nietzsche remained until 1879) Burckhardt was a much-respected scholar, and Nietzsche gave him the admiring nod (as he did the rest of his life, including his final letter before having his breakdown). What, though, are the four schools of thought regarding Burckhardt-Nietzsche; where did both men walk the same path, where part company, and why? First, there are those who see Burckhardt as an early and somewhat insignificant influence on the more significant Nietzsche, hence not worthy of more than a mention in the burgeoning Nietzsche scholarship and industry. Second, there are Burckhardt devotees who think Nietzsche thoroughly distorted, used, abused, and misread Burckhardt's name and reputation to articulate ends that Burckhardt opposed and disclaimed. Third, there are those that argue that Nietzsche was the more creative and energetic thinker who anticipated the future (hence worthy of heeding) whereas Burckhardt was a reactionary conservative not worth the time reading or pondering other than his initial and superficial impact. Then, fourth, there are those (and such is the position I will take) that there were and remained many Burckhardtian insights that Nietzsche internalized, but there were, also,

crossroads in the paths where they went in different directions. Such will be the next phase of this unfolding essay.

Where do Burckhardt and Nietzsche walk the same trail, where part paths, and what difference does it make? First, Burckhardt and Nietzsche both argued that the modern liberal ethos led to a flattening out of human creativity, a reducing of human longing to the mediocre, a fragmenting of culture, and a dimming of deeper human desire. Both men saw the reformation and enlightenment project, with their progressive and optimistic notion of human nature, as naïve and a pandering to mass consumption. Needless to say, this made them, at one level, seemingly conservative reactionaries against the modern liberal notion of the superficial self. Interestingly enough, both held high the place of the creative individual, classical Athens and renaissance Italy their models, and the intense creativity of such moments in history soared beyond the pale creativity of their age and ethos. Second, both men took the position that classical Athens, at its best, was not about a culture bringing into being the harmonious and good life through analytical reason. In fact, classical Athens embodied, in thought and deed, an understanding of the deeper tragic nature of reality, how to both live and create with such a perception, and suspicious of reason as means to answer life's troubling questions. Both men thought Socrates birthed such a problematic way of being and, sadly so, gave the west a questionable silver bullet to solve the social and political journey of the all too human journey. In short, both men were suspicious and cynical about reason delivering the goods in any sort of meaningful or comprehensive manner. Third, there was a tendency by both men in what might be called their trichotomy to elevate culture above what might be interpreted as the more oppressive aspects of the state and religion. This means that the realm of the social principle and culture were seen as that which lifted life to a higher level than the more moderate and constrictive aspects of the political principle (state) and religious principle (church). Both men did realize, though, that it was, often, the state (political principle) and religion (church) that supported some of the most significant works of creative culture in western civilization, so when interpreting Burckhardt and Nietzsche it is important not to push the trichotomy in a direction that only collides and is in conflict. Fourth, both men, when they thought about and interpreted Christianity, tended to lean towards the more classical, Catholic, and pre-reformation forms of Christianity. This does not mean, though, that Catholic Christianity was where they finally took their leads and cultural cues. Both men were in reaction to their protestant upbringings, Burckhardt to his Swiss reformed Calvinism, Nietzsche to his Lutheranism, both traditions overplaying notions of Divine Grace that subverted human creativity, responsibility, and willing a greater good. Fifth, both men were suspicious of the emerging bourgeois and entrepreneurial west, the nouveau riche, a parvenu ethos, and those who had no significant sense of

culture and the arts. And, sixth, both men quaffed from the well of the *übermensch*, hence very much artistic aristocrats even though their understanding of the higher person meant the artistic political leader. The underlying notion of the overcomer, though, was very much predicated on the classical idea of the “agon” or struggle to reach ever higher levels of creativity and excellence. In short, hierarchy, overcoming, and struggle made for a significant trinity. But where do such men part paths and why?

Burckhardt and Nietzsche had a particular commitment to the reading, interpretation and application of history. Those who linger for long with Burckhardt’s *Reflections on History*⁸ and compare/contrast it with Nietzsche’s *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*⁹ cannot but be taken by master going in one direction and disciple in yet another direction. Both men had substantive questions and significant opposition to the use of history as a form of justifying aggressive nationalism, and a form of approaching history in a detached and seemingly scientific and objective manner—this they could agree upon.

But Burckhardt’s more nuanced, measured, and judicious weighing of the tensions between, for example, the three powers of State, Religion and Culture (and the reciprocal action of the three powers) walks the reader to a different place on the historic terrain than Nietzsche’s more reductionistic and, dare I say, ideological read of history (in which the reading and interpreting of history is “for Life” in the present tense). Burckhardt’s read, yet once again, of “The Great Men of History” is layered and, in its own way, reciprocal, whereas Nietzsche’s great men are leaning more in a similar direction. If both men are committed to the *übermensch*, then the way they defined such a term was, often, at odds with one another. The great men for Nietzsche often, with their *wille zu macht*, have worrisome tendencies towards the *Gewaltmenschen* (or more aggressive and violent means of overcoming and bringing into being a reality of self-making and creating). The fact that Nietzsche had, in various places, not only fawned on Machiavelli but more importantly Machiavelli’s nod to Caesar, Cesare Borgia, and Napoleon, would make Burckhardt wince and shy away from the misuse and misdirection of power that, in places, Nietzsche seems to condone as a way of sweeping away the mediocrity of modern last men.

There can be no doubt that Burckhardt and Nietzsche opposed the disruptive and mercantile mentality that reduced all things to mobile commodities, and both men pondered how such a bourgeois and low cultural ethos could be questioned and overcome. But Burckhardt, ever the classical humanist,

8 Jacob Burckhardt, *Reflections on History* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1999).

9 Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1980).

thought that through education in the best that had been thought, said, and done, fifth columns and ginger groups could offer an antidote to the toxins of the liberal modern way. Nietzsche was convinced that such a position was simply naïve given the run-a-way train of liberal modernity. Nietzsche thought that with the coming to be of the protestant reformation, enlightenment and secularism, such a delaying technique merely put a brake on the deeper nihilism that underlay the thin foundations of liberalism (with its sheer inability to articulate anything of nobility or of a higher virtue, ethic, and ethos). It would just be a matter of time before the more thoughtful would deconstruct the paper-thin core of liberalism, and social and ethical confusion would occur (all choices being but fragile and untenable webs of meaning, meaning with no grounding or holding power). The reality of nihilism was always at the door awaiting the door and house to finally implode within and without.

There is a definite outworking of a political agenda that flows from the different philosophical and historical approaches of Burckhardt and Nietzsche. Both men were skeptical about liberal modernity in delivering on the goods, but they differed on how they might live within such a historic moment while being nourished by different reads of classical Athens and renaissance Italy. If democracy leads to a form of politics in which mass culture comes to shape and define the state, religion, and culture, how are those to think and live who are committed to overcoming such low level and mediocre pandering to lowest level desires and trendy opinions? What does it mean to be an aristocrat of thought, culture and creative deed? Burckhardt realized, in some ways, the will to power that Nietzsche so justified was, in many ways, part of the modern problem just a different version of it—a more cultural rather than political (nationalism) or religious (religious wars and divisive denominations). The content of such a merging of liberty and power was, obviously, different in politics and religion, but the notion of the dominance of liberty and power was something that all three powers shared. Burckhardt, ever the studious historian, saw only too keenly where this led and would lead in the cultural-political direction if Nietzsche took the throne (as he has for many)—liberty-willing facing into the abyss of nothingness and nihilism and a bringing into being, from chaos, ever different and at odds creative possibilities (many with dark and dangerous out workings, but at their highest and best a new being that faced the tragic and nihilist ways and overcame them).

Nietzsche often quoted and drew from Burckhardt as his model and mentor, but the more Nietzsche turned down an aggressive libertarian direction, the more Burckhardt (the conservative humanist of Basel) parted paths with him. Both men were convinced that history had to be more than antiquarian scholarship and only fit for museums—the best of the past, if rightly read and mined, could correct and redirect the problematic pathway being taken by liberal modernity. But, how many actually saw and understood the dilemma

and its unfolding?—very few! They were like the perennial canaries in the mine shaft, the toxins of their times and implications of such toxins felt and internalized by them. Ideas do have consequences, and some consequences take longer than others to bear their diverse fruit on the tree of such ideology. But by days end Burckhardt and Nietzsche took different paths, Burckhardt being the faithful and loyal teacher in Basel, publishing less and less as he aged, his energy given more and more to public lectures and time spent with students. Nietzsche left Basel and took to Sils Maria in the Engadine Valley in Switzerland where some of his most powerful, challenging and pungent books were written before his early breakdown and death. How did Hermann Hesse find a middle way of sorts between Burckhardt and Nietzsche and why did he finally find more affinities with Burckhardt than Nietzsche?

There can be no doubt that Hesse did more than most in his literary, religious, and philosophical journey to make sense of the challenge of Nietzsche but, by day's end, it was Burckhardt that held him the nearest and dearest. How did Hesse engage Nietzsche and what was it about Burckhardt that finally won the day, remembering, of course, that Burckhardt and Nietzsche both share a significant suspicion of the modern liberal project, but they differ on how they each diagnose the problem and their prognosis in dealing with the illness. But it is to Nietzsche and Hesse we now turn.

There are two poles or extremes from which Nietzsche's life and thinking tend to either polarize or dwell within an uneasy and trying tension. There is Nietzsche the destroyer, the model of deconstruction, the thinker with sword, fist, hammer, and fire in hand that exposes and undresses the no clothes emperor of metaphysics, religion, state, bourgeois society, positivist history and science, education, and economics, and seems to point the way to the cliff's edge of nihilism. It is from such a place that the weak despair, cynicism or skepticism takes hold, and a sort of paralysis occurs (or a retreat to the predictability and security of that which had been deconstructed). There seems, from one read of Nietzsche, the overcomer, to be the creative and strong souled ones who, from inner strength and self-understanding, make themselves as a painter would paint on a blank canvass, a writer on a blank page. Such is one pole of Nietzsche; Nietzsche the courageous nihilist who brings meaning and purpose out of nothing or chaos. The other pole from which to read and interpret Nietzsche is his commitment to the notion of *amor fati* (love of one's fate). There is a sense, when read in a certain way, that the authentic overcomer merely overcomes what he/she has been conditioned to be, but on the far side is the new being, the being yet waiting to be born, the being waiting upon and attentive to the daimon of fate (a sort of classical notion, in a way, of Lutheran grace)—all that is finite, conditioned, enculturated and fallible must be seen for what it is, including nihilism, and on the far side of such deconstruction is the Zarathustra prophet and harbinger of the new being

who abides, heeds, and loves the fate given to such an overcomer. Does then Nietzsche see a Zarathustra as one who also attempts to overcome fate itself (content of fate illusive and allusive) or love the givenness of fate? It is these two poles that Nietzsche often traverses in his thinking and prolific writing, his aphoristic probes and prophetic like pronouncements. How did Hesse, in heeding Nietzsche, heed the tendency towards deconstruction-nihilism on the one hand and *amor fati* on the other hand; Zarathustra being, in many ways, Nietzsche's literary messianic figure?

Some of the earliest published writings of Hesse reflect and embody, in a searching yet somewhat immature manner, the unease the sensitive artist in the world feels and is unsure what to do with: *Romantic Songs*,¹⁰ *An Hour Beyond Midnight*,¹¹ and a culmination of sorts, *The Posthumous Writings and Poems of Hermann Lauscher* (1901)¹² reflect the mood and ways of the lonely artistic individual misunderstood and unheard in an unfeeling and uncaring world. There is an obvious sense that Hermann Lauscher has many an artistic affinity with both Nietzsche and Goethe's *Werther*; Lauscher the sensitive artist, at perpetual odds with the bourgeois and superficial world that he lives in, the gap between the comfortable, unquestioning, affluent bourgeois and the doubting, inwardly disoriented Lauscher inhabiting two different and, in many ways, external and internal realities. Hesse's early novels and prose did, for the most part, not sell well and such a reality, of course, reinforced within him the notion of being the artistic outsider.

It was, though, with the publication of *Peter Camenzind* (1904)¹³ that Hesse began to find his vocational way as a writer and artist. Peter is born into a small alpine village (isolated from the larger world), and his there and back again journey takes him into the larger urban, cultural and educational ethos in which the significance and cultural impact of Nietzsche reigns supreme both in an implicit and explicit way. Peter's journey takes him to the abyss a few times but his lingering time in Italy also exposes him to St. Francis of Assisi and Italian communities that live simply yet meaningfully. Peter could not dismiss them easily as a mindless herd. In fact, it is his participation and life with them that, in many ways, transforms him—Francis, integration with community, and serving of the least of these takes Peter to places he never anticipated—his final reconciliation with his father and return to the alpine vision he grew up in concludes the novel. So, the question becomes, what is the content of the genuine overcomer? Is Zarathustra or Francis the way forward?

10 Hermann Hesse, *Romantische Lieder* (Dresden and Leipzig: E. Pierson's Verlag, 1899).

11 Hermann Hesse, *Eine Stunde hinter Mitternacht* (Leipzig: Verlegt bei Eugen Diederichs, 1899).

12 Hermann Hesse, *Hinterlassene Schriften Und Gedichte von Hermann Lauscher, herausgegeben von* (Basel: R. Reich Buchhandlung, 1901).

13 Hermann Hesse, *Peter Camenzind* (Berlin: S. Fischer, 1904), 22.

Which decision, when standing over the abyss and nothingness should be chosen and why? Such were Hesse's initial probes into the challenge of Nietzsche.

The publication of *Under the Wheel* (1906)¹⁴ brought to the fore the clash between, this time, an authoritarian educational system and the sensitive creative artist; the educational system, like a steam roller, crushing the creative artist under its relentless wheel. Again, Hesse has an affinity with Nietzsche's many barbs against the German educational system of his time in which the true thinker and artist could be crushed by such a tank.

The pendulum swing between nihilism and *amor fati* heats up further and in a more demanding way in *Gertrude* (1910).¹⁵ The two dominant actors in this compelling novel take the tensions much deeper and further than the previous novels. Kuhn is a crippled composer who knows suffering, pain, and inner anguish. It is, of course, somewhat understandable that he projects such erratic and senseless tragedy and unpredictability on nature and life in general—how is it possible to affirm life when much of the evidence negates it? The other leading actor, Muoth, takes the nihilist path to one possible end—there is no meaning other than what we make, why bother making more creative meaning (all is transitory and an illusion), so suicide becomes Muoth's answer. Is this the path Kuhn takes, though? Kuhn, by novel's end, dwells in the trying tension of nihilism leading to suicide; an unresolved, doubting and troubled faith in God and a rare blend of sensing the "divine within", a subtle *unio mystica* that is knit together with *amor fati*. Muoth embodies a direction nihilism can go and Kuhn takes a different direction, Hesse ever probing various ways to answer and massage Nietzsche and Zarathustra.

Needless to say, WWI revealed yet further paths possible to take on the nihilist path. The inevitable questions emerging from war about nationalism, brutality of war, destroying another person for the simple reason they are from another place across a border, human willfulness in mutual destruction, seeming silence from any transcendent reality pressed deep into Hesse's psyche. The fact his marriage was ending must not to be missed. The publication of *Demian* (1919)¹⁶ moves the Nietzschean overcomer to yet a more iconoclastic and sacrilegious position, Demian holding high Cain (killer of Abel) as a model of the strong and free versus the passive and weak Abel. The traditional father figure of God is jettisoned in favour of the complex Mother God Frau Eva. The naïve and maturing Sinclair is tutored into a different way of seeing and being by the more complex and challenging Demian, nihilism flirted with but layered Jungian archetypes merging and mingling in the mind and

14 Hermann Hesse, *Unterm Rad: Roman* (Berlin: Fischers Bibliothek zeitgenössischer Romane, 1906).

15 Hermann Hesse, *Gertrud: Roman* (München: A. Langen, 1910).

16 Hermann Hesse, *Demian: Die Geschichte von einer Jugend* (Berlin: Fischer, 1919), 9–16.

imaginings of Demian and Sinclair; Jung himself having written much on Nietzsche, and Hesse being a patient of both a Jungian counsellor and Jung himself. There can be no doubt that *Demian* is a novel not to miss in Hesse's ongoing journey with Nietzsche and ways of engaging him. It is significant to note as WWI came to an inevitable end, Hesse published his lengthy and not to be missed *Zarathustra's Return* (1919).¹⁷ *Zarathustra's Return* is Hesse taking up the mantle of Nietzsche and using Nietzsche's Zarathustra metaphor as a way of debunking and opposing the German spirit of aggressive hawkishness in a way that Nietzsche's notion of the *ubermensch* could not be confused or equated with—the herd mentality of German nationalism, in short, was anti-Zarathustrian. Hesse's use of Zarathustra both made it clear that Hesse was indebted to Nietzsche but his interpretation of Nietzsche clearly separated Nietzsche from those (such as Nietzsche's sister) who attempted to use him to prop up and legitimate the right wing of German fascism and Nazism.

There is, of course, Hesse's ongoing interaction with Nietzsche in most of his novels, but it would be remiss to miss his equally significant engagement with Dostoevsky in his two articles, published in 1920 in his book *Glimpse into Chaos*.¹⁸ *Glimpse into Chaos* has two poignant and not to be missed essays on two of Dostoevsky's novels *The Brothers Karamazov* and *The Idiot*. The subtitle of the essays is appropriately entitled "The Downfall of Europe". Hesse, like most sensitive thinkers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, realized Europe was quickly losing its ethical, metaphysical, and religious mooring. WWI only revealed the sheer emptiness and vacuity of a core and north star by which Europe might orient and chart its future. The notions of liberty *sans* content and *laissez-faire* identity and ethics meant any sort of meaning could be made by the willing individual. Hesse probed such a worrisome nihilism in the Russian novels mentioned above, and his notion of the emerging "Russian Man" was, in many ways, the stark opposition of the more classical and humanist notion of *Homo sapiens* (a common humanity grounded in a desire to live into wisdom and from such a centered place). Hesse suggested in his two essays on Dostoevsky's novel that the emerging nihilism would produce men and women that opposed any sort of restraint in the name of freedom and liberty and, in the process, would inevitably lead to the downfall of Europe. Hesse even suggests, in these essays, that "it seems to me that European and especially German youth are destined to find their greatest writer in Dostoevsky—not in Goethe, not even in Nietzsche". Needless to say, Hesse focused on that part of Dostoevsky's novels in which the main protagonists had turned against any restrictions, forms and obstacles and asserted their

17 Hermann Hesse, *Zarathustras Wiederkehr: Ein Wort an die Deutsche Jugend. Von einem Deutschen* (Bern: Stämpfli, 1919).

18 Hermann Hesse, *Blick Ins Chaos: 3 Aufsätze* (Bern: Seldwyla, 1921), 4–6.

wants, wills, and a making and defining of reality in any shape, colour, and size they wished. There is, of course, the deeply religious Dostoevsky who opposed such a drift and direction, but the opposite pole was the Russian Zarathustras. Hesse, in his two essays, probes and bores into the emerging ethical and metaphysical vacuum and malaise in Europe post-WWI in these challenging must-read essays; and, in some ways, *Demian* was his initial literary attempt to face into the challenges of both Nietzsche and Dostoevsky.

There is an obvious turn in Hesse's writing after *Demian* and *Zarathustra's* *Return* to a deeper spirituality in *Siddhartha* (1919-1922).¹⁹ Siddhartha is wary of Gotama the Buddha, and much of his journey is more about learning to live into and from love, the pain and suffering of love, and the redemptive nature of love. Siddhartha, by novel's end, becomes the kindly and wise ferryman who takes pilgrims from the shoreline of what they are leaving behind, across the waters to the shoreline of where they are going. There is an emerging depth in *Siddhartha* that has some affinities with St. Francis and Peter Camenzind. Who then is the real overcomer and *ubermensch*? There is no doubt that Siddhartha goes to places of insight and wisdom that *Demian*, Sinclair, Kuhn and Muoth do not. What does it mean, therefore, to become the new being, and how is Hesse parting with Nietzsche in such a read and approach, the actual content of the overcomer seeming at odds with one another?

The shift from a seemingly deeper, simpler and more integrated notion of the spiritual overcomer in *Siddhartha* gave way to Hesse's more frayed and divided notion of the human soul in *Steppenwolf* (1927).²⁰ Harry Haller, the main protagonist in the novel, is a divided person, part a wild wolf of the steppes, part drawn to the urban, civilized and cultured world of the city. There can be no doubt Harry despises the petty and bland ethos of the bourgeois last man, the middle-class herd person who neither thinks nor feels deeply. Harry, like previous protagonists, sees much social and human reality as a construct, the language and practice of good and evil being means the weaker use to protect themselves from the demands of the stronger, the more passionate, the more in touch and tune with their inner and deeper *amor fati*. There are many affinities in style and content between *Demian* and *Steppenwolf*, Nietzsche's Zarathustra ever being pondered, worked through and evaluated. Martin Buber, in his fine article on Hesse ("Hermann Hesse's Service to the Spirit") for Hesse's 80th birthday, in *A Believing Humanism: My Testament 1902-1965* (1967)²¹ rightly so, I think, hinted at the dilemma within Hesse's literary struggles. There seemed to be two trajectories Hesse was going in his inter-

19 Hermann Hesse, *Siddhartha: Eine indische Dichtung* (Berlin: Fischer, 1922).

20 Hermann Hesse, *Der Steppenwolf, von Hermann Hesse* (Berlin: S. Fischer, 1927).

21 Martin Buber, *A Believing Humanism: My Testament, 1902-1965*, translated, and with an introduction and explanatory comments by Maurice Friedman (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967).

action with Nietzsche. Hesse could continue the path of the vitalistic, artistic maker of history who, again and again, alone and lonely, isolated yet refusing to conform, misunderstood by nation, state, community, and middle class, standing over the abyss of nihilism, through sheer force of will, overcomes the emptiness within and without, and the skepticism and cynicism of the weaker willed ones. Or, Hesse could ponder yet deeper and further a more significant and substantive notion of meaningful overcoming that was grounded in the demands of community and service to a fuller good. Such, in some ways, was the bent and direction of Hesse's *Narcissus and Goldmund* (1930).²²

There is an obvious sense in *Narcissus and Goldmund* that Goldmund remains, in a variety of ways, the uber artistic individualist who indulges both physical and creative appetites to the fullest measure. Hesse does realize much is lost when the dynamic and engaged aspects of Narcissus are lost within the soul. It is, though, to Narcissus (most interesting how Hesse is redoing and rethinking this classical myth) that Hesse sees as the counterpoint—a probing of a deeper communal spirituality, somewhat indebted to Siddhartha and Peter Camenzind, that Hesse explores in this maturing novel. It is, of course, not an either-or, but more a probing of the pro-contra of both Narcissus and Goldmund, the appeal of the liberty loving Goldmund (and the dangers of such notions of liberty) and the more ordered, disciplined and communal artistic/monastic vision of Narcissus that keep this novel in living tension; Narcissus, in some ways, an anticipation of Father Jacobus in *The Glass Bead Game*. There can be little doubt, though, that the issue of the conditions for authentic freedom is being pondered in this transition novel. I think it can be legitimately argued that Goldmund seems to be the more attractive actor on the stage, but Narcissus is about to emerge as a serious option and contender to Zarathustra.

There is a sense in *The Journey to the East* (1932)²³ that Hesse has made a definitive turn in his understanding of the overcomer. What within and without is meant to be overcome? I have covered, in previous essays, the content and core of *The Journey to the East*,²⁴ but suffice it to say that Leo in *The Journey to the East* is the regal, royal, mature overcomer who is the head of the spiritual League of those travelling to greater depths (both past and present). Leo is also the hidden (throughout most of the novel) servant of all servants, Leo himself being Francis of Assisi's dearest friend; the metaphor of Leo the lion being one who has disciplined desires for a higher spiritual good (important

22 Hermann Hesse, *Narziss und Goldmund* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1930).

23 Hermann Hesse, *Die Morgenlandfahrt: e. Erzähl* (Berlin: S. Fischer, 1932), 1–5.

24 Ron Dart, *The Journey to the East by Hermann Hesse* (1956; Clarion: Journal of Religion, Peace & Justice, 2012).

Ibid., "Hermann Hesse's 'The Journey to the East' (Part 2)" (Clarion: Journal of Religion, Peace & Justice, 2019).

to recall at this point Zarathustra's three phases of transformation, the lion being the second). Leo is, in many ways, a more mature and deeper version of Narcissus, Siddhartha, and Peter Camenzind. So, the deeper and more perennial question becomes this: whose version and vision of the overcomer is the most convincing and why? Hesse was very much moving in the direction of the classical humanist, while Nietzsche was veering off in another direction. There is a succinct summary of Leo's position near the end of chapter 1 in *The Journey to the East*, and I quote from it. Leo has been commenting on how the abiding appeal of both mothers and artists is the way they give birth to and serve both children and artistic creation—at times, the mother and artist seem weary and worn low in the doing of the deed and being true to such a fate. And yet, Leo has this to say:

“Perhaps it is sad and yet also beautiful. The law ordains that it shall be so”

“The Law?” I asked curiously, “What law is that, Leo?”

“The law of service. He who wishes to live long must serve, but he who wishes to rule does not live long”.²⁵

There is an obvious position being taken by Leo, head of the League, in such a position taken (and the consequences of it). Those who know and are willing to serve their inner vision, spark, fire, fate, produce life and life abundant, but this only occurs through self-understanding and serving-birthing-being a midwife of that which is deepest within and most responsible without. The two German words, *knecht* and *dienst* are essential to understand in Hesse's response to Nietzsche.

Let us now turn to Hesse's final answer and synthesis in his response to Nietzsche in *The Glass Bead Game* (1943).²⁶ There are five things to note in approaching *The Glass Bead Game*. First, the full-bodied tome is “dedicated to the Journeyers to the East”; hence the earlier book, *The Journey to the East* is a must-read *entrée* and portal to *The Glass Bead Game*. Second, Joseph Knecht is the main protagonist in the book, and it is his life, reflections and journey that are front and centre—he becomes Magister Ludi (and all the complications and crises of conscience this brings him), but the names given him by Hesse are significant. Third, Knecht is both the German word to serve and etymologically it is the cognate of the English word Knight. Hesse is suggesting the real knight, the one who struggles and fights for the good, true, and beautiful is not a well-trained military person but one who struggles to unite the highest cultural visions of the past and present (such is the vocation of the Castilians

25 Hermann Hesse, *The Journey to the East* (London: Peter Owen; Vision Press, 1933), 39.

26 Hermann Hesse, *Das Glasperlenspiel*, Bd. 1 & 2 (Zürich: Fretz & Wasmuth, 1943).

who play the glass bead game). Third, Joseph is also connected to the Biblical Joseph (who served at the highest levels in the Egyptian court) and, interestingly enough, Thomas Mann's trilogy on the perennial yet Jewish Joseph (published before *The Glass Bead Game*). Fourth, both Burckhardt and Nietzsche factor significantly in *The Glass Bead Game*, although Burckhardt (Father Jacobus) is much more a substantive core and main actor than the more erratic yet brilliant Nietzsche (Fritz Tegularius). Fifth, Hesse brings together, in a symphony of sorts (music and harmony being a foundational metaphor for the Castalians), his final vision in this book, his attempt to synthesize many of the trying tensions that beset those on the road to thinking and living an authentic life, contemplation and action (and an understanding of both) the foundation stones of his cathedral of thought and life, the Castalians—the somewhat inadequate bearers of such cultural guardians.

My essay on *The Glass Bead Game* in *Clarion*²⁷ should be read as an introductory reflection on this, the final, fullest and ripest vision of Hesse (who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1946 for a lifetime of artistic and political activism). I would also encourage you to watch the three videos I did on *The Glass Bead Game* for an oral and visual synopsis of that magisterial tome.²⁸

I began this article by suggesting that Burckhardt and Nietzsche were two formative influences on Hesse's life and writings, and yet, at the deepest level, as mentioned in the introductory quote, Burckhardt was the more informative. What was it about Burckhardt that took Hesse to places that Nietzsche was incapable (in his oft reactionary ways) of doing? I will conclude this missive by highlighting five areas in which Hesse had greater affinities with Burckhardt than with Nietzsche.

There can be no doubt that Burckhardt, Nietzsche, and Hesse were on the same page in questioning the crass nationalism and crude statism of their age and ethos. They also had little patience for the emerging entrepreneurial culture of the bourgeois philistine class that measured all on the transient scales of profit and loss, the primacy of Culture being one of the first victims of such a dumbing down of that which makes the human quest of perennial significance. But paths do part even though all three men shared, in different ways, substantive doubts about the project of liberal modernity, their aristocratic notions of the primacy of Culture an affront to equalitarian modern thought

27 *Clarion: Journal of Spirituality and Justice*, "Hermann Hesse: The Glass Bead Game Then & Now—Ron Dart," accessed September 13, 2024, https://www.clarion-journal.com/clarion_journal_of_spirit/2018/04/the-glass-bead-game-then-and-now-ron-dart.html

28 *Clarion: Journal of Spirituality and Justice*, "Hermann Hesse's 'Glass Bead Game'—Ron Dart," accessed October 30, 2024, https://www.clarion-journal.com/clarion_journal_of_spirit/2017/04/hermann-hesses-glass-bead-game-ron-dart.html; https://www.clarion-journal.com/clarion_journal_of_spirit/2017/04/hermann-hesse-the-glass-bead-game-then-now-ron-dart-.html

and culture. Hesse and Burckhardt do, in their perspectives, trek different trails than Nietzsche, though. There are five differences I will lightly land on. First, Hesse and Burckhardt did their thinking in a more measured and irenical manner, carefully weighing the best that had been thought, said, and done at the high points of the past, absorbing such insights and passing them on through their publications and teaching. Nietzsche tended to be more confrontational, more doing philosophy with a sledgehammer (and, in this sense, very much like Luther). Burckhardt and Hesse were more like physicians of culture, doing their cultural operation with the finesse and nuance of a surgical knife. So, the very method of thinking is quite different—the one irenical the other confrontational. Second, Burckhardt and Hesse had a greater sensitivity to the layered and complex role of spirituality and religion than Nietzsche (who tended, once again, to fire hose Christianity even though he could be more sensitive to the Roman Catholic than the Protestant tradition). Hesse was, I might add, much more probing and sensitive to religion and spirituality than Burckhardt (who was interested in religion as a historic phenomenon but kept an academic and personal distance from it in reality). Hesse's ever deeper interest in the contemplative aspects of religion and spirituality are most obvious in such novels as *Siddhartha*, *Narcissus and Goldman*, *The Journey to the East* and *The Glass Bead Game*. Third, the fact that Hesse had a much greater interest in spirituality and religion means Burckhardt's trilogy of *State, Religion and Culture* (in which *Culture* took the lead) was more complex in Hesse (who thought the dialogue and interaction between *Culture* and *Religion* was more significant than Burckhardt and Nietzsche were willing to grant).

Fourth, Burckhardt and Hesse did, in many ways, embody in their commitment to place (Burckhardt in Basel, Hesse in Montagnola) the notion that the local and small is beautiful, and politics—the best and finest way to live their public lives, with Switzerland (and its many cantons) embodying just such a political way of being. Fifth, Hesse was less enamoured by classical Athens and Renaissance Italy than Burckhardt and Nietzsche. The noble and great men within aspects of these moments of cultural renewal held Hesse less. Hesse had a greater and grander sense of both comparative literature and civilizations, but more important yet, his notion of greatness was measured by the quiet and often ignored virtue of those who serve and are generous to others: Jesus, western and eastern monks and holy people, Francis of Assisi, Peter Camenzind, Narcissus, Leo, and Joseph Knecht are models that Hesse turns to as the north star; the German words of *knecht* and *dienst* portal into Hesse's vision in a way that is foreign to Burckhardt and Nietzsche's notion of the makers and shapers of history. I might add, though, that Burckhardt did give the nod to the ascetics in the early church that does need to be recognized, but many of his great men of history are quite different as cultural ikons—Hesse does nudge Burckhardt further in the direction he had some affinities with.

It is, obviously, time to thread this essay to a close. In sum, Hesse was substantially impacted by Burckhardt and Nietzsche, but it was Burckhardt that did more than Nietzsche in shaping his thinking and life. This did not mean, though, that Hesse swallowed Burckhardt whole. There are many significant ways in which Hesse took a different bend in the trail than Burckhardt (and such a different trail taken led him to unique sights and landscapes), and it is to such places seen and lived within that Hesse's unique vision and attractive qualities make him of perennial interest. It is, though, Hesse's blending of a grander religious synthesis, shaped and defined by service (*knecht-dienst*) within an inner self understanding of *amor fati* and the *unio mystica* that takes him to places Burckhardt and Nietzsche do not go. And, Burckhardt, Nietzsche, and Hesse bring to us, given their mining of the western direction (and the challenge to it these days), this simple question and answer: whose version of the western (and eastern) tradition should we heed, hear, and why? Hesse, it seems to me, offers the better and fuller, more nuanced and insightful, the deeper humanist and classical approach that transcends time and place, yet is perennially applicable to both.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ron Dart taught in the department of Political Science (POLSC), Philosophy (PHIL), and Religious Studies (RELST) at the University of the Fraser Valley (Abbotsford, British Columbia) for almost 35 years. During the 1980s, he was on staff with Amnesty International and worked with the organization for about 15 years. Dart has published more than 40 books, focusing on Canadian High-Red Toryism, Canadian political philosophers Stephen Leacock, George Grant, and European writers such as Hermann Hesse, Jacob Burckhardt, and Friedrich Nietzsche. Currently, he teaches graduate courses at St. Stephen's University in New Brunswick and has been invited to return as professor emeritus to teach a few courses on Western political philosophy at the University of the Fraser Valley for the Winter 2025 semester.