

## Theatre in “Steppenwolf”

*Uschi Linehan*

Hermann Hesse’s novel *Steppenwolf* (1927) tells the story of Harry Haller, a misanthropic “wolf of the steppes” who sees himself as possessing both the souls of a human and a wolf. One night, as Haller is prowling the streets of the town, he sees a door on an old stone wall with the inscription: MAGIC THEATRE ENTRANCE NOT FOR EVERYBODY (Hesse 2001: 41). The *Magische Theater* is the place where Haller eventually faces himself and comes to terms with his inner turmoil. The following extract is from the *Magische Theater* section of the novel *Steppenwolf*, whereby Haller comes across a door with the inscription: GUIDANCE IN THE BUILDING-UP OF THE PERSONALITY. SUCCESS GUARANTEED (Hesse 2001: 222). This is where a chess player gives Haller a lesson in developing his personality, as he tells him: “. . . the playwright shapes a drama from a handful of characters, so do we from the pieces of the disintegrated self build up ever new groups, with ever new interplay and suspense, and new situations that are eternally inexhaustible.” (Hesse 2001: 224)

Once more I stood in the round corridor, still excited by the hunting adventure. And everywhere on all the countless doors were the alluring inscriptions:

The series of inscriptions was endless. One was

This seemed to me to be worth looking into and I went in at this door.

I found myself in a quiet twilight room where a man with something like a large chess-board in front of him sat in Eastern fashion on the floor. At the first glance I thought it was friend Pablo. He wore at any rate a similar gorgeous silk jacket and had the same dark and shining eyes.

‘Are you Pablo?’

‘I am not anybody,’ he replied amiably. ‘We have no names here and we are no persons. I am a chessplayer. Do you wish for instruction in the building up of the personality?’

‘Yes, please.’

‘Then be so kind as to place a few dozen of your pieces at my disposal.’

‘My pieces – ?’

‘Of the pieces into which you saw your so-called personality broken up. I can’t play without pieces.’

He held a glass up to me and again I saw the unity of my personality broken up into many selves whose number seemed even to have increased. The pieces

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YOU LAUGH YOURSELF TO BITS  
DO YOU WANT TO BE ALL SPIRIT?  
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were now, however, very small, about the size of chessmen. The player took a dozen or so of them in his sure and quiet fingers and placed them on the ground near the board. As he did so he began to speak in the monotonous way of one who goes through a recitation or reading that he has often gone through before.

“This mistaken and unhappy notion that a man is an enduring unity is known to you. It is also known to you that man consists of a multitude of souls, of numerous selves. The separation of the unity of the personality into these numerous pieces passes for madness. Science has invented the name Schizophrenia for it. Science is in this so far right as no multiplicity may be dealt with unless there be a series, a certain order and grouping. It is wrong in so far as it holds that only a single, binding and lifelong order is possible for the multiplicity of subordinate selves. This error of science has many

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unpleasant consequences, and the only advantage of simplifying the work of the state-appointed pastors and masters and saving them the labours of original thought. In consequence of this error many persons pass for normal, and indeed for highly valuable members of society, who are incurably mad; and many, on the other hand, are looked upon as mad who are geniuses. Hence it is that we supplement the imperfect psychology of science by the conception that we call the art of building up the soul. We demonstrate to anyone whose soul has fallen to pieces that he can rearrange these pieces of a previous self in what order he pleases, and so attain to an endless multiplicity of moves in the game of life. As the playwright shapes a drama from a handful of characters, so do we from

the pieces of the disintegrated self build up ever new groups, with ever new interplay and suspense, and new situations that are eternally inexhaustible. Look!

With the sure and silent touch of his clever fingers he took hold of my pieces, all the old men and young men and children and women, cheerful and sad, strong and weak, nimble and clumsy, and swiftly arranged them on his board for a game. At once they formed themselves into groups and families, games and battles, friendships and enmities, forming a little world all by themselves. For a while he let this lively and yet orderly world go through its evolutions before my enraptured eyes in play and strife, making treaties and fighting battles, wooing, marrying and multiplying. It was indeed a crowded stage, a moving breathless drama.

Then he passed his hand swiftly over the board and gently swept all the pieces into a heap; and, meditatively with an artist's skill, made up a new game of the same pieces with quite other groupings, relationships, and entanglements. The second game had an affinity with the first, it was the same world built of the same material, but the key was different, the time changed, the motif was differently given out and the situations differently presented.

And in this fashion the clever architect built up one game after another out of the figures, each of which was a bit of myself, and every game had a distant resemblance to every other. Each belonged recognizably to the same world and acknowledged a common origin. Yet each was entirely new.

'This is the art of life,' he said in the manner of a teacher. 'You may yourself as an artist develop the game of your life and lend it animation. You may complicate and enrich it as you please. It lies in your hands. Just as madness, in a higher sense, is the beginning of all wisdom, so is schizophrenia the beginning of all art and all fantasy. Even learned men have come to a partial recognition of this, as may be gathered, for example, from *Prince Wunderhorn*, that enchanting book, in which the industry and pains of a man of learning, with the assistance of the genius of a number of madmen and artists shut up as such, are immortalized. Here, take your little pieces away with you. The game will often give you pleasure. The piece that today grew to the proportions of an intolerable bugbear, you will degrade tomorrow to a mere lay figure. The luckless Cinderella will in the next game be the princess. I wish you much pleasure, my dear sir.'

I bowed low in gratitude to the gifted chess player, put the little pieces in my pocket and withdrew through the narrow door.

## Bibliography

Hesse, Hermann (2001): *Steppenwolf*. Translated from the German by Basil Creighton. Revised by Walter Sorell. London: Penguin Classics, 221-225