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Existential Lit C Band

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Talking to the Man in the Mirror: Understanding and Controlling the Multifaceted Self

Hermann Hesse’s *Steppenwolf* pits Henry Haller’s two senses of self against each other: the self preserved by the duality between man and wolf and the self made up of a ‘garden’ of a thousand selves. The immortals, desperate for Haller to recognize the delusion of a simple two-fold self, lead him to the magic theater, where he sees himself in several different mirrors (and rooms which mirror his desires). Yet even as Harry comes face-to-face with compelling reflections that present a more complicated self than just that of man and wolf, he stubbornly clings to the dual-nature narrative, ultimately ‘failing’ the test of the magic theater. The psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan sees the mirror as a gateway to the self, an integral stage in the formation of a child’s identity. Nietzsche, in turn, believes that the spirit undergoes three metamorphoses before the child can utilize its self to “will its *own* will” (Nietzsche 141). The ‘Treatise on the Steppenwolf’ foretold that Haller “is aware of the existence of that mirror in which he has such a bitter need to look and from which he shrinks in such deathly fear,” revealing that Haller senses that he is more than just a wolf of the Steppes, but is also afraid of what he will encounter if he thoroughly explores his ‘garden’ of selves (Hesse 56). The mirrors and rooms within the magic theater present images which force Haller to go down a path that leads to a confrontation with his true self. Carl Jung would further argue that each reflection Haller sees represents a different ‘imago’ of his collective unconscious, each of which he must either discard or integrate into his personality. In Steppenwolf, Hesse holds a mirror up to mankind to reflect a deep-seeded temptation to latch onto over simplistic narratives of the self, indulging a child-like desire to shy away from the parts of the self that instill fear and stall the progression towards individuality.

The members of the magic theater must lead Haller, like a child, away from his initial man/wolf mindset and towards a new conception of his self, but Haller, convinced of his uniqueness (and fearful of leaving his wretched, intellectual existence behind), continues to resist. The entrance to the door of the magic theater reads “Entrance not for Everybody” and “For madmen only,” and Harry, believing that his identity as a Steppenwolf qualifies him as one of these madmen, wants desperately to gain entrance into this theater (Hesse 38). After chasing down one of the members, he receives the ‘Treatise on the Steppenwolf,’ a book which devotes an entire section to debunking “the artless division into wolf and man,” calling it a “hopelessly childish attempt” in self-understanding (Hesse 57). The book, written by the immortals, describes a Jungian garden, where there are “a hundred kinds of trees, a thousand kinds of flowers,” each representing a different archetype, challenging him to become the gardener of his own garden, pruning weeds and cultivating flowers until he has fashioned a whole self from these endless pieces. Haller’s insistence on seeing himself as a Steppenwolf blinds him to nine-tenths of these selves because they do not “stand classified as either wolf or man” (Hesse 65). The immortals push him to see the thousands of selves that stand alongside the wolf Haller knows so well. But Haller does not trust his spirit; he cannot begin the process of Zarathustra’s three metamorphoses, afraid that the weight of these many selves will crush “the strong, weight-bearing spirit in which dwell respect and awe” (Nietzsche 140). Though Haller deifies these immortals, he does not think their words apply to him, remarking on “the little understanding [the treatise] showed of my actual disposition and predicament… it was too wide a mesh to catch my own individual soul, my unique and unexampled destiny” (Hesse 71).

Haller maintains this stubborn insistence on his unique, Steppenwolf self because it allows him to wallow in intellectual self-pity without forcing him to look too deeply inside himself. Yet the immortals persist: the same man who gave him the treatise tells him to go to the Black Eagle, a bar where he meets Hermine, and through her, Pablo and Maria. These three each represent a conglomeration of new archetypes, new sides to Haller’s being, slowly drawing him away from his two-dimensional self mindset and opening him up to the possibility of a vast array of selves. Together, they school him in life and love, experiences he has long forgotten about in his overly serious devotion to the sorrows of the Steppenwolf. They open him to “the world of imagination,” and through this rekindled awareness, he finally looks at “the ruins of my being as fragments of the divine… I had only to snatch up my scattered images and raise my life as Harry Haller and as the Steppenwolf to the unity of one picture” (Hesse 142). Despite this progress, however, Haller cannot shake the man-wolf self which plagues him: at the Masked Ball, he recoils from the frivolity and festivity as “the feeling crept over me that the Steppenwolf was standing behind me with his tongue out. Nothing pleased me… it was a surrender and a backsliding into my wolfishness” (Hesse 163). Once again, the man/wolf duality keeps Haller from accessing different parts of his self, even those which make him happy. Finding no other way to pry his fingers from his man-wolf duality, Pablo brings Haller into the magic theater.

Once inside, the many different mirrors of the magic theater further complicate Harry’s sense of self, as they all pull him towards his multifaceted self and demand he rid himself of the Steppenwolf duality completely. When Pablo tells Haller that he must rid himself of “the old spectacles of the Steppenwolf” to properly experience the magic theater, he reacts by latching onto the Steppenwolf, much like a child will cling to its favorite stuffed animal (Hesse 176). In a mirror handed to him by Pablo, Haller sees a glorified, pitiful version of his Steppenwolf: “a shy, beautiful, dazed wolf with frightened eyes,” subconsciously holding tight to the version of himself he has grown to know (Hesse 175). But at Pablo’s command, he looks in the mirror and watches as “the mournful image in the glass gave a final convulsion and vanished,” with a sensation “like that a man feels when a tooth has been extracted with cocaine, a sense of relief” that gives way to an irresistible desire to laugh (Hesse 178). Pablo hurls the mirror down an endless corridor. At this critical juncture in the novel, Haller is finally undergoing what Lacan calls ‘the mirror stage,’ a moment which catalyzes the rise of the self and helps infants recognize that they are separate entities within the physical world. Children who have completed this stage use a mirror to “project the formation of the individual into history,” providing a stable platform from which identification with the self is possible (Lacan 504). For Haller, this means that for the moment, he can wholeheartedly embrace the multi-self narrative and attempt identification with this new self. He moves to a gigantic mirror on the wall, and sees reflected there not just himself, but “a second, a third, a tenth, a twentieth figure [springing] from it till the whole gigantic mirror was full of nothing but Harrys or bits of him, each of which I saw only for the instant of recognition” (Hesse 179). This mirror allows Haller to see the infinite possible selves that lie before him, no longer an abstract, detached idea on a page of the treatise but right in front of his eyes, jumping out of the mirror.

As Haller ventures deeper into the theater, he encounters a room with a chessboard, and while this room may appear to solve Haller’s problems with his sense of self – by showing him how he can understand and control these many fragments of self – it actually strengthens his Steppenwolf duality. The chess player who awaits Haller in this room once again holds a mirror up to him, and “again I saw the unity of my personality broken up into many selves whose number seemed even to have increased” (Hesse 191). The player then plucks some of these selves from the mirror and arranges them on a chessboard for a game. The pieces move back and forth, forming groups and families in a “breathless drama” the player describes as “the game of life” (Hesse 193). Each subsequent game is made up of the same pieces, but they form new groupings, making each game entirely different from the previous. This demonstrates a core Jungian concept of archetypes: each chess piece fits no standard definition as they are fluid and endlessly combining with one another. The chess player tells Haller that he has power of these pieces, giving him control over his garden: he can “rearrange these pieces of a previous self in what order he pleases, and so attain to an endless multiplicity of moves…you may yourself as an artist develop the game of life and lend it animation” (Hesse 192-3). Haller learns how to control the chaos of his infinitely divided self, but as he enters the next room – in which he watches man and wolf cruelly control one another – it becomes clear that he still cannot cleanse himself of the Steppenwolf. While the chessboard is a brilliant metaphor for the endless combinations of the many different selves, Haller perceives it in a way which reinforces his duality: there are white pieces and black pieces which battle one another, just like man and wolf. Chess itself is an intellectualized game that often requires serious thought and detached behavior – playing this game would allow him to continue to wallow in the realm of despair he is so comfortable in. The Steppenwolf is so deeply rooted in Haller’s sense of self that not even the power to control his multitude of selves and integrate them into his personality can extract it.

Moving further into the theater, Haller comes upon two starkly different versions of his own reflection, and Haller’s control over his multifaceted self falters, allowing the sense of duality to regain control and ‘failing’ the magic theater. In a moment of panic, he feels in his pocket for the chess pieces, but finds that “the figures were no longer there. Instead of them I pulled out a knife” (Hesse 204). Without these pieces, Haller loses whatever feeble control he had over his many selves, and when he looks in the great mirror he sees his glorified Steppenwolf self: “a beautiful wolf…glancing shyly from unquiet eyes” (Hesse 204). The ominous knife which replaces the pieces marks the return of the wolf, though Pablo had tried to cast it out by throwing the mirror with the wolf’s reflection down the hallway. He despairs, knowing that he has fallen back into duality. Looking again into the mirror, he sees himself: “It was I, Harry….it was a human being, someone one could speak to” (Hesse 204). This mirror gives Haller a powerful opportunity to evaluate himself as an ‘other:’ by looking at his reflection, he sees the consequences of integrating only the wolf self into his personality, of accepting the man-wolf duality as his true self. The Harry Haller in the mirror “was gray, forsaken of all fancies, wearied by all vice” and tells Haller that he “[is] waiting for death” (Hesse 204). This reflection serves as a warning: if Haller cannot change his mentality about his self, he will end up forsaken and live a meaningless life. Later, Haller sees a vastly different version of himself reflected in the same great mirror: a Harry Haller who has embraced his thousands of selves, instead of ignoring them, who has “learned to dance…visited the magic theater…heard Mozart laugh” (Hesse 208). Haller spends a long time staring at the reflection of this man, the true self he has strived towards for so long. But even on the cusp of individuation, Haller abruptly retreats from this reflection, saddened by how it looked as if “he had grown a few centuries older” and though this man had made “rents in reality’s disguise, it held him a prisoner still” (Hesse 208). Haller cannot accept such a reflection as it would force him to leave the brooding, intellectual nature of a life as a Steppenwolf, so he makes excuses out of the physical appearance of the man in the mirror. He wants to stay a despiser of the body, afraid of the responsibility that comes with “creat[ing] beyond himself” (Nietzsche 142). He ultimately rejects this vision of himself by destroying the mirror and “kick[ing] him to splinters” (Hesse 209). He gives himself over to the “sorrowful wave” that carries him back to the Steppenwolf and allows him to reassume his position as “a slave, a wolf-man” (Hesse 209).

Ultimately, Haller may never be able to leave behind his Steppenwolf self, though at the end of the book he resolves to embrace and explore his garden of selves, declaring that “I would traverse not once more, but often, the hell of my inner being. One day I would be a better hand at the game” (Hesse 218). Even after understanding and contemplating the thousand selves, Haller keeps himself from gaining control over them because he does not want to live without the safety of sorrow and self-pity that the Steppenwolf provides. To attempt to break through to the endlessly divided self requires not only understanding the concept of multiplicity but exercising control over it. Society is built to “establish schizomania and protect humanity from hearing the cry of truth from the lips of these unfortunate persons” who lose control and tell others about their newfound understanding of multiple selves (Hesse 58). But the rewards of striving to attain such enlightenment far outweigh the disadvantage of having to keep this understanding hidden: Nietzsche speaks of becoming “[a] bridge to the Superman” (Nietzsche 142), while for Lacan, the moment in which the mirror stage ends gives the self access to “the dialectic that will henceforth link the *I* to socially elaborated situations” (Lacan 507). For Jung, realizing and commanding the thousand selves leads to individuation, where a man becomes whole, building himself from these many pieces of self into an indivisible being. While Haller doesn’t heed the chess player’s advice that “just as madness, in a higher sense, is the beginning of all wisdom, so is schizomaina the beginning of all art and fantasy,” he does resolve to keep fighting to arrive at a point where he can call himself a complete individual (Hesse 193). It all starts with a look in the mirror.

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