# LABYRINTHS OF THE UNCANNY IN HESSE'S *STEPPENWOLF* AND KAFKA'S *THE METAMORPHOSIS*

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*Abstract:*

The present work is part of a larger effort of investigating the concept of man's ontological and ideological liminality – such as between nature and civilisation; beastly and divine; and private and public. The interest in literary representations of human liminality lies primarily with their collocation with the aesthetic and cognitive category of the monstrous, insofar as characters depicted as straddling the divides between such antinomies of the human experience personify the sense of the uncanny underlying the modern, urban civilisation. We pursue herein several aspects of the uncanny found within the labyrinthine conceptual structures in Hesse's *Steppenwolf* and Kafka's *Metamorphosis*.

**Keywords: Labyrinth, liminality, *Metamorphosis*, *Steppenwolf*, uncanny**

This paper belongs to a larger research corpus by the same author, throughout which the question of human liminality, whether in allegorical representations or in the context of social realism, is pursued particularly in the last two centuries in European literature. Of particular interest are literary representations of human liminality within certain labyrinthine structures paralleling the ancient one of the Greek Minotaur in modern urban redesigns. Such structures, coupled with liminal human figures, are instrumental in understanding the aesthetic and cognitive category of the monstrous as it registered in the ages in question, and serve well in understanding the sense of the uncanny underlying modern urban civilisation between abstracted rituals and alienation.

The following pages will extend the previous Anglocentric focus of that larger body of research towards German-language literature of the early twentieth century, investigating the uncanny found within narrative labyrinths in Hermann Hesse's *Der Steppenwolf* as compared with Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. Written in interbellum Germany, Hesse's novel draws heavily on the life experience of its author and his socio-cultural milieu at a time where ideologies and paradigms were shifting and the traditional institutions and values were being challenged. Though not very successful or properly understood upon release and faced with significant censorship for its perceived negativity or amorality, Hesse's surrealist novel features extensive passages of bitter social and political criticism, chiefly antagonising the pedantic self-absorbed mediocrity of the bourgeoisie but also the continuous rise of German militarism. As such, *Steppenwolf* garnered visibly more interest some three decades later in the United States of America, in a similar age of searching for and of crafting new values, of spiritual experimentation and of a rising culture amalgamating "sex, drugs and rock'n'roll" with state power and repression. The staying power of Hesse's novel thus appears to be provided by the author's keen understanding of various negative aspects fundamental to the human

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experience at large, regardless of political and cultural climate, e.g. superficiality or egoism, but also by the overall optimistic message of the human potential for transcendence.

Its insightful depiction of the transitional spirit of interwar Germany, applicable to other societies prior or since, is also the reason for our having selected *Steppenwolf* for the present research. Hesse's prose – not unlike Kafka's – is poignant in revealing a universe of the uncanny in that transition, hiding beneath everyday details and occasionally surfacing without warning, but the particular 'flavours' of the uncanny experienced by their respective protagonists are greatly distinct. Harry Haller and Gregor Samsa, though more than ten years apart, are 'closeted' misfits of their surrounding bourgeois social order, which they both evade in surrealist ways. Yet while Samsa undergoes a form of inner collapse, removed from being a public servant, forced into seclusion by his loss of especially physical humanity and eventually sacrificing himself for his peers, Haller enjoys much greater freedom, to the point where his very freedom to roam about is his personal form of seclusion, as befitting his self-made persona of the steppe wolf. In both cases, however, the sense of the uncanny is allegorical of the social and technological changes their civilisation is undergoing, culminating in the 'monstrosity' and symbolic shape-shifting of the protagonists being representative of their alienation and their sense of fading humanity.

In Kafka's *Metamorphosis* Gregor Samsa epitomises the struggle of man against the bureaucratic apparatus and bourgeois socio-economic materialism – a draining and dehumanising battle which he cannot win – with an accidental and somewhat cynical happy-end revealing the true parasites and preaching self-reliance. On the other hand, in *Steppenwolf* the philosophical battlefield is internalised, departing from Harry Haller's initial image as a sociophobic recluse, of one who spurns society and wishes to have as little to do with it as possible, choosing instead to try and live in the world of Ideas, to that of a self-estranged man learning to cope with the multiple facets of himself, to enjoy the company of his peers and his own life. Caught in his family-providing daily office drudgery, Gregor Samsa has little time and energy to read and ponder abstracts as Haller does, but he also finds the uncanny peering at him from beneath the life of service he was forced into, and particularly from beneath the social identity thrust upon him, that of the thankless provider. When the social roles are reversed and it is his family's turn to deal with the literal bug, both his life and the pace of the narration slow down – perhaps also in conjunction with the new speed of his extra legs – as the warm darkness of his study turned lair allows for considerations on his identity and his social relations.

Paradoxically, Samsa's room becomes the last line in defence of his humanity, the externalised see of his surviving human emotions and sensibility. Most significantly, it is the space "critical to maintaining notions of self and identity"[2], where the spheres of the Self and the Other are opposed and clarified[3]. He is no longer able to use the room except as a den and scurrying ground, to hide from incomers or to amuse himself, but it is

[2] Matthew T. Powell (2008), pp. 129-142.
[3] *Ibid.*



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also where he attempts in vain to communicate with Grete and his mother, and where he protests the displacement and removal of furniture and of his favourite portrait from his living space. Gregor's adhesion to the status quo of his room signifies more than his desire for stability: it is a cry for attention and an attempt at demonstrating – to his family – and reaffirming – to himself – his enduring humanity. His living quarters thus remain, despite efforts by his family and their hired help to hide them or turn them into storage space for junk items, a liminal space where Gregor Samsa's identity is uncannily upheld, by reminding all present of the uncomfortable truth of the human mind present within the body of their 'bug in the closet'.

Similarly, Harry Haller's room, as presented in his own writing and as introduced in the preface by his host's appalled nephew, provides the reader with one of the earliest hints that not all is as it seems with the man. He is uncanny by way of his initial apparent duality, and by the lingering sense of the nephew's inability to fully describe him – both foreshadowing the multifold nature of human personality discussed later in the novel. Haller challenges bourgeois norms from the very onset, as he strikes the narrator as alternatively derisively aloof and childishly naïve. Their rare encounters offer the young man reasons to speculate that, profoundly bookish, the older man has perhaps grown unaccustomed to the presence of his peers or of basic commodities, which he seems to long for but also shy away from, and that his way of finding their neat bourgeois existence quaint is not mocking but admiring, with a sense of ontological disconnection. But while there are multiple moments when Harry Haller appears a highly neurotic abstraction – or even melodramatic satire – of intellectuals, key details provided by the three narrators throughout the novel tether him back to a plane of readership relatability. One such memorable detail is the state of his room, where piles of rare books are interspersed with emptied alcohol bottles and ashtrays – an obviously lived-in room opening a door into the character's uncanny by revealing his later embraced wilder side.

It is no happenstance that both Gregor Samsa and Harry Haller should have core aspects of their human and social identity hinging on and mirrored by their living quarters – the reflected space of their inner thoughts, where they are finally themselves behind the cloak of privacy. The difference is that Gregor's identity is clear to him but difficult to prove to the world, while Harry unwittingly shows the world what he is yet to discover about himself. The agglutination of the material triggers in both of them a spiritual reaction that sets them on the path to crystallising their identity – to self-discovery – reaching out of their liminal dwellings and all the way through the uncanny labyrinth of their urban surroundings.

For Gregor Samsa, that labyrinth is primarily a communications one, symbolic of the breakdown of interpersonal communication in "a world of violence, of frightful laughter, and terror"[4], as poignantly experienced by the 'lost generation' of The Great War and as largely continued into contemporary times. The bug which Gregor turns into is a crude but effective representation of his increasing inability to relate to and deal with

[4] William Kluback (1993), quoted in Michael P. Ryan (1999), p. 133.



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the members of his family, his sharp estrangement from them, literalising such concepts as him becoming a stranger and an abhorred presence within his own household. The image of the bug is used to also mark the brutal power relationships within the bourgeois bureaucracy. It works that way between employer and employee – in the scene of the outraged manager coming to rebuke Samsa on his first day of missing from work, hilarious in its absurdity but terrifying in the exacting tyranny it depicts – but also between father and son, as a marker of violent generational tensions. Within this labyrinth, attempts at communication oppose the reason and emotions of man with the instincts and voracity of the crawler in the liminal nature of Samsa himself in his dealing with his family and his surroundings, but there is also a cognitive labyrinth that he is keenly aware of from the time of his waking up from his troubled sleep. In it, reality and dream are connected in the liminal topos of sleep, which Gregor Samsa alternatively indulges in, argues for and tries to tear himself away from. Sleep is his escape from the creeping nightmare of his workdays – a restoration of the natural rhythms tampered with by such modern wonders as electric lighting – but also a way out of the ontological nightmare[5] that his metamorphosis had brought him and which, for the first few pages, he refuses to acknowledge as anything but an "uneasy dream".

Throughout the short story, the socio-economic labyrinth underlying Samsa's civilisation – the proverbial 'rat race' he has to also partake in – is gradually revealed as the narrative angle opens around the protagonist to include his family and his employer. Gregor finds himself socially and financially bound to his employer with knots that tighten at every goal he sets for himself. The latter are typically plans to escape, i.e. rise in socio-economic status, as soon as he has reached certain objectives imposed on himself out of what he perceives as his filial and brotherly duty. They are quasi-Sisyphean plans, which follow the quest patterns of old, yet their effect is reversed from folk and fairy tales, granting him not freedom, but rather further servitude (and, admittedly, patience) in the bureaucratic labyrinth. Gregor Samsa finds apparent refuge from it when the economic tables are turned and it is finally his family who need to provide for him – inexpensive scavenger that he is – into the socio-architectural labyrinth of his home. Like the classical Minotaur, Samsa the bug (his new body a little labyrinth of its own, whose structures and functions he initially enjoys exploring) spends most of his time at the centre of his domestic labyrinth, his old room, where he awaits the incoming humans so he may be fed. His walls are not so much of stone or brick, but rather of social constraints – the barbed wire of guilt and shame brought about by his family's avoidance and repulsion, manifested even physically, as by his father, will eventually inflict fatal damage on him.

In *Steppenwolf*, there appear to be fewer labyrinths expressing the uncanny but they also appear more profound. Structurally, the novel itself is a narrative labyrinth, beginning with the introductory passage by Haller's young host and neighbour, which eases the

[5] See *Ibid.* for the inspiring connections between individual will, ontology and salvation in pursuit of the potential retracing of 'Samsa' in the Eastern *Samsara*.



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reader's entry into – and perhaps acceptance of – the rest of the novel, consisting of Harry Haller's allegedly left-behind memoirs. The latter are, in turn, interrupted at one point by the full reproduction of the fictional *Treatise on the Steppe Wolf*, which Haller obtains from the elusive signpost man, as well as by various other signs and symbols appearing before him: on the city walls and inside the Magic Theatre. The work itself is a masterpiece of surrealist intertextuality, as it not only references ancient Greek and Indian, as well as Christian and alchemical[6], lore, but even historical figures such as Goethe and Mozart appear before the protagonist – whether in his dreams or his 'reality' – to lead him on an initiation quest from within the banal of the modern city towards a timeless reality of Ideas and "immortals".

The other labyrinth found in Hesse's novel – perhaps the one true all-encompassing labyrinth – is that of the protagonist's own mind. Harry Haller, with his name pointing to fictitiousness already via its alliterative character reminiscent of folklore and nursery rhymes, is at times difficult to believe in or relate to, even within his own diegesis, with the exception of a few details bringing his feet back on the proverbial ground. As the plot progresses, the reader is able to detect that the reason for his incongruities is his self – rather, his irreconciled *selves*. Harry inhabits a fictional anti-paradise of sorts, wallowing in his own misery while seemingly completely detached from the hardships of the material world, unlike salesman Gregor Samsa. This is explained by Haller's living off the interest generated by various bank accounts from his youth in the very bourgeois setting he has come to loathe. In that we find a denial-characteristic form of hypocrisy which Hermine quickly mocks by pointing out he is indeed more bourgeois than he would like to ever admit.

Harry Haller chances to meet the right people and find the right things at all the right times, i.e. in times of great distress or excitement, from the highly personalised *Treatise* to his encounter of Hermine as he was postponing returning home to carry out his supposed death wish. The people and items he finds always tell him the things he knows deep inside but which he has repressed and would not like to admit even to himself, as their admission would fatally contradict the Romantic paradigm he has constructed for himself. Therefore, Haller's experience is in many ways the fictionalising of an overdue auto-psychotherapy session, including the symptomatology of his initial depressive state – complete with the self-knowledge of a mental disease in the glowing sign recommending the Theatre to him as being "only for madmen" – and its supposed cure under (drug-induced) hypnosis inside the Magic Theatre[7].

In believing himself a liminal wolf-man, at least from a psychological point of view, Haller has already fabricated his own labyrinth, so it comes as no surprise that he

[6] For Hesse's probable connections with alchemical or Gnostic thought, and for an alchemical reading of *Steppenwolf,* see Heidi M. Rockwood (1994), pp. 52-59, also quoting Ziolkowski (1979) regarding the links to Oetinger and Boehme.

[7] As also noticed by Heidi M. Rockwood (*op. cit.*), who quotes Schwarz (1983) calling *Steppenwolf* a "didactic treatise created with the help of Jungian psychoanalysis" (Rockwood 1994, p. 47) and reminds the reader of Hesse's own qualification of the work as one of "crisis and healing" (Rockwood 1994, p. 48).



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must equally fabricate the heroes and the narrative that would help him break out of that labyrinth. He then gets rid of them too when they have outlived their usefulness – like the chess pieces he is taught to store and retrieve from his pocket by the Pablo-looking sage inside the Magic Theatre. Essentially, by pondering what he believes to be his unique condition, he has placed walls keeping himself away from the world, a behaviour which he reinforces via his equally fabricated ideological disdain of most things bourgeois, but also keeping the world away from him, as he often has little interest in maintaining even civility (viz. his offending the professor's wife regarding Goethe's portrait). By seeing himself as respectively the man and the wolf in the above duality of his walls, he is also oversimplifying and forcefully rationalising his entire being, a process that damages himself due to, primarily, the stunting of his would-be multilateral growth, as well as due to his impossibility of ever living up to his own abstract ideals of himself.

To correct his years of unwitting self-abuse, Harry Haller must learn "how to laugh", the impossibility of which Pablo pities in him at one point – the "unearthly" laughter transcending his still too material being. The latter part of the novel thus reads like a mystery tale, where the seemingly disconnected and the logic-defying are in the end linked together and explained to the receptive reader. The innermost part of the narrative labyrinth is in fact rather a Mystery, an initiation ritual complete with a masquerade partly referencing the myth of Orpheus (after all, the protagonist adores Mozart), as Harry Haller literally descends to the basement level of the building, where the Hell-themed hall is, to find his Hermine. Once there, in true Mystery tradition, he has his conscience expanded by the use of hallucinogens in Pablo's Magic Theatre and he feels lost, confused, amazed and terrified along the corridors and behind the doors of the Theatre – initially described as horseshoe-shaped, thus emphasising duality and perhaps a womb or alchemical crucible[8] for his spiritual rebirth. In the end, after his 'apprenticeship in manhood' in the war against the machine civilisation, he ritually murders Hermine, stabbing her heart (the seat of emotions, on the left, i.e. feminine, side). In so doing, he has united the man and the wolf in a jealous and self-righteous symbolic penetration of his own feminine double – his Anima[9] and the feminised image of his best childhood friend Hermann (further symbolically linking him to the author). She then shrinks to a little chess piece in his hand and is absorbed into him, granting him the much-needed balance as he has, as 'she' hoped, learned to love 'her' before disposing of 'her'.

The message of *Steppenwolf* is thus a lesson in the importance of human liminality. Harry Haller is unhappy before finding his Anima in Hermine (reinforcing the hermaphrodite suggestion via her onomastic connection to Hermes), who gives him new reasons to live and a *joie de vivre* practically unknown to him previously. In learning to accept and integrate the feminine side into his personality, Harry Haller learns to not only harmonise his Id and his Superego (the violent wolf and the scholarly man), but also the two of them with his theretofore largely repressed Ego. Among the first criticisms

[8] See Note 5.
[9] See Note 6.



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gleefully expressed by Hermine upon encountering Harry was his still possessing insufficient knowledge of life to feel blasé and the suicide he preached to be, and that, from that point of view, he failed to understand that his own viewpoints are as limited as anyone else's. At the end of his ritual combining a belated rite of passage into manhood with a form of alchemical Great Work, the *coniunctio oppositorum*, Harry finally learns that enjoying the totality of life's experiences, and opening his mind by renouncing inflexible paradigms is truly the way to becoming one of the "immortals" portrayed by Mozart and Goethe. Should he continue his training, he may yet become the Cosmic Man transcending the pettiness of the material world and thus affording to heartily laugh at it all "without a paralysing nihilism and self-disgust"[10], having entered a "serene, suprapersonal, supratemporal world of faith"[11].

Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* and Hermann Hesse's *Steppenwolf* prove that the sense of the uncanny haunting urban civilisation can be successfully encoded by elements in the fictional habitats of characters. They aid in the characterisation of their respective dwellers, while also providing valuable information on the society whose exponent they are, its values, fears and goals. Therefore, researching the labyrinths – socio-psychological, socio-economic or otherwise – enclosing Gregor Samsa and Harry Haller provides the reader with an invaluable tool for the better understanding of the shifting paradigms of early twentieth-century Europe.

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[10] Richard Hauer Costa (1982), p. 127.
[11] Berhard Zeller (1971), quoted in Costa (1982), p. 127.



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