

## THE CROSSED-OUT WORD by Hermann Hesse

*It is a privilege to print Anne Freund's translation of this soliloquy by Hermann Hesse, the Nobel Prize winner for literature in 1946. His **Steppenwolf** was a best seller in this country not long ago; **Demain** and **Magister Ludi** have also appeared in English. His books from 1916 on reveal the influence of Jung's psychology, and as he writes at the end of the **Kurgast**: "I shall never succeed in bringing the two poles of life together, but I must follow the inner voice and try again and again ."*

*The passage referred to in this article, a record of conflict between the artistic and the human conscience of a great writer, is to be found on page 154 of his untranslated work, **Kurgast**: . . . 'Love thy neighbor as thyself' words which astoundingly occur already in the Old Testament. One can love one's neighbor less than one loves oneself; one is then the egoist, the racketeer, the capitalist, the bourgeois. and although one may accumulate money and power one does not of necessity have a joyful heart, and the best and most attractive pleasures of the soul are blocked. Or one can love one's neighbor more than oneself—then one is a poor devil, full of inferiority complexes, with a longing to love everything and still full of hate and torment towards oneself, living in a hell of which one lays the fire every day anew. But the equilibrium of love, the capacity to love without being indebted to anyone, is the love of oneself which is not taken away from any other, this love of one's neighbor which does no harm to the self." Ed.*

A strange request kept us busy for an hour yesterday, both my wife and myself. A letter had come from America, written by an old gentleman, a devout German Jew, belonging to one of the well-known South German families living near the Rhine or the Main rivers. Those families had up to our unpleasant times belonged to the oldest and most educated cultural centers in Germany. This old gentleman was a refugee in New York: an educated and religious Jew, an unknown unit in that throng of valuable people whom Germany had turned out in favour of the brawlers and the villains. He wrote to me on a matter of conscience, a matter which worried him. And he asked for a favour which he felt it was his duty to ask, namely that I should omit one single word in the future edition of one of my books. He had recently read the *Kurgast* and in that book he had found a passage where I quote the text: "Love thy neighbor as thyself." This the passage calls the wisest words that have ever been spoken and adds: "a text that *astoundingly* had already occurred in the Old Testament." For this reader and letter-writer in America, for the religious Jew and reader of the Bible the word "astoundingly" is not acceptable. Judaism and the Torah are insulted and put in question by this word, and he asks me seriously to cross it out.

My wife glanced through the *Kurgast*—as my eyes can no longer do it—to trace that passage and ascertain the context. Hereafter I carefully read the page in question in my book written 25 years ago. Of course the letter-writer was right, of course it was a mistake and it was almost a blasphemy for a Jewish reader that an author whom he had hitherto taken seriously thought it “astounding” that such noble and sublime words were “already” found in the Old Testament, had been written namely long before Jesus and the Christian doctrine. He was right—there was no doubt about it. The words “astoundingly” as well as “already” (to which the letter-writer did not object) were objectively wrong, had been hasty and stupid. They reflected something of that attitude, embarrassed and at the same time supercilious, which was prevalent when I was a child and was the way Protestant theology used to talk to the small Protestant children about the Bible and Judaism. It almost sounded this way: “The Bible and Judaism are highly venerable and you cannot respect them enough—but still the best was lacking, the crown; the Old Testament was above all a book of law and austerity, while it was the New Testament which brought the true and full concept of love and grace”. When I wrote those 25 years ago I was neither wise nor considerate—at least not for the moment—for when I quoted that wonderful passage about love for one’s neighbor it actually had seemed “astounding” to me that such a word could “already” occur in the Old Testament —this word which one might call the essence of the Christian ethic. Well, he was right, the kind and caring man in America.

But—what was I to do? Did I write the *Kurgast* and did I write my books to spread knowledge and objective truth ? Of course I wanted them—above all—to be an instrument for truth, but in the sense of sincerity which carefully avoids an attitude of authority; a sincerity whose law often forces the author to a far-reaching sacrifice of his personality and not seldom even to an exposure of himself, that sacrifice which no reader has ever fully realized. What else did I want to tell my readers but the results of my own experience and thinking, and furthermore to show them some part of the way that had led to this experience ? Did I ever try to be a dictator, a man with absolute knowledge, a priest or a teacher preaching his truths but carefully hiding his shortcomings and his doubts ? Had not this been my role and my task: not only to convey my thoughts and my convictions to my readers but also my doubts; to present them not with an authority or a consecrated leader, but only my own self, a seeking and erring brother?

I could not explain this to the man in America. As he had not noticed it while reading my books—and he knew almost all of them—I felt sure I would not succeed in the course of a long letter in converting him to a different way of reading or understanding. He asked me to cross out one single word and in asking that he wanted me to tell a lie for the sake of truth. He wanted me to act as if—25 years ago when I wrote *Kurgast*—I had not been able to commit an error, be thoughtless or ignorant as regards the Bible or theology; to act as if then, just as today, there had not been in my work any remnants of my descent and my education. Was that not asking too much ?

Apparently things were very simple. Somebody asked me to do something contrary to my whole being and taste, as well as to my literary habits, not to say downright contrary to my principles. There was only one answer—a refusal. But things seem to be much easier than they actually are, and particularly the ethical ones. If only I had been 20 years younger! Then I need not have troubled my wife to look for the passage in my books, I need not have worried so much; I would have found the time to explain things to my reader in a long letter. I would have enjoyed that letter and talked myself into the conviction that now I had convinced my adversary. The word “astoundingly” would have remained in my book as a document of my being without any misgiving, and of my stupidity of the year 1923.

But in the meantime I had become older and more thoughtful, maybe more insecure, and the man who wanted the word crossed out was no young man either whom you could placate with a good long letter or whose opinions you were able to shake. He was an old gentleman whose letter lacked neither dignity nor modesty. Besides that, he was a pious man who loved the Bible, a man who knew the Old Testament far better than I and who had been hurt and irritated by a thoughtless word I had written down. And something else too: he was a Jew. He belonged to the people that had given the Bible and the Saviour to the world and who had been rewarded for it with the hate and hostility of almost all nations. He was a man belonging to an ancient and holy people which had endured much in our godless time, and which had proved better at enduring than any younger people in such a predicament. For not only had the Jews (and this is still valid, for the persecution is going on) given an example of unheard-of solidarity, of brotherly love and help and readiness to sacrifice which the world has not yet realized, but also they showed in innumerable cases a courage of endurance, a bravery when confronted with death, a dignity in misery and destruction which should make us non-Jews feel ashamed of ourselves.

And now I had to reply to this dignified old Jew; should I deny him a satisfaction for which he had asked in so noble a fashion? Should I, hand on heart, oppose his creed and his superpersonal pious wisdom with my rights as a writer of books, as a representative of a psychological species? Should I by disappointing and refusing him, teach him a lesson?

I could not do that. To do so needed a security, a belief in myself and in the meaning and value of my work which I am no longer able to summon. So I wrote a short letter to the reader in New York telling him that I had complied with his request, and I wrote a note to my publisher asking him to omit the word “astoundingly” on page 154 in the event of a new edition of the *Kurgast*.

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