
CINEMA

Mystic Wolf-Man

By John Weightman

STEPENWOLF, although directed by Fred Haines, financed by an American, recorded in English and made partly in England and Switzerland, is such a German film in its brooding grotesquerie that it is reminiscent in the first place of the other German products we have seen recently: *Kaspar Hauser* by Werner Herzog, and *The Fox* and *Die bitteren Tränen der Petra von Kant* by Fassbinder.

The central figures in all four films are "natural" monsters. Herman Hesse's hero—Harry Haller (a projection of the author, as the initials indicate)—who calls himself the Steppenwolf, is schizophrenic through his awareness of the tension between the spiritual and the animal in his make-up. Kaspar is a foundling, a natural child, no doubt and also a child of nature—since, through being sequestered in solitude until his late teens, he knows nothing of culture and has to make a late start on language—learning and trying to understand social conventions. He is a crude but noble savage, whose animal innocence shows up by comparison the pretences of society. Fox, a naïve, working-class homosexual, animal-like in his unsophisticated concentration and potency, is played by Fassbinder himself, and is fox-like in appearance, since Fassbinder's homely countenance, sharp-chinned and sharp-nosed, is faintly vulpine. But this fox is not wily; he is a decent beast, set upon and destroyed by the bourgeois pack. As for Petra, she is a kind of she-wolf, howling on all fours by the telephone for her absent Lesbian lover, and one wonders if Fassbinder, who appears to know English even in its ruder aspects, did not intend a play on von Kant, two syllables which might refer simultaneously to the philosopher of the moral law within and to the hungry animal void of the near-homophone.

I don't know whether the animalism of a man is a recurrent theme in German culture, but I remember that the old professor in *The Blue Angel* was made to crow like a cock to demonstrate the derisory nature of his erotic obsession. Perhaps the Germans have what might be called a Papageno-Complex, which was handled with luminous serenity by Mozart but has since gone

murky as a result of Romanticism, Darwin, and Nietzsche. At any rate, all four films are predominantly sombre, although two of them, *Kaspar Hauser* and *The Fox*, also have a sort of endearing, home-spun goodness, which makes them attractive to watch. But there is something in the Germanness of *Steppenwolf* and *Die bitteren Tränen* that I find unbearably oppressive and would flee from at once, were I not restrained by a sense of duty. It is a mixture of strident pessimism and woolly generalities that makes one slightly sick in one's intellectual stomach.

THE FILM OF *Steppenwolf* has been in gestation since 1967 and is probably a labour of love, since it makes no apparent concessions to commercialism. Even so, one cannot imagine it converting the English public to an enthusiastic appreciation of Hermann Hesse. For one thing, I doubt whether it is comprehensible for the cinema-goer who hasn't read the book. All the introductory material which sets the scene has been dropped, so that certain episodes lose their point. For instance, Haller's ironic enjoyment of the spotless bourgeois comfort of the house where he lodges and which causes him to sit on the stairs in bemused contemplation is left largely unexplained; and so his presence on the stairs becomes a weird eccentricity. The reading of "The Treatise of the Steppenwolf" is accompanied by animated sequences which detract from the sense more than they illustrate it. Instead of reserving the hysterical, nightmarish scenes for the Masked Ball and the Magic Theatre at the end, the director has heightened a number of the earlier episodes in the direction of the peculiar, making Goethe into a manic dwarf and the uncomfortable dinner-party with the university professor into a mad excursion into high life. Worse still, apart from Max von Sydow who plays Haller reasonably well, all the actors ham their parts mercilessly—even Pierre Clementi, who might have had a certain physical presence as the epicene musician, Pablo. The prize for one of the worst performances in years must go to Dominique Sanda, as Hermine, who utters her comically translated speeches with a strong French accent and a dogged intensity, like an *au pair* girl who has just rushed back from the language lab at the Poly. to say her piece before she forgets where the tonic accent falls. All in all, I think the film must be written off as a leaden disaster.

THERE REMAINS the question: has a masterpiece been desecrated, or does the film, in its sombre and gaudy excess, merely exaggerate tendencies which were already present in the novel? Is Herman Hesse, as one of his American

admirers declares, "the greatest writer of the twentieth century" who, in the post-War years, "toppled Camus from his pedestal" among the American young, or is *Steppenwolf* something less than the masterpiece it is said to be by the proponents of the Hesse cult? The second possibility seems the likely one to me, notwithstanding Thomas Mann's praise for the book. But no reader should be put off the novel by the film. *Steppenwolf*, the book, is an extraordinary compendium of contemporary attitudes, and is well worth reading as such, although it was written as long ago as 1927.

In the animated sequences, the film presents the *Steppenwolf* as a monster whose head is half respectable Bourgeois and half snarling Wolf. This goes some way beyond the implications of the text. The German word seems to mean "prairie wolf", i.e. coyote, not European wolf, and, whether or not Hesse's zoological intentions were very clear to himself, he appears to be emphasising the loneliness of the animal rather than its ferocity. Harry Haller is first and foremost an "outsider", who is both attracted to bourgeois order and culture, as Hesse was, and yet impatient with its humdrum, non-metaphysical quality. At the age of forty-eight, he is living on a private income as a solitary, melancholy, studious lodger in Basle, exactly in the way that Sartre's Roquentin, the hero of *La Nausée*, was later to live in Bouville-Le Havre, contemplating the townspeople's *mauvaise foi* with a jaundiced eye. Because of his failure to solve the riddle of life, he is proposing to commit suicide at fifty; that is, he is going through the same Absurdist/Existentialist crisis as Albert Camus's heroes, but at a later stage. He is obsessed by two main culture figures—Goethe, whom he sees as the apotheosis of the genius who opts too easily for order, respectability, and self-control, and Mozart who enjoyed a transcendental purity and certainty, impossible in the modern world. At the same time, he is a Nietzschean, in that he senses the primary animal nature of man, which is explained in "The Treatise on the *Steppenwolf*" handed to him by a magical stranger, although he is afraid of this animal nature and cannot come to terms with it. He frequently takes refuge in drink, like so many other alienated heroes.

The stage is now set for a change. And at this point Harry Haller can be seen to bear some resemblance to yet another modern hero, Michel in André Gide's *L'Immoraliste* (1902), a similarly studious person, chafing under bourgeois restraints, who receives his Nietzschean revelation of animal freedom from Ménalque, a Mephistophelian figure based, interestingly enough, on Oscar Wilde. Michel, thereafter, goes on to realise himself in joyous homo-

sexuality under the Mediterranean sun. Harry Haller, perhaps in more German fashion, receives his revelation from a beautiful and enigmatic girl, Hermine, whom he meets in a tavern, called perhaps significantly *The Black Eagle*, and who is half-human and half-supernatural. She pledges him to obedience, as if she were a *Belle Dame sans merci*, and instructs him in pleasure, teaching him the fox-trot and introducing him to her friends, Maria and Pablo, who live for music, pleasure, and sex. In the subsequent scenes, there are many suggestion of the polymorphous perverse, since Pablo proposes group sex and homosexuality to Harry, and Hermine turns out to be the *Doppelgänger* of Hermann, a dear friend of Harry's schooldays.

THE CLIMAX COMES at a Masked Ball, where Harry, after an initial relapse into wolfish alienation, enjoys the Dionysiac ecstasy of fusion with the crowd, and then follows Hermine and Pablo down into "Hell" or "The Magic Theatre for Madmen", there to undergo a psychedelic trip which moves from horror to laughter (Pablo has already introduced him previously to drug-taking). In one phase of this dream-experience, Harry realises that what he took to be his personality is only one arrangement of the possibilities of the "subject", which can be reshuffled indefinitely. In another, he stabs Hermine to death; but this seems to be a mistaken exercise of the destructive urge, because a Court of Immortals calls him to account and accuses him of having killed the reflection of a woman with the reflection of a knife. He goes on a rampage against technology, shooting down aeroplanes and motor-cars with a machine-gun, without apparently noticing that the machine-gun itself is part of technology. (This episode in the book and the sequence in the film make one think immediately of Jean-Luc Godard's *Week-End*.) Mozart appears again to discourse rather wildly on music and to conduct a kind of ballet of heavenly spheres and fiery meteors, as if he were in a Ken Russell film. There are several reference to the Oneness Behind All Phenomena. Finally, Harry arrives at "understanding":

I knew that all the hundred thousand pieces of life's game were in my pocket. A glimpse of its meaning had stirred my reason and I was determined to begin the game afresh. I would sample its tortures once more and shudder again at its senselessness. 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. One day I would learn how to laugh. . . .

The message seems to be: *Tout est dans tout, et réciproquement*, and Animal/Man's final response to this cosmic totality is mirth, *le Gai Sçavoir*, of which only man among the animals is capable.

It is clear that there is something here for practically everyone: alienated individuals nostalgic for a new order; Existentialists; Absurdist; seekers after the Transcendental; hedonists multiplying experience with omnisex and drugs; classical music lovers; jazz-freaks. The text is studded with modern clichés, for the most part beyond good and evil.

"Strange", I said, "that shooting can be such fun! And to think I was a pacifist!". . . .

I had learnt from her, once more before the end, to confine myself like a child to life's surface play, to

pursue a fleeting joy, and to be both child and beast in the innocence of sex. . . .

Just as madness, in the higher sense, is the beginning of all wisdom, so is schizophrenia the beginning of all art and all fantasy. . . .

But this very eclecticism seems in the end to cancel itself out in a dispiriting flaccidity. True enough, in the last resort, everything that is, just is; and, from the mystic's point of view, all manner of things are behovely. However, by the time *Animal/Man* has got to this stage, he might be said to be just punch-drunk with the universe.

Pastoral

Dominic Francis Xavier Brotherton-Chancery
 had an egg for breakfast every morning
 and revelled in obsolete forms. For example
 he called an eclogue an eglog (like the Elizabethans).
 He went everywhere on a bicycle. He knew very well
 that ordinary people had never heard of an eclogue.
 How he despised them! When his rough friend
 made savage fun of Gerard Manley Hopkins,
 jokingly speaking of "The Burglar's First Communion"
 and hinting at the lust concealed in a work called "Hairy Ploughman",
 although he giggled Dominic was shocked—
 such a lack of Faith! But what he loved in his friend
 was exactly the shaggy goat-footed Philistine roughness,
 it made *him* seem at least twice as cultivated.
 His coarse moustache was an animal temptation.
 His coltish clumsiness—oh, Dominic adored!
 They were both shepherds. His mother was a nymph.
 The shepherdeses lived in a different valley.
 He literally wanted (as Gus guffawed)
 no part of them! Lithe on his bicycle
 he rode contented through a summer idyll.

Gavin Ewart