CHAPTER 4

EDUCATION, SOCIETY AND THE INDIVIDUAL

INTRODUCTION
Hesse placed supreme importance on the value of the individual. From his youth he had rebelled against the imposition of social authority on the individual, and he continued this resistance throughout his adult life. The First World War had a profound impact on his thinking and writing. He described this as a ‘cruel awakening’ (Hesse, 1974c, p. 10) and in the years following the War he found himself utterly at odds with the spirit of his times in his native Germany. He spent much of his life in Switzerland. Hesse saw himself as an ‘unpolitical man’ and even when writing about the War, he wanted to guide the reader ‘not into the world theatre with its political problems but into his innermost being, before the judgement seat of his very personal conscience’ (p. 11).

In Hesse’s novels and short stories, many of which have an educational focus, the theme of individual spiritual striving is paramount. His early novel, Peter Camenzind (Hesse, 1969), provides a fictionalised biographical account of the title character’s life, from his early years in the mountains, through his time as a student and his development as a writer, to his later life of devotion to a disabled friend and his elderly father. Beneath the Wheel (Hesse, 1968b) details the traumatic school experiences and tragic post-school life of a talented student. Siddhartha (Hesse, 2000a) takes the title character on a journey of self-discovery, with an exploration of dramatically different modes of life: asceticism, the world of business, sexual liberation, and oneness with nature, among others. Steppenwolf (Hesse, 1965) focuses on the mid-life crises faced by Harry Haller, who bears a considerable resemblance to Hesse himself.

In all of these novels, as in most others in Hesse’s corpus, questions of social structure are addressed only implicitly. It is not that Hesse ignores the social realm altogether. Social relationships, within and outside institutions, are important in many of Hesse’s books. These are often explored through romantic longings, as in Peter Camenzind (Hesse, 1969) and Gertrude (Hesse, 1974d), or through friendships and relationships of admiration, as in Beneath the Wheel (Hesse, 1968b), Demian (Hesse, 1999), and Narcissus and Goldmund (Hesse, 1968a). Beneath the Wheel (Hesse, 1968b) provides a sharp critique of one of our most hallowed institutions: the school. Even the restrained Rosshalde (Hesse, 1972) can be seen as a quiet questioning of the institution of marriage. Steppenwolf (Hesse, 1965) shows that Harry’s crises are, in part, a response to the hypocrisy and shallowness of bourgeois social norms. In none of these cases, however, does
Hesse makes social systems or structures his principal concern. Rather, the focus is more on the individual and how he or she responds to the challenges thrown up by life. *The Glass Bead Game* (Hesse, 2000b) is unique among Hesse’s novels in the explicit and detailed attention it pays to a form of social organisation: the utopian Castalia, a pedagogical province of the future. Like many of Hesse’s other books, *The Glass Bead Game* details events in the life of an individual, Joseph Knecht, but in many ways Knecht’s inner life as an individual remains ‘disguised’ by the form of the narrative. The focus is as much, if not more, on the strengths and limitations of Castalia as a social ideal. This shift in emphasis is foreshadowed in *The Journey to the East* (Hesse, 1956), with its account of an esoteric League devoted to spiritual enlightenment. In that work, however, the nature of the League itself remains somewhat mysterious. In *The Glass Bead Game* the defining features of Castalia as a social system emerge in full and overt detail. This is initially by way of explanation – in a ‘General Introduction’ by the narrator – and then via successive chapters detailing Knecht’s life in the pedagogical province.

This chapter considers the connections between the individual, society and education in Hesse’s work. Particular but not exclusive attention will be paid to *The Glass Bead Game* in investigating that relationship. It is argued that for the mature Hesse, ‘self’ and ‘society’ are dynamically intertwined. Education, it will be suggested, plays a pivotal role in linking the individual and society together.

The chapter is structured in three parts. The first section comments on the importance of hierarchy and order in Hesse’s fictional world of Castalia. This is followed by a more detailed examination of Knecht’s educational transformation. Knecht comes to appreciate that ‘awakening’, as he calls it, is not merely a matter of individual development but a process of reaching out – through education – to the wider world. The final part of the chapter reflects briefly on the question of Hesse’s alleged elitism and the bearing this has on his view of the relationship between the individual and society. I draw a distinction between cultural elitism and educational elitism, maintaining that Hesse subscribes to a version of the former but not the latter.

**HIERARCHY, ORDER AND INDIVIDUALITY IN CASTALIA**

At the beginning of *The Glass Bead Game*, the narrator notes that one of the longstanding principles of intellectual life in Castalia is ‘the obliteration of individuality, the maximum integration of the individual into the hierarchy of the educators and scholars’ (Hesse, 2000b, p. 3). So seriously is this principle taken that it is always difficult and often impossible to obtain biographical and personal information, or even names, for those who have given exemplary service to the hierarchy. ‘The hierarchic organization’, the narrator says, ‘cherishes the ideal of anonymity, and comes very close to the realization of that ideal’ (p. 3). There are well defined roles for different citizens in Castalia, from the most novice of students to the Masters of the various arts. There is an elitist schooling system, with only the very best boys – and it is an all male hierarchy – making it through to