



Sacred Displacements: Deterritorialization in Hermann Hesse's Selected Religious Poems

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Abstract

Hermann Hesse (1877-1962) is a German poet and novelist, who is known for his main theme which is the individual's efforts to break out of the established modes of civilization so as to find an essential spirit and identity. This paper explores deterritorialization in Hermann Hesse's religious poetry through close readings and critical commentary. Hesse's verses transcend doctrinal boundaries, reconfiguring sacred experience into a personal, mystical, and transcultural endeavor. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's theory, we trace how Hesse deterritorializes religious symbols, figures, and landscapes to articulate a faith rooted in inward seeking and Eastern philosophy.

Keywords: Hesse, deterritorialization, sacred displacements, Deleuze, "Stages", "The Living Word", "Trees", "Buddha ..", "Books".

النزوح المقدس ونزع الطابع الإقليمي في مختارات من قصائد هيرمان هيسي الدينية
الاستاذ المساعد شبر عبد العادل موسى
جامعة الكوفة / كلية الاداب

الخلاصة:

ان هيرمان هيسه (1877-1962) الشاعر والروائي الألماني المعروف بأفكاره الرئيسية التي تتناول الجهود الفردية للتحرر من الأنماط الحضارية الراسخة للبحث عن الروح الاساسية والهوية الجوهرية. يستكشف هذا البحث نزع الطابع الاقليمي في شعر هيرمان هسي الديني من خلال قراءات متعمقة وتعليقات نقدية. تتجاوز اشعار هسي الحدود العقائدية، وتعيد تشكيل التجربة المقدسة الى مسعى شخصي وصوفي وعابر للثقافات. بالاعتماد على نظرية دولوز وغاتاري نتبع كيفية انتزاع هسي الطابع الاقليمي عن رموز العالم الديني وشخصياته ومناظره الطبيعية للتعبير عن ايمان راسخ متجذر في البحث داخل النفس والفلسفة الشرقية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: هيسه، نزع الطابع الإقليمي، النزوح المقدس، دولوز، "المراحل"، "الكلمة الحية"، "الأشجار"، "بوذا"، "الكتب"

Introduction

Hermann Hesse's poetry serves as a subtle but vital expression of his spiritual philosophy. Rooted in both Western and Eastern traditions, his verses often dislodge familiar religious tropes, replacing them with imagery that evokes solitude, inwardness, and transcendence. This study investigates how Hesse deterritorializes religious thought in his poetry, shifting the sacred from established institutions to individual, fluid experience.

Deterritorialization and Sacred Displacement

In their book *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* Deleuze and Guattari (1983) introduce deterritorialization as a mechanism inherent in capitalist systems, where flows of desire are both liberated and constrained. They argue



that capitalism perpetually decodes and recodes flows, leading to a constant state of flux.

Also, in their book *Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, deterritorialization is explored in various contexts, including language, music, and politics. For they discuss how the refrain in music serves as a territorial marker, and its disruption leads to deterritorialization. They further elaborate on the concept by introducing the idea of "lines of flight," which represent movements of escape from established structures (p. 9). Deleuze and Guattari in *What is Philosophy?* (1994) connect deterritorialization to the creation of concepts, emphasizing the role of philosophy in navigating and producing new territories of thought.

Critical Perspectives

Michael Eng (2015) Eng examines the interplay between Deleuze and Guattari's notions of transversality and deterritorialization, highlighting tensions in their conceptualizations of objects and subjectivity. He notes that while transversality aims to disrupt linear structures, it sometimes inadvertently re-establishes new forms of territorialization.

Simone Aurora (2014) Aurora discusses the impossibility of absolute deterritorialization, arguing that every act of deterritorialization inherently leads to reterritorialization. He emphasizes the importance of maintaining open-ended processes to prevent the solidification of new power structures.

Hardt and Negri (2009) In *Commonwealth*, Hardt and Negri build upon Deleuze and Guattari's ideas to discuss the concept of the "common" as a deterritorialized space that resists capitalist appropriation. They argue that such spaces are essential for fostering collective forms of life beyond traditional state and market structures.

Thanem (2012) explores the application of deterritorialization in organizational contexts, suggesting that embracing fluid and non-hierarchical structures can lead to more innovative and responsive organizations. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) describe deterritorialization as a process where established orders dissolve, opening spaces for new meanings. In Hesse's case, deterritorialization operates through the breaking down of institutional religious language and its replacement by intimate, symbolic, and often Eastern-inflected spiritual metaphors.

Sacred Displacement and the Deleuzian Fold in Literary Criticism

The concept of sacred displacement refers to the movement of spiritual or religious significance from a fixed, institutionalized locus to a decentralized, nomadic, or deterritorialized space. In literary criticism, this notion resonates profoundly with Gilles Deleuze's theories of deterritorialization and the fold, particularly as articulated in *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque* (1993) and *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987, with Félix Guattari).



Deleuze's idea of deterritorialization breaks with traditional structures of identity, space, and meaning. Sacred displacement, when interpreted through this lens, reveals how literature may enact or narrate the migration of the sacred from temple to text, from dogma to affect, from institution to interiority. "Deterritorialization," Deleuze and Guattari write, "is the movement by which one leaves the territory" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 508). In the literary sacred, this movement is mirrored in texts that decenter religious orthodoxy and instead articulate spiritual experience as immanent and unbounded. Thus, "religious forms do not hold; instead, Hesse seeks a sacred that is nomadic" (Caputo, 2006, p. 45).

A lucid example is displayed by Hermann Hesse's late religious poetry, where the divine no longer resides in hierarchical dogma but in fluid, personal encounters with nature and self. In *The Glass Bead Game*, Hesse's characters participate in spiritual experiences not bound by any one faith but echoing multiple traditions. A similar drift appears in his poem *Stages (Stufen)*, where sacred meaning is mobile, migratory:

"Every beginning holds its own magic,
That shields us and helps us to live." (Hesse, *Stufen*, 1941)

Here, the "beginning" is sacred not because it is ordained, but because it emerges from change, echoing Deleuze's emphasis on becoming over being. The sacred is not located in a fixed theological truth but in the affective momentum of transition. This aligns with what Deleuze, drawing from Spinoza, calls the immanence of the divine—a God not above but within the world, a sacred that folds into life itself (Deleuze, 1990, p. 172).

The Baroque fold, for Deleuze, is a spatial metaphor for this immanence. "The Baroque fold unfurls all the way to infinity," he writes, "folding within the soul itself" (Deleuze, 1993, p. 3). Literature becomes a sacred fold, a site where the divine is continuously inflected rather than fixed. In Hesse's mystical verse, this fold manifests in the entwining of Eastern and Western spiritualities, the lyrical interweaving of Christian, Vedantic, and Taoist sensibilities—none dominant, all resonant.

Critic Leslie Paul Thiele notes that Deleuzian deterritorialization enables a kind of "sacralization of flux" (Thiele, 1997, p. 208), in which spirituality is found in the process rather than the product, the journey rather than the destination. Hesse's poetry, especially in works such as *Hours in the Garden (Stunden im Garten)*, affirms this with meditative attention to impermanence, nature, and the inward path:

"Let every spring be like the last,
Not because it is the same, but because it's new."

In such lines, the sacred is displaced from church or doctrine to the seasonal, sensual experience of living. Through Deleuze, we can interpret this not as a loss of the sacred but its liberation—its unfolding into the world.



Hesse rejects all the materialistic aspects that would limit and undermine his his spiritual quest as he believes that the poet's role "as a guide toward insight, toward the conscious life beyond materialistic and hedonistic goals, to an appreciation of the sanctity and inherent dignity of all life" (Hesse , 2011, p. 38). Thus, he states the major qualities of the true spiritual poets, as he says:

Great poets feel into the future with most sensitive antennas and live out head of us a piece of future development, a yet unrealized potential poets and philosophers, if they do not sell out to please, but have the courage to be themselves, represent the most precious and dangerous models a culture can have. They don't supply a ready made set of duties and doctrines to be followed, but they show and teach the opposite: the path to individuality and personal conscience. (Hesse , 2011, p. 38)

III. Abandoning the Church: The Self as Sanctuary

Through his poem: "At Evening" the poet reorient his compass to the inner part rather than the external. For he seeks solace with himself through deep contemplation with the soul. The purgation of the soul is realized to erect a chapel in his heart and to dismiss every mundane and restore the sacred.

"No priest to guide, no altar lit—

Only silence in my soul's cathedral." (Hesse, 1970, p. 47)

The poem imagines a spiritual departure from ecclesiastical tradition. The soul becomes its own place of worship—a deterritorialized sacred. "In Hesse, church and temple are reabsorbed into the human interior" (Ziolkowski, 1965, p. 138).

Hesse offered a more holistic understanding of life, where faith and art, story and myth, marry analytical logic to birth a more unified wisdom.

It is an old, uneven battle between criticism and creativity, between science and art, whereby the former is always right without serving anyone and the latter again and again sows the seeds of faith, love, solace and a sense of the eternal falling on a fertile soil. Because life is stronger than death and faith is stronger than doubt. (Hesse, 2011, p. 39)

Hesse is profoundly concerned with the unconscious use and abuse of the word, because when words become worn, meaning diminishes, potential shrinks, profit maximizes briefly, fun becomes addiction, the healing power of joy can be lost, and as Hesse writes in the last lines of the poem "The Living Word":

Poetry and music invite you
to understand the splendors of creation.
A look into a mirror will confirm it.
What disturbs us often as disjointed
becomes clear and simple in a poem:
Flowers start laughing, the clouds release their rain,
The world regains its soul, and silence speaks. (Lines xvii-xxiv)



The poet affirms the significance of poetry as an agent to facilitate the process of contemplation and thinking deeply beyond the human boundaries, as rhetoric renders truth in different form to be conceived and captured within the consciousness the task of the poet is to ascend highly and raise the standards of the addressees.

Fog and Solitude: Spiritual Unknowing

Hesse's sense of solitude is reflected through his poems Poem: "In the Fog" and "Books". the mystery scene is presented through the fog to show the human relapsing reality in time of calamity. Hence, solitude is celebrated despite the physical detachment and human dissociation.

"Each is alone
And none knows the other...
We are all alone."(Hesse, 1970, p. 79)

Moreover, the fog represents both epistemic and spiritual dislocation. Absence of clear religious identity or community opens the way for mystical individualism. "Solitude in Hesse is not exile but initiation" (Freedman, 1978, p. 192). His poem "Books" reflects another trajectory to the heart, for happiness can not be sustained through the books, says Hesse. The real joy is in your heart and you should discover the heart to be happy for the heart contains all the aspects of life and beauty.

All the books of the world
will not bring you happiness,
but build a secret path
toward your heart.

What you need is in you: (Lines i-v)

The real light is the inner light that will give riser to the spiritual temperance. The divine mercy will illuminate and enlighten the human heart with knowledge and wisdom, if he seeks that sublime aim, diligence and patience must be present all the time.

the sun, the stars, the moon,
the illumination you were seeking
shines up from within you.

The quest for wisdom (Lines vi-ix)

The truth lies in the heart through faith they can never be a part, thus the pulsing hearts establishes an ethereal domain with the divine, so, it communicates light and knowledge freely.

Mysticism through Buddhism:

Through his work, Hesse presented the image of Buddha retrospectively, through its association with the continuous movement of life after the demise. He writes: "Still, he sits beneath the tree, Not God, not man, not prophet— But void, but being." (Hesse, 1970, p. 93) Hesse strips the Buddha of Western



interpretive categories. Spiritual presence is found in stillness and negation, not proclamation. “For Hesse, Buddhist emptiness is a fertile spiritual space” (Decker, 2018, p. 312). Hesse in his poem “*An Ancient Buddha Decaying in a Japanese Forest Ravine*”

Being exposed openly to the remarkable aspects of nature, the statue is described by Hesse in a dramatic way, Buddha resides under cold wind and rain that left their impact on its features and shape.

Long rain and cold nights of frost
unveil your shape, soft and worn away.
Covered with moss, your face still shines serene.
Your half-closed eyes still reveal
your calm focus on eternity, (Lines i-v)

The statue is covered by moss that could not stop the brightness of Buddha’s face. Hesse focuses on the spiritual aspect of eternity as it is depicted by Buddha’s focus.

your tranquil yes to the changing over
into the formless void of the unlimited.
The slowly withering features of your face
still speak of your noble mission, (Lines vi-ix)

The spiritual aspect of modesty and tranquility is analogized through process of self renunciation, debasement and self exile into the nothingness. The countenance is wilting losing its features of the external reality, but the same process of withering bears witness of the spiritual and noble eminence of his mission.

Tomorrow you will be root and rustling leaf.
Tomorrow you will turn into water mirroring clear sky.
You will curl as ivy, grow as fern and algae,
become symbol of all transformations,
and show the eternal oneness behind all change. (Line xii-xvi)

Hesse is addressing the future time through these lines, as he asserts that Buddha will be rendered into the void leaving the earthly shape through merging with the natural world. The rendition occurs to validate and empower the belief. The real reflection of the celestial reality is motivated by transformation into water, which signifies life and rebirth and consequently oneness with the divine.

Trees as natural symbol of transcendence

“Trees are sanctuaries.
Whoever knows how to speak to them,
knows truth.”(Hesse, 1970, p. 153)

Hermann Hesse frequently employed trees as a potent symbol in his literature, essays, and poetry. For Hesse, trees represent life, solitude, wisdom, and spiritual rootedness, acting as natural mirrors of the inner human condition. His



use of trees aligns with Romanticism and Eastern philosophy, offering a form of sacred naturalism that bridges self and world. In *Wandering: Notes and Sketches*, Hesse (1972) personifies trees, granting them voices of cosmic wisdom: "A tree says: A kernel is hidden in me, a spark, a thought, I am life from eternal life..." (p. 57).

Trees, for Hesse, are more than elements of the landscape; they are spiritual teachers. Their presence evokes the eternal, and their growth reflects a divine order in nature. Trees also function as emblems of solitude and endurance. Hesse describes how, during personal crises, the silent presence of a tree can offer profound counsel: "When we are stricken and cannot bear our lives any longer, then a tree has something to say to us: Be still! Be still! Look at me!" (Hesse, 1972, p. 58). This connection underscores a kind of meditative dialogue between humans and nature, reminiscent of Taoist and Buddhist practice. In his poetic works, Hesse reiterates the sanctity of trees. In *The Seasons of the Soul*, he writes:

"Whoever has learned how to listen to trees no longer wants to be a tree. He wants to be nothing except what he is" (Hesse, 2011, p. 134). This line emphasizes self-acceptance, a core theme in Hesse's work, where trees act as metaphors for an authentic, grounded existence. According to literary scholar Theodore Ziolkowski (1965), Hesse's trees are more than aesthetic symbols: "For Hesse, nature—especially the tree—serves not merely as a backdrop, but as a figure of cosmic order and the indivisible link between man and the world" (p.4 9). This reinforces the idea that trees in Hesse's work function as sacred nodes connecting the physical and spiritual dimensions of life.

Nature serves as a deterritorialized spiritual text. Truth is not revealed through scripture but natural presence. Hesse's pantheism is a flight from dogma into living forms" (Freedman, 1978, p. 203).

The Endless Journey: A Movement of Religion

Hesse's poem "Stages" crystallizes the very nature of spirituality and the sense of disjointedness being centralized to overcome the transience of this short life so every step of life must be an ascent that brings us closer to the spirit That made us, and lives in us:

All blossoms will wilt,
each youth fold into the mold of age.
Wisdom and virtue never last forever.
Your heart must always be ready to leave
and ready to begin again, (Lines i-v)

Accordingly, the poet beholds the course of life as fully charged with perilous pitfalls of time, death, and mortality, that set the poet's zeal for spiritual union in the after death. To have a well established faith to meet the unknown.



This journey through the realms of life
was not meant to end in one home only.
World spirit does not want to tie us down,
wants us to soar into the open. (Lines x-xiii)

Through the poem the stages of life are unlimited as they are overlapped with various realms. The continuous process to seek spiritual freedom empowers the human to resist any form of captivity that would frame him within limited boundaries. Unlike the materialistic world that confines the body with all its lures, the realm of spirituality has free access to be associated with all the new realms. "Spirituality for Hesse is kinetic, never codified" (Ziolkowski, 1965, p. 146).

Maybe the moment of our death too
is just another gate to new dimensions.
The call of life to us will never end.
Well, then, my heart, take leave and heal. L xviii- xxi

The course of life will never end in death for death is not but a gate that would lead a us to new realms, where the broken heart will be healed spiritually. No fixed goal, no dogmatic endpoint—only progression. The soul is on an eternal pilgrimage, unanchored from doctrine.

Christian Imagery

Hesse transcended the Christian imagery in his poem: "To the Unknown God". The articulate prayer is being muted and displaced into another territory, the heart is the mouth that communicated with the divine in holy silence. Thus he says:

"I do not call you Father,
I do not call you Lord.
I call you Silence." (Hesse, 1970, p. 44)

Language itself becomes a barrier; Hesse undermines Christian nomenclature. Sacredness lies in what escapes naming. "This renunciation of theological language marks a radical deterritorialization of the divine" (Caputo, 2006, p. 68). For the high level contemplation and concentrated conscious awareness of the divine presence help Hesse communicate spiritually through the cordial channel.

Conclusion

In his poetry, Hesse performs a spiritual unmapping. Churches dissolve into forests, priests vanish into silence, and God becomes "void" or "unknown." This is not nihilism, but a reorientation of the sacred—a deterritorialized space where



belief is an act of becoming. His poetry thus constitutes a lyrical theology of the in-between: between East and West, word and silence, self and cosmos. In Hesse's literary universe, trees are profound metaphors for life, growth, and spiritual truth. Whether as counselors in solitude or symbols of sacred resilience, they illuminate his recurring themes of identity, nature, and transcendence. The heart become the centre as a reflection for the inner pure reality of faith as it is a rendition for the external vocalization of religious practices. This process of deterritorialization is a transcendental and sublime achievement that culminates Hesse's innovative career.

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