

This week, I've been reading Hermann Hesse's final novel, *The Glass Bead Game* [1943; in translation to English], which I am ashamed to say that I had not read before (we're all learning). Set in an unspecified era in the province of Castalia, the book has the feel of a much later 1960s postmodern story by Jorge Luis Borges, performing a kind of life-history documentary of its fictional central character, Joseph Knecht. Knecht is educated in the study of the titular Glass Bead Game and eventually rises to become its chief master in the role of *Magister Ludi*.

What I think most interests me about this novel is its patient pacing in the documentation of the central Game to which it never actually turns its full attention. The rules of the Glass Bead Game, for instance, are never revealed to the reader. I have no clue how one would "play" it or what it actually is. Instead, we're simply told that the Game is a kind of fusion of all academic disciplines. It is one in which rhetorical skill and inward contemplation clearly play a role. The Game also seems somehow to be related to the concept of the Renaissance Man or Woman who can be well-versed across a diverse set of academic fields. However, the Game has the strongest resonance with the discipline of music. But, importantly, the Game and its instruction sites are not akin to a university centre of learning (there are also universities in the novel). It is, and remains throughout the novel, a game. For instance, the Benedictine Monks whom Knecht visits are unsure of the seriousness of the Glass Bead Game, although Knecht himself perceives in the synthesis of all knowledge a type of supreme beauty or aesthetics, that only the most advanced players can perceive.

As Knecht comes more and more to challenge the hierarchy and order over which he presides, my attention was pulled by the relationship of places of learning – universities – to an ability to criticize society and the university itself. It is definitely the case that the Glass Bead Game is, as I said, not a university. But it certainly looks and feels like one. It has also long been claimed that the critical thinking one can develop in universities should lead to an engaged, democratic citizenship who bring their intellectual development to bear upon democracy. It is interesting that, in Hesse's novel, Knecht must proceed through his formal phase of learning before he can begin to criticize his own order and hierarchy.

Yet, even as Knecht comes to realize in the text that "every step upward on the ladder of offices is not a step into freedom but into bondage" I wondered how much this also applies to the way that our universities are being re-moulded in the UK at the moment. The withdrawal of public funding coupled with the re-classification of students as consumers who go to university purely to better their own financial life prospects, seems to work against the freedom of critical thinking for which one might hope. Indeed, the "pedagogy of debt", as it is known – in which university ends up teaching students that debt is the way to live – now ensures that students learn a lot about the price of university, without often being able to realize its full value (if value is defined by how many steps up the ladder one can take as a result).

But there is still hope. Students come year after year to universities and love their courses. Humanities degrees, which politicians continue to deride, have good uptakes and we continue to have a population who have learned to think critically about art and culture. We can continue to advocate for the return of full public funding of universities and humanities subjects, even though it is difficult, so that we can have people knowledgeable throughout our country. For this mode of learning and education is certainly no "game". Glass beads or not.