
The Picaresque and the Romantic: A Critical Reading of Hermann Hesse's *Knulp*

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Abstract

Hermann Hesse's *Knulp* (1915) is a memorable novel about vagrant life on the road. The eponymous hero is a tramp living an adventurous life in nature as a lonely wanderer, and the novel is loosely structured around such adventures taking place in different stages of his life. Hence, this article engages literary connections between the romantic ideals incorporating the countryside and fields and the picaresque genre. Their overlap creates a rich romantic impulse that valorizes nature, the withdrawn individual, and even the nostalgic melancholic spirit. The article explores such connections between an idealized nature and spiritual, meditative aspects reminiscent of the Graveyard school of poetry, being a precursor of romanticism. Nature is not only, realistically, a backdrop for survival (as per the realistic slant of the picaresque tradition) but also an idealized (sometimes lost) spiritual refuge (as per the romantic tradition). While both traditions focus on the outsider, one tackles the social dimension and the other the incomprehensible. Hesse's protagonist manifests the overlap of both impulses, with emotion, freedom, individualism, and nature being key features of romanticism. And instead of the anti-hero of picaresque fiction, we have in *Knulp* a noble, passionate wanderer. The picaresque tradition might have given the prototype of the outsider figure to romanticism, yet romanticism elevated this figure and deepened it by giving it artistic and philosophical depth. Hesse employs the picaresque structure as a vehicle for the romantic impulse of loss, introspection, and freedom, subverting the picaresque tradition to transform the survival journey of the picaresque into a spiritual one of inner growth and mystical union with nature.

Keywords: modern German literature; picaresque; romanticism; Hesse's *Knulp*; genre mixing

I am not made like anyone I have seen; I dare believe that I am not made like anyone in existence. If I am not superior, at least I am different. (Rousseau 15)

Introduction

Hermann Hesse's *Knulp*¹ (1915) presents us with a romantic wanderer living according to his own principles rather than choosing the path of social conformity of marriage or profession. Although this novel may not be the magnum opus of the 1946 Nobel Prize winner and the German-Swiss writer, it is still, however, a memorable and unique work that manifests Hesse's critique of industrial modernity in favor of natural life, introspection, and freedom. In this novel, Hesse lives up to the romantic ideal of embracing nature as a healing refuge from a hypocritical rational civilization. He depicts a romantic worldview that can be traced in the text's themes, ideas, and characters. The Hesse of *Knulp*, it seems, is that of the nostalgic late romantic phase. An unconventional tramp living on the road, *Knulp* is, in tandem with the romantic theory, the peculiarly unique individual and even the eccentric man. Hesse

transforms and subverts the conventional picaresque novel by merging it with romantic and pastoral impulses, thus transforming the rogue's journey of witty survival into an introspective, philosophical quest for spiritual freedom, inner truth, and communion with nature. In a sense, the picaresque is used as a vehicle for the romantic. In *Knulp*, the social message of the picaresque tradition becomes an elevated, transcendental, and mystical vision. Knulp is no amoral rascal as with many picaresques. Rather, he is a Wandervogel (literally a "wandering bird") spirit achieving a pantheistic communion with nature. Despite romanticism's conceptual complexity and confusion as a term, rendering it empty in itself as many critics complained (Lovejoy 232), there are general themes and tendencies universally associated with the term, what René Wellek called "systems of norms" (2) by way of referring to major conventions, styles, or philosophies dominating literature "at a specific time of the historical process" (2). While for Lovejoy the romanticism of one country is incompatible with that of another, for Wellek there are major traits for the romantic and romanticism in countries like Germany, France, and England during the time frame of the 1790s to 1830s, which establishes a zeitgeist (spirit of the age) through which we can study the period. Hence, Romanticism exalts primitive and uncivilized ways of life, spontaneity, non-conformity to conventions, and free personal expression. It also elevates nature and imagination. Such traits are manifest in *Knulp*, a text in which Hesse subverts picaresque journeying and transforms it as a vehicle for the romantic ideals of introspection, freedom, and outsider status. In *Knulp*, the vagabond of the picaresque novel becomes the enigmatic romantic wanderer.

German romanticism highlighted significant motifs like traveling, nature, the landscape, and old myths, which justifies its relation to the picaresque tradition as manifested in *Knulp*. Generally philosophical in orientation, German romanticism found in the work of Immanuel Kant a focus on aesthetic judgments as opposed to moral or informative claims. Kant highlighted the role of human subjectivity in interpreting the world as it seems to us, allowing for the personal individual vision in life. On the other hand, the German Wandervogel movement (or youth hiking group) offers another contextual clue. The Wandervogel emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as a reaction to rapid industrialization and urbanization. The central tenet was a romantic back-to-nature principle (hiking, travel on foot, camping, and sleeping outdoors). Rejection of modernity (materialism, industrialism, consumerism, or bourgeois lifestyles) and valuing freedom, self-reliance, folk culture, and spiritual unity with nature are also dominant traits. In the words of John Williams, the Wandervogel youth "sought spiritual renewal through movement across the countryside, seeing in nature a moral and cultural refuge from mechanized civilization" (2). This naturalist ideology was a remedy for the alienation of city life. Knulp captures the Wandervogel spirit, preferring open skies and rural roads to stable, bourgeois life. He is a free, sensitive, and introspective soul.

In *The Mirror and the Lamp*, M. H. Abrams interrogates two primary conceptions of art and the artist, the reflector or the imitative as opposed to the lamp or fountain. Thus, the expressive theory of art (as opposed to the mimetic one) advocates the expression of the artist's personality, genius, and creativity. This also implies expressing the writer's life philosophy via the medium of the literary work. The mind can reflect the external world or actively shape it. In *Knulp*, Hesse vents a romantic pastoral spirit via his main character, who refuses conformity, settling down, or industrial exploitation. The character Knulp is honed according to Hesse's own romantic philosophical ideals, embodying the mystical as what is beyond ordinary human understanding. In his odd lifestyle and connection with nature, Knulp is an emblem of transcendence, intuition, and spiritual insight. He is an expression of Hesse's philosophical vision, a late romantic and nostalgic one. While Hesse's debt to romantic

sensibilities in his “modern” novels and poems has been generally discussed by critics like Freedman and Mileck, his fusion of picaresque and romantic impulses in *Knulp* has not been investigated before, which is the aim of this article. The novel is read in terms of the impact nineteenth-century romanticism left on Hesse’s thought and work, looking at the intersections between the picaresque and the romantic impulses and arguing that the picaro was employed as a meaningful vehicle for the pastoral. *Knulp* exploits many genre elements of the picaresque novel by way of enhancing its pastoral romantic potential, mainly the lonely individual out in nature seeking an inner illumination. Via exploiting the figure of the rogue, Hesse vents romantic philosophies about life, art, and nature. *Knulp* manifests an overlap between two established genres, the picaresque and the romantic, whereby the picaresque’s wanderer and episodic journey are given greater psychological depth, imagination, and emotional intensity.

The Picaro as a Vehicle for the Romantic

The Amiable Picaro

Knulp is a book about a wandering tramp who favors freedom over the conventions of settled life, marriage, or a profession. Instead, the eponymous hero is a traveling man on the road out in nature, embracing the beauty and complexity of life around him and trying to find meaning in simplicity and spreading joy to others, not in materialistic considerations. He simply tramps through valleys, mountains, and towns as a lonely “migrant” who is “always on the move and could never settle down anywhere” (7). To an old friend from school days, Dr. Machold, who accidentally meets him after ten years, Knulp seems to be a dusty wayfarer “a thin man with a small beard, poorly dressed, obviously at home on the road” (49). Hence, the novel has two dominant themes: one is the journeyman or vagabond (i.e., the picaro), and the other is the natural world in which our saunterer moves and where he finds spiritual joy as well as support from friends and acquaintances. Nature is ambivalently depicted in that the road revitalizes him and inspires him, and yet it worsens his lung condition. Literary traditions across the world have many instances of the picaro as the journeyer on the road. Looking at the sixteenth century, the famous yet anonymous *Lazarillo de Tormes* (1554) offers us the archetypal rogue as a poor boy surviving by tricks on the roads of Spain. The novel is realistic, using a poor boy to satirize hypocritical social norms. Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* (1884) features a runaway boy drifting down the Mississippi and rejecting authority and social conformity, adding a feature of humor to the genre’s realism and social criticism. In particular, Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* remains a classic instance whereby the road symbolizes freedom from social norms, the unknown, restlessness, and the search for new meanings in post-WWII America by the rebellious Beat Generation of the 1950s who wanted to live intensely in the present. The spirit of non-conformity depicted by Kerouac finds an echo in Hesse’s *Knulp*. Sal Paradise, the narrator of Kerouac’s novel and Dean Moriarty’s friend, sums up the whole thing when he says (as they arrive in Denver, covering great distances in a short time): “We still had a long way to go, but it didn’t matter. The road is life” (48). In Kerouac’s novel, Beat literature is mixed with picaresque and semi-autobiographical elements to give us a modern road-epic with episodic adventures. The same logic applies to Hesse’s protagonist Knulp, Karl Eberhard, as he once introduces himself. The road is life for Knulp and the site of his adventures and reflections on life. The road is not simply a path but an avenue for a personal philosophy in life. It is the embodiment of freedom, discovery, and renewal. It signifies liberation from worldly attachments and an idealism beyond secular materialism relates.

As a genre, the picaresque novel, often in an episodic fashion and in the first-person, the adventures of a rogue or adventurer who roams the world in an attempt to survive. In the process, rogues learn to live by their wits rather than by doing honorable work. The rogue might deceive, steal, or swindle, still exposing the prevailing social hypocrisy and corruption. In Hesse's *Knulp*, the eponymous hero shares many of these genre elements. He is a lowborn peasant who tramps the country, relying on friends and acquaintances for food and financial support, yet he is a noble man. He has a code of manners, rejecting the betrayal of his friends or excessive drinking. Unlike many typical rogues, Knulp is not a thief, nor is he morally loose. The three sections of the book, "Early Spring," "My Recollections of Knulp," and "The End," represent distinct phases in his life between youth and old age and are staged in different seasons. With the exception of the middle part, which is narrated in the first person by his tramping friend, the novel is narrated in the third person rather than the first-person confessional mode common in picaresque novels. When the novel opens, Knulp is out of the hospital and on the road for days despite the rain and cold. He still feels feverish, which makes him decide to look for a roof over his head. The opening section entitled "Early Spring" is set in Achstetten, and we get to know that Knulp spends his days on the road, i.e., living the life of a picaro, but a cheerful and likeable one: "He had always had plenty of friends; he would have met with a friendly reception in almost every town in the region. But he was strangely proud about such things and any friend from whom he accepted help could take it as an honor" (1). He receives help from friends, and they gladly offer that help with a sense of honor. His friends help him and feel privileged to do so. So, he is no ordinary picaro who begs or solicits help. He is honest, mannerly, and smart. Even the police are disposed toward him despite his "illegal" and "disdained" tramp life:

They respected the cheerful, entertaining young fellow for his superior intelligence and occasional earnestness, and as far as possible left him alone. He had seldom been arrested and never convicted of theft or mendicancy, and he had highly respected friends everywhere. Consequently, he was indulged by the authorities very much as a nice-looking cat is indulged in a household, and left free to carry on an untroubled, elegant, splendidly aristocratic and idle existence. (5)

Those features of Knulp being a vagrant conform to the picaro tradition in literature, yet Knulp is a combination of picaresque and romantic elements. He does conform to the low-life principle and the outsider status of being on the road in the picaresque tradition, yet he is no delinquent or criminal, as is the case with many roguish characters and tricksters in the genre.² According to J. A. Garrido Ardila, the picaro as the protagonist of this sub-genre "(i) is born to a family of the underclass..., (ii) undergoes a progressive psychological change, (iii) is a social outsider who tires his hand at several professions living by his or her wits, (iv) normally engages in unlawful activities, and (v) is a cunning trickster who deceives others" (14-15). Such a general outline, with some modification, fits Knulp to a good extent. If deception and unlawful activities are taken away, an argument can be made for the rest of the criteria in the case of Knulp as a picaro, yet an amiable one. His outsider status is a matter of choice; he chooses to be the non-conformist other to the banal lives around him. All in all, Knulp adapted the wandering, low-class rogue from the picaresque tradition to highlight romantic themes of travel as an avenue for individual experience, freedom, and rebellion against social conventions.

Nature and Sauntering

As a romantic text, *Knulp* takes up themes of individualism, self-discovery, and spirituality, thus highlighting the role of nature in that end. In his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth explains that his object was to deal with "incidents of common life" taken from rustic or rural life, linking this simple life to "elementary feelings" and "essential passions" (18). Though Wordsworth's theory works better for poems and his preface was viewed as the manifesto for romantic theory, his claims about the primacy of rustic, solitary life in romantic art are directly related to his preoccupation with nature as a theme and a source of inspiration. This pastoral rustic impulse figures dominantly in Hesse's *Knulp*. Wordsworth offers a memorable definition of the poet in the expanded edition of his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* as a man "speaking to men" and one who is gifted with "more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul... a man pleased with his own passions and volitions, and who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him..., and habitually impelled to create them [volitions and passions] where he does not find them" (*Prose Works* 123). This definition fits Knulp who is also a singer, a nascent poet, and a nature aficionado. According to the German romantic poet and philosopher Novalis, apprenticeship "suits the novice poet-academic study the novice philosopher" (*Philosophical Writings* 23). The best kind of apprenticeship, Novalis adds, "is apprenticeship in the art of living" (23). Knulp, we are told, knew "the language of every trade and the signs by which its practitioners recognize one another" (8). Life on the road taught him many things, including being different and even exotic. He is different not in type but in degree from others, possessing heightened sensitivity and more emotionalism. He is an artist, and his realm is the art of unconventional life. An archetypal wanderer, Knulp dwells on the connection with the natural world and rejects the restrictions of industrialism and materialism. Besides, he has his personal code of ethics and intuitive beliefs. He tells his friend the tailor, Schlotterbeck, that we should not ask too much of the Bible and that "everybody's got to figure out for himself what's true and what life is like; those are things that you can't learn from any book" (17). In a sense, Knulp evokes a Wordsworthian dictum in "The Tables Turned," which encourages readers to abandon barren books in order to learn from nature. Moreover, Ralph Waldo Emerson's transcendentalism rejected religious dogma and organized religion in favor of inner truth and oneness with nature. In his essay on the "Over-Soul," Emerson asserts: "Let man, then, learn revelation of all nature and all thought to his heart; this, namely, that the highest dwells with him; that the sources of nature are in his own mind, if the sentiment of duty is there" (17). This knowledge that Knulp endorses comes from experience and adventures, not books. In other words, it comes from nature and can be achieved through the transcendental ethic of self-reliance and introspection.

Knulp conforms to the pantheistic view of transcendentalism, which sees divinity in nature and the universe, without being confined to the church. As a naturalist, he is a keen observer of seasons, rivers, and trees. While waiting for the servant girl Barbele to meet him for a walk, he experiences a pantheistic communion with nature. The external landscape gives him inner equilibrium, and his ego gets absorbed into the living totality around him:

The damp wind sang softly in the bare chestnut trees, the river flowed soundlessly in the deep darkness, broken only by the reflections of a window or two. The gentle night soothed the tramp in every fiber of his being, he sniffed the air with an intimation of spring, warm weather, and dry roads. His inexhaustible memory surveyed the city, the river valley, and the whole region; he knew it well, he knew the

roads and the paths along the river, the villages, hamlets, and farms, and he knew where he could expect a friendly lodging for the night. (25)

Knulp knows nature in LAchstetten very well. His communion with nature is beyond the greedy or selfish exploitation of nature by the typical picaros in their attempts to survive. Nature reflects Knulp's inner soul, moods, and feelings. His connection with nature is both psychological and spiritual. Since Knulp is a Wandervogel wanderer, he is harmonized with rain, skies, forests, wind, and bird songs. If he alienates himself from most people, he is at home in nature. On the other hand, Henry David Thoreau's classic transcendentalist essay "Walking" celebrates nature while linking walking to freedom, truth, spirituality, and inner peace. Thoreau's description of walking makes it a "noble art" (4). Knulp is, after all, a walker, a "saunterer" in the fields, villages, valleys, and mountains. Thoreau says: "I think that I cannot preserve my health and spirits, unless I spend four hours a day at least—and it is commonly more than that—sauntering through the woods and over the hills and fields, absolutely free from all worldly engagements" (5). Being a tramp on the road, Knulp is a "saunterer" who rejects those "worldly engagements" Thoreau alludes to like marriage, a fixed profession, or settled life in return for a life on the road. His art of walking elevates the tramping of the conventional picaro and ennobles sauntering as a spiritual and creative act. Walking enhances the inner journey of self-discovery and improves the appreciation of the divine presence in nature. It heightens imagination and frees the saunterer from the demands of a mechanical modern life.

Romantic Melancholy

Despite Knulp's happy communion with nature, there is a sad, nostalgic strain in his thoughts. His melancholy is a characteristic romantic motif. The Graveyard School of the mid-18th century served as a bridge to romanticism, paving the way for the romantic movement with its focus on personal emotion, individual reflection, and respect for nature. In addition to being melancholic, this school of English poetry was also meditative and spiritual. The Graveyard poets wrote on death, decay, and the lives of rural peasants. Moreover, their school was also a precursor to Gothic romantic literature. The Graveyard poetry has echoes in *Knulp*. To be specific, Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Church Yard" has this stanza, which describes a village graveyard and reflects on the death of humble villagers buried under elm trees:

Beneath those rugged elms, that yew-tree's shade,
Where heaves the turf in many a mould'ring heap,
Each in his narrow cell forever laid,
The rude forefathers of the hamlet sleep. (Lines 13-16)

As with Gray's elegy, there is a memorable graveyard scene in *Knulp*. At one pivotal point, in section two entitled "My Recollections of Knulp," Knulp and his travelling companion (the unknown narrator of this section, who is a fellow tramp) saunter through grain fields and forests, tramping through the "fertile" countryside with few worries (32). This middle section has exquisite descriptions of nature and includes Knulp's philosophical musings. The tramps take a rest from the road and heat inside a shady graveyard at midsummer. There, they enjoy the beauty and serenity of nature and reflect on mortality, beauty, and freedom. They rest under beautiful walnut trees in the midst of numerous flowers, enjoying a scene of lilac and elder flowering shrubs. The narrator describes the quiet graveyard in remarkable language:

One afternoon, I remember, as we were making our way through the fields, far from the nearest village, we came to a deserted graveyard with a little chapel beside it. Surrounded by walls overgrown with dark shrubbery, it lay friendly and peaceful in the hot countryside. There were two large chestnut trees at the entrance. The gate was closed and I wanted to go on. Not so for Knulp, who started climbing over the wall. (32)

This graveyard scene is essential for explicating the dark and philosophical romantic thrust of the novel. The serenity of the graveyard triggers melancholic reflections on the mystery of life and death as well as the transience of human endeavors. Knulp knows the simple peasants, and knows that they (ironically) take good care of their resting places, growing the loveliest plants and trees on their graves and around them. For Knulp, nature is a protective mother-figure too. His return to the graveyard, in metaphorical terms, is a return to the womb of Mother Nature. It is an escape from the muddle of conventional life and empty materialism into the spiritual sanctuary of sublime nature. Hence, the cemetery is no morbid experience for Knulp. Rather, it is the site of intellectual reflection, deep emotions, and potential transcendence. Once the tramps climb the fence and enter the graveyard, the narrator is surprised: “The graves, most of them marked by white wooden crosses, lay in straight and crooked rows, and over them grew flowers and greenery. Bindweed and geraniums sparkled with joy, late gillyflowers grew in the shadier spots, there were rose bushes weighed down with roses, and a dense copse of lilac and elder” (32-33). Knulp recognizes and appreciates different kinds of flowers and plants in the graveyard. He thinks that mignonettes are lovely flowers and wants one on his grave (33). Hence, flowers for Knulp are not only pretty objects with aesthetic potential but also a link with a spiritual world beyond life. They embody romantic themes of beauty, death, and renewal. In the graveyard, Knulp finds the full cycle of life, death, and rebirth. Graveyard flowers give death poetic meanings and romanticize mortality.

In his unfinished novel and fragmentary romance *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, Novalis’s dreamer gazes at a blue flower (a major symbol in German romanticism) “with indescribable tenderness” before it turns into a pretty face (15). He is like Knulp, who is driven by a longing for beauty and transcendence in the graveyard flowers. The vision Novalis’s young poet, Heinrich, has of a beautiful blue flower fills him with intense longing. The blue flower becomes a mystical ideal and a symbol of spiritual yearning, poetic striving, and unity with the divine. Novalis also presents poetry as a bridge between the real and the ideal. Knulp, on the other hand, finds in graveyard flowers a link between the real of human transitoriness and the ideal of sublime transcendence beyond mortality. The song he sings in the graveyard is romantically nostalgic and elegiac in spirit. Knulp says he would sing it (if he were prematurely dead) on Sundays when girls would come to pick flowers from graves: “Because I’ve died so young, / Come sing me pretty maidens, / A song of farewell. / When I come back again, / I’ll be a pretty lad” (33). A brief passionate existence is more meaningful than a routine life for the romantics, and mortality is more of a tragic transcendence than a simple loss. The overall thrust of Knulp’s poem is reminiscent of another instance of romantic melancholy associated with deep, reflective thinking and spiritual longing. Wordsworth in his “Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood” interrogates the lost innocence of childhood in a melancholic spirit that yearns for a connection with nature and the infinite, immortal soul. The first stanza ends with this line: “The things which I have seen I now can see no more” (Line 9). The fields in Wordsworth’s poem betray a sense of something that is gone. The childhood dreams and visions of a mystical union with nature are now gone for Wordsworth’s speaker. Knulp’s imagination is richly romantic, envisioning the

innocence and beauty of childhood and youth over old age. However, the graveyard scene reminds Knulp of a lost world he cannot claim.

In his celebrated and transcendental praise of nature, Emerson in his essay "Nature" says that nature endows man with "wild delight" despite "real sorrows" (3) when man lives in harmony with it. Emerson also asserts that it is the poet "whose eye can integrate all the parts" of nature into a harmonious whole (3). He suggests: "In the tranquil landscape, and especially in the distant line of the horizon, man beholds somewhat as beautiful as his own nature" (4). For transcendentalists, nature is associated with pleasure, innocence, and harmony with the universe. It reflects the inner beauty of one's soul. Knulp, it should be noted, is a nature poet of sorts. He sings many poems, some of which he creates on the spur of the moment. And he is a lover of folk music too. One special poem he sings one morning is for the sun: "Like a maiden from her door/ Bright and clad in Sunday best, / Blushing and yet proudly, she / Steps up from mountain crest" (43). Like romantic figures, Knulp loves nature and personal freedom. To Wordsworth, nature was "a mother-goddess who teaches the soul serenity and joy, and never betrays the heart that loves her" (Frye 20). Knulp's pantheistic communion with nature echoes Emerson's transcendental praise of a rich, deeply meaningful, and spiritual nature. However, the graveyard scene reminds us that Knulp's journey is but another one of a spiritual search for meaning and purpose in life. He thinks that beautiful or perishable things (like love, marriage, or friendship) are subjective and diffuse, coming to an end soon (35). For Knulp, sorrow spoils love, marriage, and friendship. Thus, there is a profoundly sad strain in his mind, since with time we adapt to loss and the dead become strangers to us. He embraces melancholy because it exists within joy and short-lived beauty. Keats, in his "Ode on Melancholy," personifies Melancholy and says that "She dwells with Beauty--Beauty that must die" (Line 21). An awareness of impermanence makes beauty intense and moving. Philosophically and romantically viewed, pleasure and loss are interconnected, and beauty is fragile. Knulp and the narrator begin a reflective discussion on life and death. Knulp asserts that beauty often leaves us with a negative sentiment: "The most beautiful things, I think, give us something else besides pleasure; they also leave us with a feeling of sadness or fear" (34). For him, sorrow is part of every human relation.

This melancholic mood reflects core romantic values of profound thinking and deep spiritual truths pitted against mortality and transience. Knulp tells his friend: "You can see that when a friend or loved one dies. You weep and grieve for a day, a month, or even a year, but then the dear departed is dead and gone, and the person in the coffin might just as well be some homeless unknown apprentice" (36). There is a sense of determinism and gloom in Knulp's thoughts as he believes that our endeavors and wants become meaningless when life simply goes its way, and we become strangers in death. This gloom in his thoughts suggests the pessimism of the graveyard school and our lack of agency to stop death or overcome our weaknesses. After their session of philosophizing, Knulp sings an old Rhenish folk song suggestive of death: "I've worn the red coat until now, / And now the black coat I must wear / Seven years to the day, Till my love rots away" (37). Sorrow, as an authentic human experience, is a rejection of the positive Enlightenment belief in rational categories and ready solutions, scientific progress, and positivism. And melancholy is a form of spiritual yearning for what is beyond the earthly reach. It is a way of realizing the fleeting nature of beauty and joy. As a traveler, Knulp does not simply seek to survive through his wits like the traditional picaros. Rather, he comes to express his life philosophies, which are romantically melancholic. The act of confessing and expressing his (melancholic) views on life is in itself an expressive one reminiscent of the romantic expressive theory of art, which views the artwork as an expression of the writer's personality or imagination. In this regard, Knulp can

be viewed as a mouthpiece for Hesse's Wandervogel views, which revived romantic ideals early in the 20th century Germany. In particular, the sad strain in Knulp's thought can be equated with the romantic spiritual longing for truth and unity with the divine. It is a sign of a sensitive soul, a deeply emotional being, and a gateway for truth and self-knowledge. The romantics felt nostalgic for a vanishing world swept by industrialization and rationalization. Ruins, graveyards, and vast landscapes gave them an alternative space for genuine feelings and a rich inner life.

The Incomprehensible Soul

Early in the novel, we see Knulp visit an old friend, a tanner, seeking shelter from the bad weather. The tanner's wife enters the attic where the tramp sleeps. What she sees and remembers calls for a curiously enigmatic romantic hero:

Struck by his fine dark hair and the almost childlike beauty of his carefree face, she stood a while, looking at the handsome young fellow about whom her husband had told her such strange stories. She saw the bushy eyebrows on his clear, delicately modeled forehead, his thin brown cheeks, his fine red mouth and slender neck, and she liked what she saw. (7)

He is, for her, a strange yet fascinating exotic figure. The dark and the wild, the romantics believed, stir imagination and the heart. In a sense, this experience can be described as a sudden encounter with the "sublime," a favorite romantic theme. The dark hair juxtaposed against the innocent, childlike features of Knulp estranges beauty, deepens mystery, and intensifies emotions. In romantic art, the incomprehensible is linked to infinity and transcendence, i.e., to the realm of wonder and imagination beyond rational understanding. The romantic impulse shifts to a transcendental orientation when Knulp, after recounting a dream to his companion to the effect of feeling a stranger and leaving his native town in disgrace, asserts that every human being has a unique soul. Knulp fuses his appreciation for nature and poetic sensitivity with intellectual musings and philosophical views. Schlegel's vision of romantic art as "progressive, universal poetry" that makes "poetry lively and sociable, and life and society poetical" (175) echoes Knulp's life as a poem, a free and sensitive one rather than fake or imposed. Importantly, Schlegel views romantic poetry as uniting poetry with "philosophy and rhetoric" (175), and Knulp similarly blends art, reflection, and nature into one organic whole. What Schlegel suggests for poetry Hesse achieves in prose. Knulp, the poet with philosophical leanings, argues:

Two people can meet, they can talk with one another, they can be close together. But their souls are like flowers, each rooted to its place. One can't go to another, because it would have to break away from its roots, and that it can't do. Flowers send out their scent and their seeds, because they would like to go to each other, but a flower can't do anything to make a seed go to its right place; the wind does that, and the wind comes and goes where it pleases. (40-41)

Like a flower, a human soul is delicate, transient, and beautiful. Knulp asserts that fathers can pass their genes or looks or intelligence to their children, but not their soul: "In every human being, the soul is new" (41). In romantic terms, each individual has an inner world or a subjective vision that cannot be replicated, and each has creative and imaginative potential. Each soul has its truth, and each is divine and infinite. The soul is deep and rich, and not

understanding one's soul makes us strangers. In line with Emerson's thoughts on the soul, Knulp believes that the soul is unique, implicitly divine, and eternal. Emerson reflects that:

the soul in man is not an organ, but animates and exercises all the organs; it is not a function, like the power of memory, of calculation, of comparison, but uses these as hands and feet; is not a faculty, but a light; is not the intellect or the will, but the master of the intellect and the will; is the background of our being, in which they lie, - an immensity not possessed and that cannot be possessed. ("The Over-Soul" 4)

The soul connects us to the divine universal soul and to the hearts of men. Emerson says that it is "the perceiver and revealer of truth" (9). For the romantics, the soul is neither rational nor orderly. Rather, it is mysterious, creative, and profound. It is connected to a universal, infinite spirit, and it communes with nature. His tramping friend (the narrator) is surprised when he discovers that Knulp has suddenly left their sleeping quarters. He thought that he understood Knulp in every way, but Knulp surprised him by being more complicated than he thought. Friedrich Schlegel found in the "incomprehensible" an integral element of understanding the world beyond the confines of rationalism. In his article "On Incomprehensibility," he contends that "Only an incredibly minute quantity of it [incomprehensibility] suffices: as long as its truth and purity remain inviolate and no blasphemous rationality dares approach its sacred confines" (305). A man's happiness and strength, Schlegel maintains, depend on something dark or mysterious beyond rational analysis (305). Knulp's personality, hence, evades the rational logic of expectations or results. Despite his apparent simplicity, he is the enigmatic figure popular among the romantics. The cult of the strange, mysterious, and unsolved gave the romantics a way out of Enlightenment rationalism with its focus on reason and clarity. The infinite depths of the human psyche, they believed, cannot be subjected to rational formulas. The suggestion for them was more beautiful than the plain or the direct. The narrator feels shame and grief that, despite their conversations and walks together, he could not understand Knulp's soul well. As an embodiment of wanderlust, Knulp leaves suddenly, and the narrator feels disappointed for not comprehending Knulp's soul: "I found more fault with myself than with him. Now it was my turn to taste the loneliness which in Knulp's opinion was the lot of every man and which I had never really believed in" (47). Such a complaint is compatible with the romantic thrust for individualism and the unique, inner life of the soul. Knulp's loneliness can be interpreted as a quest for both individual self-discovery and deeper truths and a rejection of social commitments.

Although Knulp's ideas are deeply philosophical, his songs are effortless and have high spirits. The narrator of the middle section concedes that although Knulp's conversation is often "heavy with philosophy," his songs had "the lightness of children playing in their summer clothes" (44). In romantic thought, innocence does not dispel mystery but rather sanctifies it. The innocence of childhood means accepting the incomprehensible rather than rationally mastering it. Knulp likes to enjoy the beauty of the present and privileges the innocence of childhood. The narrator, as the voice of anti-romantic sentiments, prefers the wisdom of old age. Overthinking and excessive speculation about good or bad bother Knulp. He trusts more his instincts as learning does not simply solve life's riddles, which is a romantic assertion of intuition over books and over-rationalization. This hints at the merging of transcendental philosophy and romantic themes like innocence and celebration of childhood.

The Mystical Union: Spiritual Renewal

The last section, entitled “The End,” could equally be called the homecoming of Knulp. Sick and dying, he returns to his native town of Gerbersau to savor the light and air of freedom and listen to the shouts and cries of peasants and townspeople at the cattle market. He is eager to see chestnut trees and the market fountain. Significantly, the novel ends with a return to nature (the grain fields, young pines, autumn skies, and potato harvest) just as it began with Knulp out in nature. While it began in February, the last section begins in October, in the thriving countryside of Bulach: “The village gardens were abloom with full-colored asters, pale late roses and dahlias; here and there along the fences a flaming nasturtium still glowed amid the pale withered shrubbery” (48). The vibrant life in nature contrasts with Knulp’s deteriorating health (yet inner spiritual brilliance). When the last section begins, Knulp is on his way to his native town, Gerbersau. He is in his forties, and his medical condition is getting worse. The wayfarer is still on the road when Dr. Machold, a former friend from school days, meets him and recognizes him despite the traveler’s beard, poor shape, and tired looks. Machold takes him to his home, but that (in Knulp’s mind) brings him closer to death rather than life because he is born to be free: “He was listless and dejected, for now that he was living in comfort, with fine food and a soft bed, he felt more plainly than ever that the end was in sight” (58). As a Wandervogel figure, Knulp looks for freedom and spiritual renewal. He still seeks adventure even when his health is not helping him. He wants to go to Gerbersau as his last wish is to say goodbye to things like the river, the marketplace, his father’s old garden, and the bridge, all sites of his childhood. Once he leaves the wagon that brings him to his native town, he decides not to go to the hospital. Since the road is life to him, a hospital would confine him and thus symbolize death. Hence, he decides to remain free: “He was free again. In the hospital they could wait” (62).

The poem he writes to his host, Machold, before he leaves is a nature poem and conforms to the spirit of the graveyard school of poetry, with the theme of death being prominent: “The flowers must wither / When the fog comes, / And people must die/ And go down to their graves. / People are flowers, They too will come back/ In the springtime. / And then they will never be sick again, And all will be forgiven” (59). This elegy captures Knulp’s emotional state before his ultimate demise in death, capturing the soul’s fragility and transience. It also represents the cycle of birth, growth, and decay. Just as flowers bloom and fade and often get renewed in spring, human death allows for rebirth and renewal. Hence, death is a form of spiritual regeneration and intellectual resurrection. When Knulp reaches his native town, he goes to the family garden to remember the good days of his simple childhood. He savors the light and the air, the sounds and smells. The nostalgic Knulp recalls and reconnects with a romanticized and idealized past in order for his soul to be free and pure in death:

Here, before his expulsion from Latin school, Knulp had lived the happiest days of his life; here he had known complete happiness and fulfillment, joys without bitterness, the sweetness of stolen cherries, the delight of tending his little garden and watching his flowers grow, the lovely gillyflowers, the merry windbeed, the tender velvet pansies. (63)

Knulp has a flair for ecological awareness and natural harmony. His recollections of a world he once possessed (the lost world of his childhood) are significant as they indicate identity formation, familiarity, and love: “This bit of world belonged to him, he had known every inch of it and loved it; every bush and every slope had held meaning for him, had its tales to tell; every rain or snowfall had spoken to him; the air and the earth had lived in response to his

dreams and desires” (64). He revisits his father’s garden and his own flower bed, observing the autumnal spirit and the “bear’s-ears he had planted on Easter Sunday and the glassy balsamines” (64). He is sad that the old currant bushes were gone, uprooted and burned. In his birthplace, Knulp finds that the neighbour’s lilac tree had grown old and withered and was covered with moss. His nostalgic return, in a sense, is an attempt to mourn that lost world of his childhood. The overgrown paths he finds, withered trees, and ruined gardens sadden his heart. As Mimi Jehle contends, the garden becomes a symbol of “childhood happiness” (42), and thus Knulp’s longing for lost childhood innocence. His communion with nature continues to the very end of his life when he dies in a snowy landscape in the mountains above Gerbersau. Considering Knulp’s respect for home and nature, Jenna Gersie claims, in a “bioregional” reading of the novel, that Knulp returns to “a life-place” (1250) rather than simply to a birthplace. This implies an intimate connection with nonhuman forms of life including plants, trees, and animals as well as an appreciation for surroundings like valleys, mountains, and lakes in the Black Forest area the novel depicts. His return to Gerbersau, for Gersie, is an attempt to “reinhabit his life-place” (1262) before his ultimate death.

Knulp observes his town from the mountain until he dies, feeling something alien and hostile about his surroundings, not estrangement from nature as much as it is alienation from people. He spends his last days in the nearby mountains in woodcutters’ cabins or in the fields bedded in straw, trudging on through a snowstorm, tired and wasted but still alert to every copse and clearing, every breeze and animal track (69). He initially blames early love for losing purpose and focus in life before being assured by God in a last spiritual vision that God willed his life that way, and it had meaning on its own and in relation to those of others. In this last encounter, there is a personal, imaginative, and emotional affinity with God rather than an institutional or traditional church relation. Joseph von Eichendorff’s image of the soul spreading its wings wide and flying home and heaven kissing the earth in exquisite harmony in his 1837 lyric nature poem “Mondnacht” (“Moonlit Night” 42) also mirrors Knulp’s reconciliation with nature and God at the moment of his death and his longing for resurrection. The soul needs to be freed from earthly boundaries to commune with the infinite. Knulp’s death under open skies and in the midst of snow (a serene death like a spiritual homecoming) echoes Eichendorff’s final vision of the soul’s homecoming and achieving a mystical union:

And my soul spread
Her wings out wide,
Flew across the silent land,
As though flying home. (Lines 9-12)

The gentle breeze, the soft murmur in the corn fields, and the clear night all suggest this harmony between heaven and the earth in Eichendorff’s romantic vision.

Characters like Machold and the stone-breaker Schaible blame Knulp for wasting his talents in accepting to be a poor tramp rather than marrying and settling down with a family and a job. However, he never betrays his lifestyle, sleeping in the mountains or in the fields, bedded in straw. His final vision before he surrenders to sleep (i.e., death) has God clear his suspicions that Knulp’s life was for a purpose, and that he should be grateful for all happy times he had in life and all those he made happy. God assures him: “Can’t you see that you had to be a gadabout and a vagabond to bring people a bit of child’s folly and child’s laughter wherever you went? To make all sorts of people love you a little and tease you a little and be a little grateful to you?” (71). God comforts Knulp that he was chosen to be a wanderer in His

name and that he had lived just as God had willed. His life as a tramp has meaning, purpose, and design. The romantics believed that God manifested Himself in nature, which they viewed as divine. They considered nature with awe and reverence. Pantheism was viewed as a belief in God in nature and yet beyond. And the soul was viewed as closer to God than the teachings of priests or church institutions. God, for the romantics, was more felt than defined. Knulp's ultimate religious vision of unity with God is romantic in orientation, emphasizing feeling and imagination over rationalism. Knulp cannot delay death or illness, yet he is content that his little talents, like singing, dancing, and whistling, gave pleasure to others. He enjoyed his freedom and relaxed lifestyle, living according to his intuitive impulses rather than social conventions. Knulp's last vision is one in which nature and the divine merge; the snowy mountains and forests of southern Germany unite with the mystical presence of God, in which he is assured that his life as a nature gadabout had a purpose.

Conclusion

To look at *Knulp* in light of German or continental romanticism, one can say that the text captures the essence of romanticism in its depiction of the wanderer's poetic life, spiritual longing for the infinite, and communion with nature. Life as a form of art, longing for the divine, and nature as the soul's home are major tenets of romanticism, we find in *Knulp*. Hence, Hesse's wanderer embodies a profound romantic quest. Hesse fuses the wanderings of the picaresque tradition with the spiritual depth of romantic idealism. Knulp drifts in life as a journeyman seeking not simply survival but meaning, freedom, and truth. He is the romantic exile seeking an escape from mundane realities into natural harmony and spiritual being. In *Knulp*, the picaresque adventures become an avenue for a romantic meditation on the ephemeral yet profoundly spiritual life. However, Hesse builds a synthesis between the picaresque genre conventions and romantic ideals. A life of vagrancy gives meaning to romantic idealism in that the drifting self finds fulfillment in communion with nature and thus an inner vision/truth. Hesse not only blends picaresque, pastoral and romantic motifs but also transforms and subverts the picaresque's witty journey of survival into a romantic one of introspection and inner truth. His hero of childlike and simple innocence living up to the romantic ideals of spiritual longing, poetic spontaneity, and introspection is one on the move (as per the picaresque conventions), questing for meaning and fulfillment in episodic adventures. Knulp constructs a system of philosophy on life choices, the soul, and personal ethics. His freedom, however, comes at a price of loneliness, melancholy, and self-reliance. He lived the life of an outsider, popular and liked in his youth, yet "alone in his illness and advancing years" (p. 65). He blames early love for losing direction and interest in life, yet he is content that he is not a burden on others. His last days spent in the mountains above his native town confirm the unconventional life path he has chosen. Hesse gives us a critique of modernity (industrial/capitalistic greed) in favor of an authentic life lived in tune with the natural world and one's inner self. Knulp, as a wandering hero on the margins of society yet living life as a journey, combines two literary traditions, the romantic and the picaresque. The external journey is also a spiritual pilgrimage capturing Knulp's longing for unity with nature and the divine and freedom from all forms of stagnation or convention. The apparent realism of the picaresque tradition fuses with the idealism and mysticism of the romantic tradition. Organically, *Knulp* is a picaresque novel in form, yet romantic in heart and conception. In seeking spiritual wholeness amid transiency and decline, the picaresque wanderer becomes romantically and existentially authentic. This blending of traditions (the picaresque and the romantic) achieves many ends, enabling us to better appreciate Hesse's artistry and see why the wandering rogue is also a spiritual seeker with a profound soul. This re-frames Hesse as not simply a late romantic nostalgic figure but a modernist mediator between traditions.

Moreover, genres are not stable containers in *Knulp*, and genre mixing is not incidental; rather, it is made meaningful as an interpretive leverage. The rich heritage of both traditions (picaresque and romantic) moves *Knulp* to the status of world literature, yielding more literary appreciation and deeper critical insights.

End notes

1. Each time a reference is made to the novel itself, *Knulp* is italicized. When a reference is made to the titular character, Knulp is not italicized.
2. Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1722), for example, has a female picaro who is born in prison, and who uses deceit and cunning to survive. In the process, and before she finally repents, she becomes a mistress, a bigamist, and a thief. Like many picaros, she follows the pragmatic rather than moral code.

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