

Damals bei uns daheim

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I read this book about thirty years ago, or could it have been even before? In the mid-seventies I read a couple of books by Fallada when I was in the States. I recall them being easy to read, although in German. Of this book I remember very little, except in a general way its mood. What stands out in my memory is the notion of 'Wandervogeln' a phenomenon of which I had had no inkling at the time. In particular the young Fallada inadvertently spilling out a big cauldron with soup boiling over a fire he has been left behind to attend. He is forced to rinse the ingredients with salt water and reheating them in the same as their supply of fresh water is already depleted. Of course it tastes too salty and in order to compensate for it he empties all the rucksacks of his fellows of sugar. The result is of course inedible and they all have to troop off to the nearest 'Dorf' some ten miles away along the hot dunes. I also recall the young Fallada having an accident with his newly bought bike, and only surviving because due to a cigarette, his first, he emptied his stomach of all its contents. Nothing else stand out in my memory, so reading it again, is like reading it anew.

The life of Fallada, in particular that of his youth was tragic and dramatic, but of this there is no indication in the memoirs written in 1942, during the war. This is of course the privilege of the autobiographer so he cannot be faulted for this. How much is made up? This is hard to tell. Every writer of stories has to resist the ever present temptation to elaborate and fictionalize when recalling real events. The pull this exerts is often impossible not to give way too, after all a story is meant not so much to relay factual events as to convey a mood, and to that effect a made up event can be more effective, especially if none such remains in clear memory. We often refer to such truths and poetic.

Fallada was born in 1893 and grew up in a family of four children, two sisters and two brothers, in the idyllic times before the First World War. The father is substantially older than the mother, but the marriage seem to be very happy, at least from the innocent perspectives of a child. The father is a jurist in fact a judge who is eventually rising in the ranks from a mere 'Kammergericht' in Berlin to a 'Reichgericht' in Leipzig. The family is well-to-do, lives in a big apartment, and has at least three maids. There is nothing noteworthy about that. The father is not the one to spend money frivolously, so nothing is wasted. If an expense is not necessary it is avoided. This makes for many a comical observation. One passion rules the family, and that is books. The father has some three thousand books at home, the oldest sister, an avid, omnivorous reader if any, already a thousand, while the younger sister and Fallada himself count four hundred each, and the youngest brother trailing behind with about two hundred. Fallada may not mark himself as a good student, and in those days, students were mercilessly ranked, and those at top duly appreciated; in fact by some teacher who has managed to scare him out of his wits, reducing him to a wailing, hollering misfit, whenever called upon, he is dismissed and humiliated as being retarded, he nevertheless is a serious reader. However, most, if not all

future authors, are, so this is hardly surprising.

There are Christmas gatherings, visits by relatives, of which there seem to be an endless supply, the exact relationships of which never ceases to confuse the young narrator. There are also excursions to the country, be it to der Stechlinsee, or further on in time, to the Baltic coast at Graal-Mürich, in the vicinity of Rostock. The excitement of the train journey, of course in a slow fourth class train to save money (or maybe also to get more of a trip for less the amount), the confusion of getting there on the train and getting the oversized luggage onto the baggage conveyance. And then the idyllic sojourn in the country. But if there is one thing that recurs over and over again, it is the constant repetition of accidents that befall the poor narrator. He is a real 'Pechvogel'. If anything can go wrong however unlikely, it is sure to go wrong. When a fisherman proudly shows his flies, of course it gets stuck on Falladas thumb and he has in the end to cut it out with a sharp knife. When a millstone is rolled, of course it falls on his hands and his father has to rescue him. When he falls, he always falls badly, cutting himself, losing a teeth, hitting his head, losing consciousness. Add to that a variety of life-threatening illnesses supposedly strikes him regularly. And of course at the end of his excursion as a 'Wandervogel' he has to be carried home sick wit Typhus, something none of his fellow 'Wandervogeln' is affected by. This marks him out and his status as a sickly child and hence as an outsider is tacitly conveyed. Then of course, there are a lot of mischiefs ('Kinderstreiche') perpetrated by the children, what was quite common in former times. This is of course not such a big deal nowadays, with a more indulgent attitude towards the freedom of children, but when in the past, they were kept on a rather short lease, and constrained by all kinds of restrictions and exhortations to obey, the very fact of rebellion was an achievement, to be secretly admired as well as deplored.

Fallada does not follow a chronological order, but he crisscrosses his past in a seemingly random way, depending on what comes to his mind, although a certain semblance of order is achieved by collecting events under the headings of themes. There are chapters on grandmother and mother separately, on being whipped, on excursions and their preparations. On the 'Vandervogeln' of course. But it goes back and forth in time, although there is a certain progression towards the end. We learn that the father disapproves of Karl May, which only whets the appetite of the son, for such forbidden fruit. That the same father has a passion for music, be it a contrived one as is suggested, while the son himself is left cold, his inability to sing, not making matters better. Somewhat peculiar is the rage the father falls into when Fallada at a visit to the barber accidentally has his long hair with its wide locks shorn. The boy had always believed that this affection for his hair belonged to the mother, that it actually belonged to the father has a more ominous touch. More interestingly though. Fallada at times feels as if he is two different people living under the same skin, and when he goes away for the holiday, the other self stays sulkily behind in the apartment. At times the author doubts the authenticity of childhood memories, one example being when they were still residing in Greifswald, where he was born. He puts his head through a railing only to get stuck. The memory is very vivid in his mind, but when he after the death of his father finds his written reminiscences of his childhood, he encounters almost the same episode. It is extremely unlikely, he reasons, that both father and son should have fallen into the same unusual predicament, one must

have learned it from the other, and it seems far more likely that the son learned it from the father, than the other way around (especially if those reminiscences may have been written down before the birth of the son.) In other words, it is what we now would term a false memory. But yet it is so vivid in his mind, so many details that speak to you so directly. There is a theory that all memories say before the age of five, are reconstructed, simply projections into a voided past of stories being told afterwards. But for those of us who have such memories it is impossible to doubt their authenticity, you could as well doubt the authenticity of your present sensory impressions.

The book ends appropriately with sexual awakening and its loss of innocence and hence implication of guilt. This is but obliquely indicated, but not so obliquely that one does not right away conclude that the young Fallada is seduced by the new young maid with the bright red hair and the pale white skin, sneaking up to his bed, while the parents are away at the theatre,

Fallada was during his time a very successful writer. In other words a bestseller. His popularity survived his death, which points to more enduring qualities. Bestselling writers can easily be dismissed as pandering to the vulgar tastes of the public, but when enduring, they must have certain qualities, which if not of high art, whatever that means, must be based on solid craftsmanship. And if so something certainly worth studying, if not necessarily emulating. The language is simple and clear, no complicated syntax. German is not an easygoing language, in fact it seems far too involved to the simple everyday uses a language normally is restrained too. But of course this might be due to a comparison to English, which in its basic use provides a convenient pidgin. For all what we know, most languages may be like German in that regard. But in the writing of Fallada it flows easily enough and there is little opportunity to stumble. Maybe this is why he is eagerly read. Simplicity of expression is deceptive, it is often the fruit of hard work, much rewriting and slimming. Fallada was very productive during a short life, often hampered by disease and self-abuse, and much of it must have been produced spontaneously under time pressure.

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