

## Roßhalde

*H.Hesse*

April 5-7, 2020

I must have read this book a long time ago, maybe even in the late seventies. What I recall was the young boy succumbing to meningitis, which was sad of course but did not touch me that deeply. Now rereading it some forty years later, the book makes quite a different impression.

First the language. Hesse writes a simple and lucid prose. The syntax is straightforward and the vocabulary is basic, in fact I did not encounter any words that I did not already know, except possibly 'sachte' which in fact did mean the same thing as the Swedish 'sakta' I found out by checking a German dictionary. I do not recall having been alerted to it before. With the simple prose goes also a simple plot, in fact everything is rather transparent, maybe too much so to be a serious literary work. A novel should have an epic component, meaning that it illustrates not just a slice of life, but somehow encompass as well as suggest a much larger panorama. This invariably implies a certain diffusiveness. In fact due to the explicit presentation in this case the novel could do better as a drama for the stage or maybe shot as a movie. The number of characters are very limited, and can easily be summarized as in the initial list of rôles in a play. First we have the couple Veraguth, the man Johann being a very successful painter, while the wife Adele is just his wife, at least so she comes across, although she is a pianist by education. Personally they are, what one says ill-matched, he lively, imaginative and sensitive, she strict and inhibited; on the other hand being ill-matched does not really imply being incompatible, maybe on the stage, but not in real life. They are leading parallel lives with little intersection on what may have appeared as a romantic scene, namely the manor Rosshalde purchased some ten years earlier than the present time. The artist, addressed as Herr professor', escapes into his work and sets up his abode by his study, reeking from turpentine, and does at most participate at meals in the main building. There are two sons in the marriage, an older one by name of Albert, whom his mother has claimed, and who actually resents, at times even hates his father, and then a younger one - Pierre, who is the apple of both their eyes, and who has unqualified access to both parents and their abodes. There is a tug of war between the couple, who will in the end win his affections, but so far he is unaware of the strife between his parents fought on the turf that he constitutes. Now as in a play, what will upset this petrified situation into which they are trapped? Then the proverbial friend of the family turns up, more specifically a childhood friend of Johann, by name of Otto Buckhardt. The father has very much looked forward to this visit. The friend, a more expansive character, arrives in style lugging a large chest, out of which he generously dispenses presents to the various members of the family. A variety of toys and knick-knacks for the child, beautiful textiles for the wife, and photos for the artist father. Herr Buckhardt who resides in India, by which is meant Malaysia, wants to entice his friend to visit him there. He does not have to stay long before he realizes the situation and cuts his visit rather short, as his sustained presence could not only be a

source of embarrassment to his friend. They do share some more moments together and in an confrontation one night, his friends makes it clear to him that he cannot stay on in this situation, that it is degrading and warps his life. He understands that Pierre is the bond which ties him to the place, and he can only get free if he gets free of his bond to his beloved son. This is of course not going to be easy. As noted the presentation of the plot is very much that of a dramatic play, the main conflict is stated clearly, and now what remains is to resolve it .

Eventually Johann decides to cut free, to leave Rosshalde in the fall and set out with Otto to India, leaving his wife with the two sons, preferably in some nice spot such as St-Moritz (money does not seem to be the problem). Adele, however, does not feel the same joy of being liberated that she had thought she would feel and no doubt would have felt earlier in their ill-fated relation, now she realizes it is too late. It would be a liberation for her husband, enlarging his views, but what is there in it for her? she would simply be put in the pathetic rôle of the abandoned wife. She wants time to think, after all Johann had already had that time before his decision, why not her as well? Albert their elder son, is however excited by his father taking off for India. In those times exotic travel was definitely not within the capability of ordinary people, and above all meant a commitment, at least for several months, sometimes years; and as with true travel one was never assured of a safe return home, maybe not even of a return. In fact Albert, inspired by the perceived daring of his father, is forming an improved opinion of him and confesses to his mother

*Weißt Du, manchmal tut es mir leid, daß ich oft häßlich gegen ihn war – er hat mich auch gequält, aber er hat etwas, war mich doch allemal wieder imponiert. Er ist ja furchtbar einseitig, und von Musik versteht er nicht viel, aber er ist doch ein großer Künstler und hat eine Lebensaufgabe. Das ist es, was mir so sehr imponiert. Er hat ja nichts von seiner Berümtheit, und von seinem Geld auch recht wenig; es ist nicht das, wofür er arbeitet*

Albert himself has talent, especially talent as a musician, his piano playing has the force to even move his father. But he has no plans for his future, beyond that of being the talented dilettante in a variety of subjects and skills. Some people are beyond enjoying life, for them life has a purpose to which they must submit themselves, and that purpose -*Lebensaufgabe* - is what he is jealous of.

Now Pierre gets sick. Softly at first, arising worries, and even a visit to the doctor (*der Sanitätsrat* and sixth character in the drama) who is reassuring, and they can all relax. But the boy is not getting any better, and the doctor makes a few more visits. The mother is gently reassured again and the father is off painting. After one of his painting excursions he gets a note from the doctor wanting to have a word with him in his office. He gets there and is shown the room where he sits down, and after a while, the doctor speaks to him of the extreme seriousness of his son's condition. It is *Gehirnhautentzündung* (meningitis) and this is serious indeed, and at the time not treatable, let alone curable. In short the young boy may die, in fact he will likely do so. The father is thunderstruck and wants to know what can be done, will he survive? On that score the doctor has no comfort to give beyond that of it being in the hands of God or Providence, all that can be done is to give the child as much comfort and nursing which is possible, and hope for the best.

Johann returns, with a heavy heart as the saying goes. He tends to the child and does

not disclose the seriousness of its condition to his wife, but she cannot help but suspect. A serious conversation follows in which she promises him that he can bring Pierre with him when he leaves for India in the fall. What use is such a generous offer to him now when the child may die. Nevertheless he thanks her warmly for it. This is not the first time they lived through the anguish of tending to a sick child. Albert was once also seriously sick and it brought the couple together and Pierre ensued from that union; something similar will not happen this time, for that it is far too late, but at least an atmosphere of mutual tolerance and sympathy is inevitably enveloping them. Their prolonged wait for the inevitable end becomes tedious, and Johann almost wishes that death will occur soon so it will be over with. And then the miracle occurs, the child seems to rally, the face which has aged during the ill-ness now returns to innocence and youth. There are no pains anymore, the child has an interest, even an appetite, and his mood is calm. Is this the recovery for which they all have been so fervently wishing. The doctor, on the other hand, holds himself aloof whispering to the nurse who has moved in recently. And of course it turns out to be that illusion of recovery, that mirage of good health, that often occurs just before death, as if the victim is allowed a reprieve, that his strength is gathered for one last effort. Soon thereafter he gives out a terrible scream of pain and horror, the relentless crying of an animal is lethal distress. One of his legs starts pounding rhythmically on the bed, it is as if he has ceased to be a human being, but instead turning into a mechanical contraption. A day or so of that, and then in the morning, his heart does no longer beat.

After the funeral Johann and his wife Adele part. Now he is on his own and feels a loneliness he has never experienced before. Everything seems empty and voided, except one thing.

*Was ihm blieb, das war seine Kunst, der er sich nie so sicher gefühlt hatte wie eben jetzt. Ihm blieb der Trost der Draußenstehenden, denen es nicht gegeben ist, das Leben selber an sich zu reißen und auszutrinken; ihm blieb die seltsame, kühle, dennoch unbändige Leidenschaft des Sehens, des Beobachtens und heimlich-stoltzen Mitschaffens. Das war der Rest und der Wert seines mißglückten lebens, diese unbeirrbar Einsamkeit und alte Lust des Darstellens, und diesem Stern ohne Abwege zu folgen, war nun sein Schicksal.*

One may argue that all authors write nothing but variations on their own autobiography, and surely there are definite biographical sources for the story. Hesse himself was trapped in an unhappy marriage with children who tied him down, but from which he eventually extricated himself, but in his case his wife suffered from schizophrenia. Furthermore one of their sons was also struck with meningitis as a young child (but in real life, romantic deaths are not the order of the day) but that seems to have been just after the book was finished. Another case of Art anticipating Life. In addition to being a writer he also had a dream of being an artist, and in Johann Veraguth he may indulge in that dream. He dwells lovingly on the craft of the visual artist, his searching eye for the 'motive', the pleasure of the preliminary sketches, the putting on paint on the canvas, which must be done with the utmost concentration. The reader is made privy to three pictures. In the beginning a fisherman with his catch on a boat on a river, engages his eye. Especially the look of the fish. Then later on he paints his marriage, two adults staring stiffly away from each other, and below them their child, as of yet happily unaware of its parents predicament. And

finally he finds on the very premises of his abode a sight that catches his imagination and his desire to paint it. Now this necessitates 'plein-air' painting and he gets up early each morning in deep anticipation of joy, accompanied by his faithful servant Robert. This is what occupies him before the final crisis of the son's illness. And so, after the boy is dead, he sits down to complete the drawing he has made of his boy's sleeping head during his watch by the sick-bed. This becomes his farewell to his son and his expression of profound grief.

This is vintage Hesse, in whom the the issue of the artistic soul and the vicissitudes it is bound to encounter in life, lies at the core of his writing career, his *Lebensaufgabe* so to speak. He admitted to his father that the unhappy marriage he depicted was based on his own, but the problems went deeper than mere compatibility. He wondered whether it was possible for an artist to be married at all.

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