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REVIEW OF HANS FALLADA'S *LITTLE MAN, WHAT NOW?*

Hans Fallada's *Little Man, What Now?*[1] describes the drama, the mystique, and the harsh realities of life for commoners in Germany, especially Pomerania and Berlin, during the difficult years of the Weimar Republic (1919-1933). The leaders of the constitutional republic, Friedrich Ebert (1919-1925) and Paul von Hindenburg (1925-1934), began the task to reconstruct the nation in light of the Treaty of Versailles, which stripped Germany of continental and colonial lands and imposed on the new administration a huge reparations debt. In 1923, after the country failed to pay reparation costs, the *Mark* collapsed, the economy spiraled wildly out of control, and France and Belgium occupied the Ruhr. In response, right-wing extremists in Bavaria made an unsuccessful attempt to restore the monarchy. Assistance from the United States under the Dawes Plan (1924) and the Young Plan (1929) brought a brief period of economic stability, but could not forestall disgruntled financial and industrial organizations of moderate political persuasion from gravitating toward the radical *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* or National Socialist German Workers' Party. After the economic setbacks of the Crash of 1929 and the Great Depression, the National Socialists seemed a viable alternative to the growing threat of communism. By 1933, a barrage of right-wing pro-Aryan and anti-Semitic rhetoric, along with the nation's continuing economic woes, led to the death of the short-lived republic.[2]

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[1]Translated by Eric Sutton (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1933; reprint, Chicago: Academy Chicago Publishers, 1983).

[2]For an excellent survey, see Donald D. Wall, *Nazi Germany and World War II* (St. Paul, MN: West Publishing Company, 1997), 22-40, 42-62.

In this novel, Fallada clearly shows the effect of these powerful events on the life and lifestyle of his two main characters, Herr Johannes Pinneberg and Fraulein Emma Moerschel.

Fallada's story takes place first in the working-class city of Platz, then in the village of Ducherow, and finally in the industrial capital of Berlin. The novel ends with the young couple's return back to the simple but impoverished countryside. They live close to the city, but just far enough away to escape the sway of its wealth and its oppressive corruption. The plot of the novel is quite simple: A young German boy meets and falls in love with a young German girl. She gets pregnant, they marry, they have a baby, and they struggle to pay the bills and maintain a meager and modest lifestyle. They experience complications, disappointments, and even outside interference. But they have each other, and they love each other. So the difficulties that come their way cannot rob them of the bliss of togetherness–one of "the wholesome things" they cherish (288, 383). Life in the postwar period of reconstruction has its besetting problems for a young couple like Hans and "Bunny" (Emma's nickname). Fallada tells a poignant tale of worries about money, anxiety about outward appearances, concern for political conflict and social disruption, disgust of unfair practices in business and employment, and estrangement from familial ties and natural fraternal bonds.

Fallada presents his story as a two-act drama with a delicate movement from innocent beginnings to the countryside and the city, then back to a rural setting in close proximity to the city.[3] Fallada's plot–often humorous and sometimes mysterious, always delightful and never uninteresting–moves toward an unresolved conclusion, as he takes the reader only so far in the

[3]Prelude: Young Hearts; Part One: The Little Town; Part Two: Berlin; Epilogue: Continuation.

early experiences of Bunny and Pinneburg. But these experiences are quite adequate to illustrate Fallada's main points, which center around money, political and social conflict, and the break down of familial relationships.

Fallada's main theme is society's concern about money–money to pay the bills, the doctor, and the landlady, money to buy clothes, food, and household furnishings. In fact, there seems to be an obsession about money, not only as an economic necessity but also as status symbol, especially as it reflects on the division between classes (i.e., the bourgeois and the proletariat). Bunny certainly buys into this system of valuation, when she marries Hans and rises out of her working-class origins into a middle-class world. Pinneburg likewise enjoys his role as a clerk and then a salesman, as he generally disdains the ideology, the lifestyle, and the drudgery of the work done by poorer folk. But against this tendency to devalue life itself, as if to rob the material of any spiritualizing force, comes Fallada's insistence on the limited, temporary, and uncertain role of money. On the one hand, he can quote Pinneburg, "Yes, money, just money. It's hateful, but we can't do without it" (50). But on the other hand, he has Pinneburg muse, "It doesn't matter, I know quite well it doesn't matter not having any money" (247; cf. 196). In this respect, Fallada clearly raises the *Volkstimme* or "the voice of the people" (16, 332) against the so-called power of money and all its divisive trappings.

In contrast to Herr Holger Jachmann, who is portrayed as a "giant" (someone important with influence, money, and status), Johannes Pinneburg is only a "little man" (150, 258, 295). In a world that values the material, he is insignificant and unimportant. But in spite of the odds against him, the little man Pinneburg struggles to preserve his dignity and integrity, his sense of self-respect and self-worth. He spurns the avarice of shady practices in business and labor; he

chooses not to enter the fray of political activity (even though he expresses an opinion); and he scorns the abnegation of rights to certain ethnic groups like the Jews. His simple world issues from the realization of the creative power inherent in unadorned meanings about life, love, and pleasure, rather than the imposed entanglements of materialistic appearances. But as he resists the embellishment, he too is caught in the web of sociopolitical entrapments, and he is beaten down by its persistent drubbing.

In this predicament, Pinneburg, as well as Bunny, feels lonely and the need for familial and fraternal companionship and support. No doubt, he would like to achieve reconciliation with his estranged mother and find a surrogate father in Herr Jachmann. But such is impossible, since the pretense of what they value puts an impenetrable barrier between each of them and young Hans (319-326, 372-379). This could also be said of Pinneburg's friend Heilbutt and even the old man Puttbreese, since the issue of greed also injures these relationships (274, 354, 358-360, 362). But even though the end of the story finds the little man Pinneburg dispirited and dejected–since he is alone, unemployed, and without means to support his immediate family and even himself–he is not meanspirited nor despondent. As long as he has Bunny and his baby, even without the "respectability" of a materialistic society, he still enjoys the splendid delight of "wholesome things."

> Suddenly the cold had gone, an infinite soft green wave raised her up, and him with her. They slid onwards, and the twinkling stars came very near. She whispered: "You can always look at me. Always and always. You're here with me and we're together."
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> The wave rose and rose. They lay on the sea-shore by night between Lensahn and Wiek, once more the stars were close above their heads. The wave rose higher and higher, from the polluted earth towards the stars.
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> Then they both went into the hut where the baby lay asleep (383).

To create this picture of life in Weimar society, Fallada possibly gleans much from his own personal experiences. According to "A note about the Author," at the age of twenty he worked on a farm in Thuringia and later at petty jobs in the city. Before he wrote his first novel, *Bauern, Bonzen and Bomben*, which was followed by *Little Man, What Now?* in 1933, he did office work for the famous Berlin publisher, Ernst Rowohlt. With his recollections about bourgeois and proletariat, Social Democrats and Communists, Nazis and Jews, nurses and patients, men and women, husbands and wives, parents and children, and salesman and customer, he proves himself to be the master of hackneyed business practices, trite social relations, and platitudinous familial expectations, but this gives Fallada's work a stark verisimilitude about Weimar life in general. Infused into this banal mix of things is his charming portrayal of the little trio–man, woman, and child–a blend of tender naivete with a touch of stern realism, just the right blend. As the story unfolds in impressionistic-like snippets of interplay between actor and event, Fallada interweaves his episodes and reveals characterizations that frequently are pregnant with symbolic meaning. The ironies, as a result, are tremendous, the comic relief is superb, and the double entendre is striking. Fallada does not fail to delight and charm, to challenge and educate. For this reason, *Little Man, What Now?* is a splendid novel, both entertaining and thought-provoking.