

## Der Stechlin

*Th. Fontane*

May 9–June 5, 2013

Nothing very much happens in the four hundred odd pages of the novel. An old man dies, his son marries. This happens all the time. Not much to write about, or maybe the only thing really to write about? The novel is epic, meaning that like many of Fontanes shorter novels, it is meant to evoke something much larger. What Fontane is after is not so much the unravelling of a riveting plot, as to evoke a state of affairs. Here we are. The Old count Dubslav Stechlin, living in a big manor by the village and lake of Stechlin. One gets the idea that there has been living Stechlins at Stechlin since time immemorial. They are of the old nobility, the salt of the earth. The count is very much aware of this, with a mixture of pride and self-irony. He is comfortably set in a feudal tradition, which he knows inevitably will end. Times will inexorably change. There is modernity around the corner. The ride cannot be stopped. He realizes it, once again with a mixed attitude of regret and relief. He allows himself to engage himself in politics, although he does not really have either the head nor the stomach for it. He is set to run for a seat in 'der Reichstag'. Predictably he fails, the seat goes to someone representing the Social Democrats. This is inevitable, and the confirmation brings more relief than regret to the old Count, as well as to the Conservative Party he was supposed to represent. There is a dinner afterwards. The loss of the election has not changed the good mood. What may have been thought of as an intended consolation, instead almost gives the impression of a celebration.

This is typical of the novel. We are introduced into a mindset, not into an action *per se*. And mindsets are mental and hence best conveyed through conversations. And this provides the basic structure of the novel. Conversations presented, some snatches verbatim, some only sketched, but the reader is supposed to catch the general drift. For this to work, there has to be personalities, a lot of them individually distinctive, as to dramatically clash against each other.

The novel starts with the only son Voldemar visiting the old estate in company with two of his military friends. Voldemar is an only son, as his mother died shortly afterwards, and his father had compunctions about marrying again. What about resurrection being real, he thought, or pretended to think, would not the presence of two wives complicate matters in heaven? A reasonable thought, the ultimate consequences of which, few sentimentalists would be prepared to draw. Through this visit we get a presentation of the household and its environs. We meet not only the master of the 'Schloss' but also his devoted manservant Engelke, who acts as his closest friend and confidante. Is he exploited? Yes and No. There is also the school-master, who is something of a fool, and quite willing to assist the old count in his more foolish ventures, such as his Museum, stocked with weathercocks. The count knows that he is a fool but is fond of him anyway. Fonder he is of the Pastor - Lorenzon, who comes across as much wiser than his clerical position would require. And whenever there appears such a person in a novel, one is tempted to suspect he or she to act as a mouthpiece of the author. There is also Adelheid, his older sister,

or rather half-sister to be exact. Who is the Domina of an evangelical nunnery (I did not know that such existed). She is contemptuous of her younger brother. Does not think that he carries himself properly, leading the life he ought to do, considering his position. As many old maids, she has a lot of mental authority, more so than her brother of course, and hardly surprising she has a hold on her nephew, who does not fail to pay her proper respect.

So what is a young man, an only son, required to do? The answer is of course obvious. He needs to get married. To continue the line. That is the ultimate responsibility. His father makes tasteful inquiries as to his matrimonial plans. The subject is a bit sensitive so the father takes on a somewhat frivolous approach using military and hunting metaphor, but is nevertheless taken aback when his son responds in a rather business-like manner. Love, a subject almost as sentimental as poetry, according to the old count, nevertheless deserves a more passionate involvement, otherwise it is nothing.

Woldemar, stationed in Berlin, is a frequent house guest at the Count Barby, who has two grown up daughters. The past career of the old count has been more diplomatic in nature than military, and has included a long sojourn in London, which had made a deep impression on him, as well as on his eldest daughter Melusine, while the youngest Armgard supposedly was too young at the time. This lengthy sojourn abroad lends a certain distinction to the family, a distinction maybe more one of eccentricity than honorability. Melusine has a past. She is divorced having once had a brief marriage to an Italian nobleman, whose name she still carries. She is urbane and fun and sophisticated, while her younger sister seems far more blend, if less tainted. Whom should Woldemar choose? The reader is left in some suspense. Probably he will select the younger and prettier, although the older is more to his liking. As a reader one senses a certain conflict, whose resolution may provide the dramatic nerve of the novel. If so, the reader is up for a disappointment. Predictably the suitor picks the younger sister, a wedding is arranged in Berlin, where the two fathers meet for the first, and as it will turn out to be, the last time. In many ways they are rather similar, and one surmises that part of the attraction, maybe even a substantial part of the attraction of the household to Woldemar, is due to the similarity between the two fathers. If so, a rather sentimental motive, of which the suitor is at least partly aware. Incidentally, by referring to the similarities of the two men, Fontane gets a character almost for free. The reader having internalized one, can easily imagine another one. The wedding is followed by a honey-moon in the classical manner. This means a trip, via Dresden, down to the south, which means Italy and an extended sojourn. The kind of post-wedding trip described more than once in the novels by Fontane. Melusine sees them off. She notes with satisfaction that they are not alone in their compartment. She was on her honeymoon, wholly at the mercy of her husband during a long passage through a tunnel. Is there any need to say anything more? Not to Fontane at least. What is merely hinted at occupies a larger share of the readers imagination than that which is fully described. This does not mean that full descriptions has no place in a novel. On the contrary. Those too can stimulate the imagination of the reader, or rather instruct it, providing plenty of material ready for extrapolation.

While the young couple is engaged in their leisurely trips, intended to last for a month or two, the Count Stechlin faces his last task in life, namely dying. This can be hard work

and it is remarkable that every man or woman, regardless of their abilities, eventually manage to accomplish it. It takes its start inauspiciously, as such matters usually do. At the return from the wedding, the old count does not feel very well, besides he notes a swelling of his legs. He is sufficiently concerned to call for the family doctor Sponholz. The doctor is concerned, but does not want to alarm anybody. The Count is given some drops to take daily, and it latter transpires that those are for the heart. However, Sponholz plans to go away for six weeks. His wife has to take a month-long treatment at a Swiss Spa, and while in Switzerland the doctor thinks it worthwhile to cap it off with a sightseeing trip for two weeks. A substitute is arranged, but one to whom the old Count takes an exception. He does not like him, a dislike rationalized by his way of holding his stick. Consequently he dismisses his services and instead turns to an old woman whose cures benefit from a reputation. By using leeches she suppresses the swelling symptoms of the disease and makes her patient happy. But the rumors of his declining health have spread. He is courted by neighbors trying to save his soul, including his older sister. He resents such solicitations. He invites the grand-child of the old woman to reside at his estate. He finds the charm of the physically precocious child soothing, well knowing that they would offend the sensibilities of his sister, whose departure he hence is assured of, without having to confront her. Then he rapidly goes into decline and mercifully dies during his sleep (the wished-for end by all of us cowards?). There is a funeral arranged a few days later, and one to which his son and daughter-in-law have no possibility to attend. They are notified of course and make haste (but not too much) to return. Woldemar decides to quit his military career, and instead to move back to the old estate and continue the tradition. His wife seems quite pleased with the prospects. And so the novel ends.

As noted there is very little action in the novel, most of it consists in actual conversation, covering a lot of themes and contemporary issues, some of which we have already remarked upon. The Count and his entourage are part of a vanishing breed - the old aristocracy, whose place in society is being undermined by the modernistic forces. There are frequent references to Bismarck and special ones to the years of 1864 and 1870, the glories of the new emerging Prussian state. 'Der Alte Fritz' is not far from the thoughts, nor is the more recent Kaiser Wilhelm, whose humanity is contrasted to the hero-status of the old Fritz. Conversations are presented in the same economical style as the other depictions of the novel. Some of it is presented in great literal detail, other is summarized or simply obliquely referred to. This allows the reader to skim without losing the sense of verisimilitude. As already noted the careful realistic depiction is meant to set the stage for extrapolation. The description of nature is similarly impressionistic, a technique that is inevitable in any literary representation. There is always a nature presence in the novels of Fontane. A lifetime of journalistic observation and a realistic ambition makes him always be particular as to the settings<sup>1</sup>. In this particular case this is epitomized by the presence of the lake 'Stechlin' (in fact a real lake, not just a figment of the imagination), whose mystical associations to the Stechlin family and fate are suggested. As to nature, it can only be evoked, never fully depicted. Evocation depends on the readers familiarity, with its concomitant rich webs of associations. One only needs to ponder the meaning of

---

<sup>1</sup> This is of course a hall-mark of the mature novel, and most novelists of the time took pains to perform it.

a dark tarn set in a forest to see how much can be conveyed in a few words. The same goes for the evocation of society and time, but here the modern reader is more at a loss. Just as little as the typical nature description can be used as a botanical handbook, can the fragmentary political references be used as an instruction in history for contemporary readers of today. Fontane wrote for his contemporaries and supposedly had little suspicion that his novels would still be read and published more than a hundred years after they were written. Thus to the reader of the times the setting that he so leisurely weaves would be pregnant with associations and emotions an ignorant contemporary reader can only vaguely imagine<sup>2</sup>. For people of the depicted milieu, nature and history would merge into a unit. The magic sense of aristocracy, especially the kind that Fontane describes is intimately connected with the sense of location and geographical belonging. It is Heimat carried to a subtle extreme. The old count knows all this and feels it in his bones so deeply, that he can indeed take a relaxed and ironic attitude towards it.

June 6-8, 2013 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden ulfp@chalmers.se*

---

<sup>2</sup> To take a typical example. I read 'Effi Briest' over thirty years ago. For some reason I was unable to recall its plot when I reread it recently, thus the rereading benefitted from a desirable freshness, I would normally not be in the position to expect. However one thing did make an impression on me when I read it back then, and it was the oblique references to Sweden (some occur in 'der Stechlin' as well), which brought home the fact that Sweden did in the 19th century occupy an important place in the imagination of cultured Germans, with no corresponding place carved out in that of Anglo-Saxon readers, not to mention the French.