

Schach von Wuthenow

Th. Fontane

December 22–24, 2013

The skill of a master is to evoke an epic within the confines of a mere novella. In my opinion Fontane mastered that in 'Die Poggenpuhls', which, although very short still gives the sense of having presented a family saga. Something similar is also effected in Lampedusas -'the Leopard'. The secret, as far as one can speak of a secret, is to leave most of the matter unsaid and only hinted at, while focusing on a few selected episodes with a lot of detail. In fact this is an elaboration on the novelist's strategy in evoking the whole of a scene, by pointing out a few significant details thereby stimulating the imagination of the reader and leaving the rest to it to unfold and elaborate. In fact this is not unlike the way we take in a visual scene, fixing on a few objects and then making an interpretative interpolation. We are in fact no passive recipients of sensory data, we create our worlds, allowing sensory experiences just to act as regulators. On a more abstract level, this is also how our memories work. Around a few significant episodes, the whole is evoked with a depth and extension that may be illusory, not unlike the way the skies high above the ground can be faithfully reflected in a shallow puddle. Wisdom consists in knowing much more than you choose to tell. 'Schach von Wuthenow' is told in the same constrained manner, with the natural volubility of a naive narrator being held in check.

The plot is simple enough. Schach von Wuthenow, a captain in the elite corps of the Prussian King, is making the court to a young beautiful widow by name of von Carayon, and while so doing he is naturally captured by the charm of her daughter, thereby letting himself, as an habitual initiator of amorous adventure, being carried away. He realizes that he has gone too far and maybe in a brief moment of enthusiasm impulsively sown a few hopes he will not be able to honor. The beauty of the mother attracts him, while the ugliness of the daughter, due to the pox, repels his aesthetic sense. To him paying court is a social game, in which beauty confers prestige, while ugliness is an embarrassment. Could it be so simple that he cannot bear the thought of being ridiculed by his fellow officers for his liason? This surely would bespeak a weakness of character and a superficiality of engagement, that should leave us indifferent to his fate. Why do we read this short novella with a sense of the doom, anticipating his suicide with an apprehension that causes pain. How is Fontane able to involve us in the fate of such a silly caricature? The officer is summoned by the mother to make a quick announcement of engagement, then to set a date for a wedding soon to follow. He acquiesces, but with a heavy heart. Obviously he feels trapped, and this is a feeling some of us may have experienced, having ourselves had matters, like matrimony, settled above our heads. It all comes to a head when he receives some nasty caricatures, depicting him as a Persian shah, forced to make a choice between one of the two von Carayons, making the disgrace of the situation not only private but social and public. He flees to his ancestral home, where he finds some relief from the pressures. He realizes that he is not the marrying kind. Meanwhile the mother fueled by righteous indignation, one of the sweetest emotions there is to make us act, pulls her

strings and gets an audience with the King who gallantly lends her his sympathetic ear. Von Wuthenow is summoned to the King who receives him in a friendly manner but tells him to obey or to resign. Wuthenow cannot disobey his king, goes through the motions, the engagement is announced, the wedding takes place, and on the way home from it, for some reason sans his bride, he shoots himself in his wagon.

So why, once again, should we care? No person is truly superficial, Fontane seems to tell us, below the surface of the social being, we all share the same emotional depths. There is a conflict between our private selves and our social. The latter are wedded to mores, which may be silly, but which nevertheless gives meaning and structure to our social existence. Honor, is one of those. Honor not only on the battlefield, but the honor of believing in something, sticking to conventions, holding on to promises. Von Wuthenows social persona is defined by this sense of honor. The inflexibility of which may be likened to the principle of always telling the truth, however inappropriate in social settings. The life of the private Wuthenow is glimpsed through his brief seclusion at his family estate allowing the reader to sample his feudal roots, his deep seated relations with his old servant couple, the garden slowly going to seed, and not least, the timeless tranquility and beauty of the immediate surroundings, exemplified by his nocturnal excursion onto the nearby lake. Fontane had an exceptionally long apprenticeship as a writer of novels, during which he trekked through the Brandeburger lands, documenting his experiences in thick multi-volumed works. Unlike Henry James, the charm of Fontane is not only conversation, driving subtle social interaction, but he is also always able to set a physical scene.

Epilogues are provided, toning matters down. His rival and enemy pronounces upon his acts, yet not without a certain understanding and empathy, and the unfortunate pox-marked widow, writes in a letter to her confidante soothingly about his fate a few years later. Her reference to a child, recently snatched from the jaws of death, down in Italy, is intriguing. What does it mean? Was she actually made pregnant by her husband, and the child, who now furnishes her life with meaning, is actually his continuance, if by other means? The setting of the affair is appropriately set at the eve of the Napoleonic engagement with Prussia, after his triumph at Austerlitz. The retrospective letter is written after Jena. Most likely, we are encouraged to speculate, had von Wuthenow not killed himself, he surely would have been killed in the battle, which were soon to take place.

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