

## Der Alte Fontane

*Th.Mann*

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What is so remarkable about Fontane? In 'The First Circle' Solshenitsyn remarks that different periods of life suits different people. Some seem meant for youth, when young they bloom, and whatever comes later is an inevitable let down, others seem more temperamentally suited to old age, only at the end of their lives do they seem to come into their own. One such example, Mann notices in his essay from 1910, and thus far ahead of Solshenitsyn's remark, is Fontane. As he was young he wrote to a friend that the older he got the younger he became. Mann points out that the first sixty years of Fontane's life was just a preparation for his last two decades of greatness. Only at the very end did he come into his own, only then did he mature. For him being ready for death coincided being ready for life.

Wisdom ennobles a man, and what better example than Fontane? He himself exercised a wholesome detachment from his work. He did not believe in the inherent superiority of the artist, this so romantic a notion. Who does not have talent? Talent is far from enough, there should also be taste, moderation, wisdom, but above all diligence. 'Fleiß' in German, that Germanic word that better than mere 'diligence' engenders associations of hard work and sweat. It is only through unremitting 'Fleiß' an artist, like anyone else, shows his worth. Talent without hard work counts for almost nothing.

Of course such a detached attitude towards creative and artistic work is only justified by a devoted artist. Only a devoted artist can be disparaging about the artistic endeavor, only one who has trodden the path himself, has the right to pass judgement. That is the judgement of Mann, a man who more than most have stressed the particular nature of the artist, and the need to make amends for his weaknesses, to treat him with special concern.

Fontane was not a Romantic, at least not in the German sense, Mann cautions. Instead he was a rational liberal, perhaps more liberal and rational in his everyday doings, as manifested by his letters, a collection of which inspired Mann to write his essay; than he was in his novels. He was a man of the 18th century, who would have felt himself at home in the 20th,

Fontane was critical of money meaning the devotion it was apt to engender. But when it was due to hard work and singleness of purpose, not just endowed by undeserved inheritance, it was very different. Real richness, as he termed it, he was more likely to admire than to castigate, without having any desire to emulate the efforts going into it. Not for him to pursue the path to wealth, even if he found much to commend it for. He was content being a mere spectator, one who observed and marveled, having no desire to actively pursue. He felt towards the rich no contempt, just simply no envy. Mann has a hard time really to accept Fontane's passivity, his readiness to find the world as it is and gratefully accept it. Fontane, who never had any exaggerated sense of his own importance, but accepted the world's judgement of it, just as he accepted the critical reception of his work, and was humble enough to learn from it. Taking it in stride as we

say. He was also the one who claimed that his old poetry, honed by its critical reception still gave him pleasure, but his youthful prose, not yet pruned by critical reception, only embarrassed him. Artistry as a craft, formed not only by subjective artistic criteria coming from within, but also shaped by external ones, those imposed by the costumers. He has a long apprenticeship as a journalist, a craft not characterized by any exalting standards.

The essay is short, appreciative if at times somewhat bewildered, as already implied. A man to admire, yet not one to follow, at least not for Mann himself. Fontane was a Prussian writer, meaning one who was a witness to the Prussian age as it flowered in the 19th century, but also one who was detached from it, as every writer has to be in regards to his subject. Fontane was fascinated by Bismarck, not surprisingly considering him, due to all his contradictions, as the most interesting man of his age. Yet he felt towards him not veneration, but more something almost of disgust, there being so many sides to his personality, such as his lack of principles, or his love of duplicity, that he simply could not abide.

There is a pity of peaking in old age, death, as a physical manifestation will not respect spirituality but cut you down in your prime.

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