

## Irrungen, Wirrungen

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July 15-16, 2012

The story is a simple one, and one which has been a running theme in literature for centuries. The attachment of a man of birth with a woman of the masses. An impossible combination for a variety of reasons. The man is Baron Botho von Rienecker and the woman Lene is a young washer woman living with her similarly employed foster mother. The former leads a life of leisure and pleasure, an officer whose daily life orbits the barracks and the club. Something is of course missing for that gentle soul whose skills are mostly social, and when he by accident saves a party on a boating-trup from overturning, he is struck by the young woman, especially her simpleness, truthfulness and naturalness. They get to know each other and go for walks and exchange letters. To the Baron this is a nice diversion and one which may come to fruition after all, while Lene realizes from the start that the relationship is doomed and that she should just be content with the momentary happiness it gives her. The writer makes her to be the wiser and more realistic of the two. During an excursion to a country Gasthaus by the Spree they accidentally encounter his cronies and their side-kicks, and the Baron realizes the incompatibility of his love relation with his social standing, and Lene understands that the relation is now at an end, once he makes this obvious realization. A few days later he ends the affair under the pressure of his mother and uncle and realizes that he needs to marry his cousin, to which he is in some social sense already committed and whose match will save him from financial difficulties and allow him to continue the life of comfort to which he was brought up and to which he has formed an inseparable attachment. Of course it comes with a price, the woman he has married is a young goose, pleasant enough, vivacious and an object of envy to most of his companions; but without a serious thought in her head, and incapable of carrying on a real conversation beyond the hapless drivel that at best may alleviate the tedium of social intercourse. Lene in her turn is picked up by an older gentleman, a lay preacher and a zealot of sorts. The constraining influence of his company the author illustrates by giving him a 'Vatermörder' ('fathermurderer'<sup>1</sup>) that vise of a collar that short of strangled the wearer. We can only pity her fate, but of course compared to alternative ones, she was probably rather lucky.

To this basic plots there are subsidiary figures. The foster mother of Lene, e.g. an old wizened woman at the end of her days, and to which the Baron likewise takes a sentimental attachment, to the point of that when learning of her death he goes to the trouble of getting her a wreath of her preferred kind (not a fashionable one using ivy, but an old-fashioned one using 'immortadellen', because with eternal flowers so to speak, the memory of the departed may linger among the survivors for a longer time) and seek out her place of burial in a churchyard in the extremity of the city. There are also the initial landlords of Lene and her mother, Herr and Frau Dörr, who run a garden center. Frau Dörr is a frequent visitor

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<sup>1</sup> A detachable collar, supposedly invented in New York in the early 19th century

to mother and daughter, and her situation in some sense forebodes that of Lene. She was once the darling of an elderly baron, whose attraction to her was entirely to her youth and full figure, which she proudly acknowledges. She too was rescued into a loveless marriage to a miser, who did not resent her former liason, on the contrary it appealed to his vanity, by having a wife other men had lusted after, Frau Dörr is presented as well-meaning but not very bright, the common type that goes through life without ever being aware of its basic tragedy.

Fontane is not a great writer, nor a natural talent, but that does not mean that he is not a good one with an acquired talent. There are few composers in the history of mankind we can count them on our fingers and toes, as to painters there are many more a few hundred at least whose works are worthy of preservation, while as to literature we may count them in the thousands. We need writers, even more than painters, to cover geographically our earth, as well as chronicling the changes of times. A good regional writer is worth his or her weight in gold, because without them crucial witnesses would be absent. The novels of Fontane can be likened to charming genre paintings you stay and admire in a museum. Apart from the sentimentality of nostalgia such can provoke, they preserve for future a vanished world, faithful or not depends on the innocence with which they have been executed. A sincere attempt has always a kernel of precious truth. Fontane is no Chekov, neither is he a Henry James, although the latter maybe the writer that most naturally invites comparison. There is none of that studied subtlety of interpersonal relations that characterizes the efforts of James, on the other hand Fontane excels over James when it comes to depicting a setting, especially a natural one. In James there is only cerebral interchanges that seem to exist in a void. James seems unable to evoke a presence in a physical world, while Fontane makes you share with his characters their beingness in physical space. This is, I claim, an important part of literature, to evoke a full world, be it only reflected and refracted in the consciousness of its characters.

The world Fontane depicts is of course a vanished one, and I am then mainly referring to its social aspects. The kind of problems that engage his imagination are no longer actual and have become obsolete. But of course such a judgement is merely a naive one based on a too literal reading and interpretation. If you go beyond the obvious, their essential aspects are still with us today, so while we may now dismiss the predicament the two lovers are suffering from as a pseudo one, nevertheless we can easily imagine ourselves in their shoes and suffer with them. We also understand that while the constraining structure of the society at the time put them into an impossible situation, it was also this very structure that enabled their love affair to spark and blossom, without that gulf that separated them, without the impossibility of their quest, would there have been any reason at all for them to get together? In an ideal society with no class barriers, the scripts of loves would have to be different, and to be cynical not necessarily better, at least never as romantic.

So in the end in which way does a typical novel of Fontane differ from say one in the Harlequin series? After all one suspects that the readers at the time that sought them out were more or less the same who nowadays would devour trash romances. Of course Fontane took his craft seriously and produced a limited body of work. By any standards they are better written then the run of the mill, and as I noted, they have still the power to evoke, and although dealing with dated subjects still do not feel dated but fresh. As

I have already written, they constitute witnesses and documents of a vanished time, now maybe read more for their implicit historical interest than their entertainment value.

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