

Die Poggenpuhls

Th. Fontane

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It is a very short novel, yet it gives the impression of an epic width. How come? Similar effects have been brought about by Lampedusa in 'The Leopard' and Bulgakov in 'The White Guard'. What they all have in common are family sagas in which the members are only sketched, yet give the impressions of being fully portrayed. In Poggenpuhls very little happens. There is a birthday party, a visit of one of the sisters to wealthy relatives, and the death of an uncle and a subsequent inheritance. It all takes place within a couple of months. Not much to write home about maybe, but it is all a question of delivery.

We are introduced to the family von Poggenpuhl, a case of impoverished nobility, once having earned its spurs on the battlefield. There is a widowed mother and her five children, two sons pursuing military careers, one of the irresponsibly so and hence with great charm, and three daughters living at home. The characters are sketched yet come out very much alive, and hence they provoke our curiosity to extend far beyond the limited episodes the author have chosen to highlight. This is as it should be, the trouble with much fiction being too much detail that stifles the imagination of the reader. Less is actually more in depictions of lives. Paradoxically a comprehensive account makes you think sadly, was there not more to life; while a sketch focusing on some episodes, indicate that there was so much more. Furthermore the book is one of the last in the production of the author. Fontane came late to the writing of fiction, having spent his professional career as a journalist, and it is tempting to conclude that he was only getting in stride after ten fifteen years of a belated apprenticeship.

The forte of Fontane is the depiction of character through conversation, and thus it is natural to compare him with Henry James. But James is very meticulous, leaving little to chance, while Fontane has a lighter touch. James also, as I am always at pains to point out, unable to evoke a physical setting, seemingly at least, taking no delight in such mundane matters, while Fontane is not above such opportunities of word-painting, although of course, they still tend to play a rather subdued part in his writings.

Now there may be a social message of the novel, in trying to describe the plight of marginal nobility and the folly of pride in your provenance, particularly displayed by the eldest daughter, but such an ambition strikes a recent reader to be irrelevant, or at least not above an antiquarian interest. On the other hand a late reader may find charm and interest in an old work, and which would not have been present to the contemporary reader, maybe even less to the author himself, because time changes and, just like old photographs, the accidental freezing of the innocuous detail, may strike unexpected chords.

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