

Altes romantisches Land

Impression aus Frankreich

Th. Fontane

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This is an anthology of predominantly journalistic writings of Fontane on the subject of France, interspersed with a few letters to his wife and the occasional one to his father. One should expect Fontane to be something of a Francophile, after all he was of Huguenot stock both on his father's and mother's side, relatively liberal Prussia becoming a sanctuary in the 17th century for Calvinist refuges from France, but he seems, at least initially to have been more of an anglophile. The first few selections stem from his first visit to Paris in the middle of the 1850's and he compares Paris unfavorably to London, with which he has previous exposure. He finds Paris ugly compared to the British capital, something that strikes us as rather remarkable. Part of the reason, as he admits, may be the fact that London was the first 'Weltstadt' he had encountered, and thus the impression it made on an impressionable youth, tended to overwhelm subsequent experiences. Another explanation is that Haussmann's thorough renovation of Paris resulting in the one we are all familiar with since the 'Belle epoque' had just gone under way. The Paris of before, was clearly a medieval mess, a far cry from an Imperial City. Not even Napoleon had done much about it, it was to become the province of his farcical relative. Furthermore, which also may have played a part, Fontane did not know French very well.

A decade and a half later he arrives in France to report on the ongoing war. He manages to get himself arrested, and under incriminating circumstances to boot. He barely escapes being shot as a spy, and once the authorities are convinced of his basic innocence, he is taken under friendly custody. By this time Fontane knows enough French to get around and he is very favorably impressed by the civility, not to say the kindness, of the French. The collection is here taken out of his book 'Kriegsgefangen' ¹. His experiences notwithstanding he returned shortly after his release to report on the German occupation of France. This time the presence of Prussian troops reassures him, so when he on a late night train journey suddenly no longer observes their typical helmets at a small local station he starts to panic as he eventually realizes that he has missed getting out at a station to get a new connection and is heading for Paris, where chaos at the time reigns. He gets out at the next station, just in time, and spends a few hours nervously walking up and down the platform to get another connection. Fontane is loyal to his country and its army, which is to be expected, and although he regrets Prussian atrocities, he does put the responsibility on the French, as having instigated a guerilla war against the Germans, and thereby abandoned the classical pursuit of civilized war in terms of big armies dueling. He has a point of course. Guerilla warfare obliterates the distinction between soldiers and civilians, making the latter fair sport as well, something that has plagued modern warfare.

¹ Reviewed in a previous collection

The reports from the second visit to France are less interesting, it mostly shows him as a tourist seeking out the sights of various towns and reporting on the standards of local hotels and tables. There are some digressions, such as on Jeanne d'Arc and the escape of Napoleon III, but not enough to really hold attention. The last part is a hodge-podge of theater criticism concerning French plays, and thus in the nature of an add-on.

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