

Ellernklipp

Th. Fontane

July 20-27, 2016

This is a short novella that takes place in Harz and is based on a true story from the 18th century of a father killing his teenage son by pushing him down a precipice that had come to the knowledge of Fontane and inspired him to fashion an elaboration. It is set next to the fictional Emmerode based on the real Wenigrode during the 18th century. The plot is easy to summarize. Central is the forester Baltzer Bocholt who has made his way above his station by a judicious marriage to an only daughter and single heiress of a well-to-do father. At the onset of the narrative he is a recent widower who has just returned from the regional hub of Ilseburg with a lattice to adorn the grave of his wife. He is met with a request from the vicar to discuss a matter, which turns out to be what to do with a young girl by name of Hilda, whose mother, a young pauper, has just died. Bocholt is persuaded to take care of the girl and raise her as his own, and brings her to his home to the two servants and his own young son Martin. There are rumors in the village as to the paternity of Hilda, rumors to the effect that she is not the daughter of the alleged father but of the young recently dead count. Bocholt has no truck with such rumors, being an employer of the widowed countess holding her and her dead husband in very high esteem. This is 18th century and feudalism is very pervasive. The girl is very charming, Bocholt's young son takes to her, as does the vicar who teaches them both religion, and most ominously the guardian father. As she grows up, she and her step-brother fall in love with each other, and the father recognizes in himself a similar attraction which he at first tries to suppress. Gauded by the suggestive remarks of his housekeeper, (who at first had shared her room with Hilda but as the latter grew up and rose in the esteem of her guardian had been ejected from it), to the effect that Hilda and Martin are lovers, he spies on them and has it all confirmed. Ravaged by jealousy he confronts his son on the top of the cliff of Ellern¹ which ends in his son being pushed down the precipice, and the distraught father imagines that the last he hears is the cry for 'Vater'. The father is surprisingly indifferent to the fate of the son more concerned with the inconveniences it all will lead to. He returns home and somewhat later makes a half-hearted and aborted attempt to find his son and bury him. Three years later he marries Hilda and a sickly child ensues from the union. Was it really a voluntary one on her part, the countess is concerned. A shepherd who has won the trust of both Hilda and the countess reveals to the latter that it was made under duress, that the young woman did so out of duty inspired by gratitude and fortified by fear. The child is sickly and a medical doctor in Ilseburg is sought out. The father is rather indifferent to his fate more concerned with the possibility of doing some target practice in town, while the mother is distraught. It is disclosed to the father that the child is moribund, there is not much to be done. On their way home the father is overcome with guilt at the cliff and dies, the next day the child dies and after that Hilda seems to be much relieved and

¹ A dialectical variation of the German word 'Erlen' referring to alders, a plant related to birches.

happier and is taken up in the custody of the countess, only to die later. She has herself buried next to the first wife, but her grave stone bears no name only the inscription *Ewig und unwandelbar ist das Gesetz*.

The charm of the story lies primarily in the depiction of landscape and weather and in spite of its brevity does suggest a feeling of an epic scope far beyond the limited format, as do many of Fontanes novellas. Then there is also the psychological drama. The violence of the father is foreshadowed by an episode when he coolly shoots a poacher as if he was just game himself. And throughout the story his presence is more associated with respect and fear than love and tenderness, and his early career as a soldier casts a shadow. His son Martin wants to be a soldier too, much to the consternation of Hilda, but he sees no other practical solution to the problem of escaping home with Hilda than to join the Prussian army, of which she has heard awful things.

As in so many of Fontane's novels, it is a woman who holds the centre of attention and provide the focus of sympathy, entitling him to claim that he was what we now refer to as a feminist.

July 28, 2016 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se