



Short Review Paper

The perception of reality in Theodor Fontane: romantic, realistic and classical traditions

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Abstract

*Theodor Fontane is being discussed widely in the contemporary literary discourse as a European writer. Both, the broader European literary influences on his writings as well as the presence of a wide-ranging European landscape in his works stand testimony to the European spirit of his works. Alongside, a renewed interest in the motifs of his writings has led to the exploration of the idea of 'real' in his thoughts. Theodor Fontane was hardly interested in any 'hierarchy of art' and he was averse to participate in a realism versus idealism debate. Literary creation connoted a testimony of the intimate subjective involvement with the objective reality for him. In this regard, like Goethe, the sentiments and meditative stance of the author appealed closely to him. He held the German romantic poet E. T. A. Hoffmann in high esteem and designated him as a "man of genius". When Fontane pleaded for the 'aesthetic enterprise' of the author, he was arguing for securing a 'residual freedom of individual' in his writings. The dream-like narration of reality also distinguishes Fontane's writing and in this context, his proximity to the German philosopher Schopenhauer has been highlighted too. It is equally noteworthy that the German classical tradition lived on in Fontane. In the form of a novel entitled *Frau Jenny Treibel*, he was able to produce a 'Bildungsroman', a classical sub-genre. As distinct critique of the social situations, this work laid bare the hypocrisy of the bourgeoisie class of the society.*

Keywords: Realism, Romanticism, Discretion, Schopenhauer, Bildungsroman.

Introduction

Fontane-researchers and literary-critics are approaching the works of Theodor Fontane from differing and distinct angles at present. If one consults recent archival resources, it becomes clear that his theoretical writings are being re-explored on the basis of many of the sources which were yet not used in earlier theoretical probing into his works. For example, he is being discussed in the context of media-theory, views about reality and its literary mediation. A lengthy essay published by Christoph Wegmann, dealing with the images of reality in Theodor Fontane's works is titled "Landschaftsbilder", "Fensterbilder". *Wie Theodor Fontane Wirklichkeit als Bilder erzählt¹*. Intense debate regarding Fontane's probable affinities to romantic literary traditions seems to have caused shifts in engaging with Theodor Fontane and his literary legacy. Traditionally, Fontane was seen as the writer engrossed with the themes pertaining to German nobility. That perception has undergone a radical change and some of his works, where he has been able to satirize the goals of noble class of Germany, are being received in a new, critical perspective. A pointer in this regard is the assessment of his novel *Frau Jenny Treibel*, which lends new perspective to the classical genre of the educational novel or Bildungsroman. That Fontane was aware

of the riddles of social climate of his time, is being especially underlined in new studies. Michael Stolleis's essay concerning the critical encounter of Fontane with the complex of socio-political realities of his time in his novel *Der Stechlin* bears the apt title "Der Stechlin", ein politischer Zeitroman²."

New Discursive Interests in Theodor Fontane: European Context, Reality, Subjectivity/Objectivity, Romanticism

Theodor Fontane, one of the leading representatives of Realism in German literature, stands in the centre of contemporary literary discourses. Various, his relevance in the European context is being explored and debated anew. Underlining the broader European spirit of his writings, Rüdiger Görner observes: "When reading Fontane some are reminded of Montaigne and the sanity and balance of his argument; others compare the style of Fontane's *causerie* with English common sense and his prose with the poetic realism of the great Russian writers³." The landscape evoked in his writings is truly European. The images of Germany, England, and Italy are all present in his oeuvre. Rüdiger Görner mentions: "Palmerston's Britain is just as present in Fontane's work as Bismarck's Prussia; and even an element of *italianità* appears as a pictorial

quotation at the end of *Der Stechlin*...³”. The revival of interest in Fontane is occurring at present not only in exploration of the European context, but also the German context of his works. The production of the film on his *Effi Briest* as well as Günter Grass’s works have played pivotal role behind the surge in Fontane-reception in Germany. Rüdiger Görner elucidates this Fontane-renaissance: “One hundred years after the death of this most European and urbane of nineteenth-century German novelists, Fontane’s presence in German culture is more prominent than ever. The origins of the more recent renaissance of Fontane go back to Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s film version of *Effi Briest* (1972/74), with Hanna Schygulla in the title role...But there is also Günter Grass’s controversial novel *Ein weites Feld* (*Too Far Afield*), with its Fontane-obsessed protagonist Fonty, which has contributed to raising public awareness of Fontane...Fontane, the lyric poet, has regained recognition during the last decade or so, assisted by Christian Friedrich Delius’s ballad on German unification, *Die Birnen von Ribbeck* (The Pears of Ribbeck)...³”.

In the course of the awakening of a renewed interest in Theodor Fontane, there has been intense concern about the motifs in his writings. First, his conception of ‘reality’ has been sought to be debated. Did he have any philosophically grounded conception of reality? In this context, Renate Böschenstein pinpoints that Fontane’s time was far away from the era of the idealistic philosophy. She remarks about Fontane’s time: “In his time there was the turning away from the speculative and metaphysical interpretations of the world which the idealistic philosophers had imposed, a turn that he described in vivid colours in his early essay *Unsere lyrische und epische Poesie seit 1848* (Our lyrical and epic literature since 1848)⁴.” Böschenstein contends that even though philosophical theorizations are hardly to be found in the writings of Fontane, he not only believed in realism, rather also defended its closeness to the artistic representation of the reality. The art is not a copying of the reality, rather artistic endeavour is accompanied by reflections, meditative sentiments. Böschenstein dwells on this aspect of the writing of Fontane as follows: “Everybody knows that Fontane was no friend of philosophical theories; nevertheless we can find in his writings implicit philosophical positions. I should like to highlight two points...at which he proclaims that realism is not only the art of his time but the principle of all true art. As is well-known he stresses that realism is not the...mimesis of “the world of the senses” and of “everyday life” but “the reflection of all real life, of all forces and interests” from the *infusoria* to the meditations and sentiments Goethe shaped in his *Faust*⁴.”

The interspersing of subjectivity of the writing self with the objectively perceived reality characterizes the oeuvre of Theodor Fontane. Fontane believed that behind the literary creations lurks unmistakably the depth of profound subjective vision of the writer, in which the objectivity is interpreted. In the literary praxis the subject of the author remains undeniably involved. As Alan Bance puts it: “Fontane’s fictional form rests

upon an awareness that fiction presents a subjectively selected and interpreted objectivity, and that this objective reality itself exists only ‘als eine, in die das Subjekt verschlungen und verwickelt ist’ (‘as one in which the subject is intimately involved’)⁵.” Professing this conviction about writing, Fontane maintained a distance from the idealism/realism debate. He did not assent to a hierarchic understanding of the representation of reality, in which either the ‘ideal’ or the ‘real’ vantage point has to be defended. Alan Bance observes that Fontane “was uninterested in the debate about the ‘hierarchy of art’, or the question of ‘idealism versus realism’ which exercised Stifter and Otto Ludwig among others⁵.” Fontane’s art can be read as an attempt to prevent art from falling into the zones of limitations. He guarded himself and his art as much against idealism as against the exhaustive objectivity. In the words of Alan Bance: “Fontane’s realism...succeeds in avoiding the dual limitations of a neo-idealist elevation of art, and of the exhaustive objectivity attempted by other realists and the Naturalists⁵.”

It is imperative to note that Fontane had inclinations to the romantic world view and he did not renounce it altogether during his career as a writer. He was charmed by the imagination of E.T.A. Hoffmann and was deeply lured to his way of looking at the double structure of reality. In him, he encountered religiosity, sacredness, and constructs of idealism. He maintained his respect for all these realms of the romantic world view. Renate Böschenstein goes at length explaining Fontane’s respect for romantic vision of E.T.A. Hoffmann: “...he seems to cling to the dichotomic “Weltbild” in which the empirically perceptible world is only a surface behind which a deeper reality reveals itself...Especially important seems to me the impact of E.T.A. Hoffmann...Against the criticism of his friend Merckel, Fontane defends Hoffmann as a “man of genius”. Through Hoffmann he was indirectly marked by the idealistic philosophy he never studied. In Hoffmann’s works he could find the principle of double structure: on one hand, the sharp observation of the outside world, on the other hand the ingenious introduction of a second world. In Hoffmann, this second world contains partly religious representations, partly pictures of sacred art, and partly constructs of idealistic philosophy⁴.”

The presence of the romantic view in Fontane’s narratives has been debated further by some other critics too. Alan Bance argues that in the narrative structure of Fontane, the need of placing the aesthetic alongside the realistic can be amply traced. There remains to be identified what he calls a ‘residual freedom of the individual’ besides the conditions of society deciding the position of the individual in the society. This freedom realises itself in the contours of the ‘transfigured reality’ presaging the ‘mysterious shaping’ of the characters and truth in his narratives. Alan Bance reiterates this aspect of the presence of the romantic in Fontane: “And it is my contention that Fontane is a romantic...However ‘naïve and misleading’, quixotic or irrational it may seem, the dominant social structure of

Fontane's works is in conflict with an indispensable counter-structure, what he himself calls the 'verklärender Zauber des Künstlerischen' ('the transfiguring magic of the artistic'), which has aesthetic need of the 'thinkable' authentic position outside society...Fontane does not deny that one's personal position and decisions are preconditioned by society in a *general* way, even before the *specific* acute pressures applied by society; yet there remains a residual freedom between this predetermination of the individual and the massive claim exerted by society. And in that residual freedom or 'room for manoeuvre'-which may exist in truth only in the aesthetic realm, but for that very reason serves as part of the *raison d'être* of Fontane's aesthetic enterprise-lie two constituent elements of Fontane's romantic/realist art: a 'verklärte Wirklichkeit' ('transfigured reality')...and the element of mystery or 'Räthselmacht' (mysterious power), which finds its appropriate form in the 'rätselhafte Modelung' (mysterious shaping)...⁵.

Fontane ascribes his protagonists 'discretion', by virtue of which they shape, cultivate and retain the mysticism crafted around the facts, and which thus mark out their personalities. The reality in its transfigured form settles in this discretion as long as finally a disillusionment takes place, when the fragility of that discretion and accordingly the brittleness of that transfigured reality become obvious in the domain of the common knowledge. The double-structure of the mystic garb and the stark reality fail to hold any ground and the employment of the discretion in the narrative technique fulfils its task of finally presenting the reality in its crudest form beyond any veil. Discussing the interrelation between the 'mysterious shaping', 'discretion', and the 'accommodations demanded of the individual' in the tragic labyrinth of *Effi Briest*, Alan Bance maintains: "The most striking aspects of this 'mysterious shaping' are at the same time devices which help Fontane to maintain the decorum of the dominant social structure: his discretion, and his symbolic allusions...this discretion or reticence on the part of the narrator in Fontane's novels is 'a projection of the flight into the social, the recourse to the world of fact, on to the plane of style'...The reader is invited to question the accommodations demanded of the individual: an obvious example is the presentation in *Effi Briest* of Frau Wicker at Bad Ems. Without comment from the narrator, she stands as an awful example to Effi and the reader of the complete, cynical adjustment to the demands of the world of facts. It is not too much to say that after Effi learns of her social fall from grace through the discovery of her adultery (information she receives in the presence of Frau Wicker), she is faced ultimately with a choice of 'Frau Wicker or death'; that is to say, of accommodating 'facts' by shamelessly living up to her name as a fallen woman, or succumbing to the despair engendered by the irreconcilable conflict between her own subjective sense of being wronged, and the irreversible condemnation of society⁵." The unfolding of the narrative from shaping to shattering of the 'discretion' in its course does not fail to involve in its trail the 'imaginative participation' of the reader on those processes itself. Alan Bance elucidates: "More positively, discretion is at

the same time a provocation to the reader to contemplate the mysteries the author is unfolding to us, 'an invitation to...participate imaginatively in the creation of the story⁵.'" The world view of Fontane evoked dream like perception of reality also. The lines of reality and dream intersected in his narrative technique. Fontane owes this characteristic of his writing most probably to the impact of the teachings of Schopenhauer, a philosopher whom he liked to study with avid interest. According to Böschstein: "The means by which Fontane as a novel-writer has tried to subvert the narrow and often one-sided character of the reality conception of his time are well-known: perspectivism, evident exaggeration, the self-doubts of the narrator or the withdrawal of statements by the figures...But Fontane's writing itself has a structure that is partly analogous to dream...If now for him the limits between 'reality' and 'dream' become blurred, as far as poetry is concerned, this change may have to do with the influence of the only philosopher in whom Fontane had a genuine interest, Schopenhauer...This means a certain de-realisation and transparency of the empirically perceptible world. Probably the dichotomic structure of the *Weltbild* he had received from the romantic authors was reinforced, just at the moment when he began his novel writing, by the impact of Schopenhauer⁴."

Theodor Fontane and the Classical Tradition: Goethe's Spell and Bildungsroman

The classical tradition lives on too in Fontane, in so far as Goethe's influence continued to imbue Fontane with inspiration. Goethe was significant for him not only because of what he wrote, rather also how he viewed the world and the reality. It was on the ground of the aesthetic concerns that Fontane tried to seek proximity to Goethe's writings. Terry H. Pickett writes about Fontane's closeness to Goethe: "Though the North German Theodor Fontane (1819-98) was much more interested in an objective knowledge of Goethe's significance..., he was as influenced as Stifter by Goethe's essays on art and derived from them the aesthetic principles he applied in his work as critic of the Berlin theatre⁶." As a matter of fact, he thought to have found in Goethe an ideal for himself. To him, Goethe's way of approaching the reality converged on his own perspectives to deal with the literary presentation of reality. Terry H. Pickett observes about Fontane's estimation of Goethe: "He viewed Goethe as a proto-realist (a position suggested as early as 1833 by Varnhagen von Ense) and, therefore, the father of his own approach to fiction⁶."

Fontane's attempt to write 'Bildungsroman' can be conceived as further acknowledgement to the furtherance of the classical tradition in his oeuvre. His novel *Frau Jenny Treibel* has come to occupy the reputation of a 'Bildungsroman' in the German literary history of the nineteenth century. Fontane's Bildungsroman is highly satirical of the social system of his time and it serves as a sharp critique of the contradictions on which the bourgeoisie social-structure of Germany was resting towards the end of the nineteenth century. He portrays the sheer

inconsistency in the personalities of his characters, who are torn between the ideals of 'culture' and the craving for material prosperity and comforts. W. H. Bruford states about the specificity of the Bildungsroman of Fontane that "to find out what importance Fontane still attached to the old idea of 'Bildung' for life in his day, it is not necessary to discuss the...novel in detail...what looks like sheer hypocrisy on Jenny's part, the incompatibility between her enthusiasm for the 'Ideal', for poetry and music and 'culture' as the only things worth living for, and her even more evident craving for money, showy possessions and social esteem...is rather more complicated..."⁷.

The hypocrisy of the bourgeoisie class, which Fontane portrays in his Bildungsroman, does not conceal the haughty stature of the protagonists. At the same time, this haughtiness brings to light how less open these individuals are to good art and literature. Despite having qualified examinations of different kind, the emptiness of their personality reveals the incongruity between the educational system and real elevation of human soul. In this context, it is relevant to quote W. H. Bruford: "Fontane then, though in personality and general background he had hardly anything in common with Nietzsche, confirms many of his negative criticisms of the age. The educated middle class seem to him less broad-minded and humane than in his youth, too proud of the examinations they have passed and of external honours, and too often blind to good art and literature"⁷.

Fontane's Bildungsroman has within its fold characters from all walks of life. The characters from the aristocracy class and the civil servants, writers, actors and industrial bourgeoisie appear on the scene together. In a way, this is a larger, more comprehensive portrayal of the social context. Finding in Fontane a writer trying to fuse a new perspective into the Bildungsroman, W. H. Bruford comments: "He put new life into the traditional German 'Bildungsroman' by introducing features characteristic of the work of great French, English and Russian writers in the historical and social novels...He has drawn for us convincing pictures of a whole range of social types, from the landed and court aristocracy of Prussia, through the officer class and higher civil service, the protestant clergy, doctors, teachers and the 'free professions'-writers, actors, musicians-to the commercial and industrial bourgeoisie, now growing rapidly in wealth and influence in a period of unprecedented economic expansion...He prefers to draw people of some education, and it is a striking feature of the social criticism usually implied in his descriptions that it so often questions the real value of current educational methods and examinations, and even of the hallowed idea of 'Bildung', diluted and externalized as it now is"⁷.

One of the key concerns for Fontane in his Bildungsroman is the demonstration of the lack of genuine cultural ennoblement of the characters, who are well placed in the social system. These characters appear shabby with their meagre sense for real refinement in their life. Fontane directs subtle critique on them.

W. H. Bruford highlights this aspect of the Bildungsroman of Fontane: "Again and again Fontane expresses privately opinions about Germany's lack of a genuine culture which remind us of Nietzsche, except that they are pitched in a much lower key. He finds especially among higher civil servants a lack of feeling for the finer things of life which makes them poor company, excellent as they are in many respects:

They know half a dozen odes of Horace, a bit of Homer and a bit of Ovid, and with this behind them they claim the right to look upon any modern efforts in this field (of literature) as twaddle. These superior people, who flood and penetrate our lives with their very limited views (and knowledge) about matters of taste, are one of the main causes that make the nations that are after all more civilized look down upon us-and hate us"⁷.

Fontane reserved strong critical attitude towards the idea of 'Education' resting principally on its self-legitimization through the system of examinations. To him, such a system has been able to produce second-rate individuals only, who are laden with boredom. Berlin is a city populated with such bored people. W. H. Bruford points out: "Fontane finds Berlin (1894) full of...bores. 'Education' (Bildung), he concludes, 'is something splendid; but what counts as education with us is something thoroughly second-rate and even downright silly.' The main reason why Fontane has a weakness for the nobility of the Mark Brandenburg is that they are still original, four-square personalities among them, like Colonel Stechlin in his novel *Der Stechlin*"⁷.

Later on, Fontane's belief in the cultivated personalities of the nobility also was eroded. He did no more find in them developed and educated individuals with refined sensibility. He grew ambivalent towards them. Along with this ambivalence towards the nobility, there developed within him also a scorn for everything bourgeoisie. W. H. Bruford elucidates: "If Fontane in his later years...called his rather ambivalent attitude towards the country nobility 'at best an unhappy love-affair', he never had any doubts about his dislike for the new bourgeoisie...The novel in which Fontane makes false pretensions to culture his main theme is *Frau Jenny Treibel*, where his bugbear, the rich bourgeoisie, is made to appear ridiculous and inconsistent..."⁷.

Conclusion

Theodor Fontane's realistic writing distinguishes itself from that of the programmatic realists insofar as Fontane contends for subjective engagement in representation of reality, whereby the narrative turns out to be a witness of the interspersion of subjectivity of the author with the objectively perceived reality. Alan Bance underlines that the fiction of Fontane presents subjectively selected and interpreted objectivity. Concerned though he was about the representation of reality in literature, Fontane avoided indulging in any debate about the hierarchy of artistic representation guided from the conflicting vantage

points of idealism or realism. Even as Fontane is a realist writer, traces of romantic world-view in his thought are being researched. His fascination for the German romantic writer E.T.A. Hoffmann never waned. He believed to have found in E.T.A. Hoffmann mutually complementing outer world of observation and inner world of religiosity, sacredness, and idealism. His writings elicit an implicit endorsement for this romantic principle of “double structure”. Alongside, multiple manifestation and expression of the ‘transfigured reality’ and the ‘mysterious power’ implied in the poetic praxis of Fontane serve as a signpost of the romantic world-view underlying his literary commitment. Fontane remained closely tied to Goethe’s principles of art and made a salient contribution towards the furtherance of the classical tradition by attempting to write a Bildungsroman titled *Frau Jenny Treibel*. Encyclopaedia Britannica defines Bildungsroman as follows: “Bildungsroman, a class of novel that depicts and explores the manner in which the protagonist develops morally and psychologically. The German word *Bildungsroman* means “novel of education” or “novel of formation.”...The first novelistic development of this theme was Christoph Martin Wieland’s *Geschichte des Agathon* (1766-67; *History of Agathon*). It was followed by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1795-96; *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*), which remains the classic example of the genre⁸.” Fontane’s Bildungsroman is, however, a departure from Goethe. It is not the portrayal of the harmonious personality, which stands at the core of Fontane’s Bildungsroman. Instead, his *Frau Jenny Treibel* sharply critiques the hypocrisy and illusory enthusiasm of the German bourgeoisie class for the ideals and values of culture.

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