17. Theodor Fontane: Getting to Know and Appreciate a Great German Novelist: May 15-20

While I was quite knowledgeable about German literature of the past century and I had read many of the leading novelists such as Thomas Mann, Hermann Hesse, Erich Maria Remarque, and Gùnther Grass and also quite a bit of its greatest poet, Rainer Maria Rilke, the nineteenth century was mostly a complete blank to me, except for Goethe's *Faust* and a few outstanding poets of the first half of the century such as August von Platen, Friedrich Hòlderlin, and Heinrich Heine. Of how German prose literature, whether drama or the novel, fared during this century I knew virtually nothing, only a few names. A former colleague and a very good friend of mine who is a professor of German language and literature has been instrumental in filling this gap by introducing me to the novels of the author on whom he has done some impressive scholarship, namely Theodor Fontane (1819-1898), who is now considered one of the greatest German authors of the nineteenth century and Germany's greatest novelist between Goethe and Mann, although he is still relatively little known outside the German-speaking world. Fortunately, good translations into English have appeared, and I hope this will gain him new admirers. So far, I have read only two, often with an eye on the original German. These are considered among his very best. A visit to the much larger library of Dalhousie University will allow me to put my hand on some others, but I do not consider it premature to set down my impressions already at this point, confining myself mainly to these two works..

A bit of background first. Fontane's name points to his French, i.e. Huguenot ancestry, his family having settled in Brandenburg-Prussia as the result of the French repression of Protestantism in the wake of the revocation of the Edict of Nantes. Having read two of his highly praised novels now, I like to think that the psychological finesse and careful attention to social milieu so amply displayed there perhaps reflects a bit of this French legacy. He was a copious author, writing and publishing poetry with a special taste for the ballad, travel books on England, Scotland (he lived and worked as journalist in London for a few years), and Brandenburg, which are distinguished by both elegance of style and meticulous research and observation, and three books of war reporting (the Danish-Prussian war, the Austro-Prussian war, and the Franco-Prussian war) which are notable for their superior journalism and their complete lack of bias. He was a frequent and perceptive reviewer of theatre and novelists, and found an outlet for his numerous reviews in well-established newspapers. He wrote a two-volume memoir and also conducted an extensive correspondence which, too, found its way into publication. He came to the writing of novels rather late in his life, not until he was almost sixty, starting with a lengthy historical novel set in Prussia in the last days of the Napoleonic era, and in the 1880's moved on to his highly acclaimed novels set in Germany, above all Berlin, of the recent past and contemporary times. It is a pity that, apart from his later novels, most of his work remains untranslated.

There is much to praise in Fontane's short novel of 1888, *Irrungen,Wirrungen* (literally, “Aberrations, Confusions,” which in the 2010 translation by Peter James Bowman is creatively and elegantly rendered as *On Tangled Paths*. The subtitle is *An*

Everyday Berlin Story, for this is one of Fontane's many novels set in Berlin, where he lived most of his life, and is one of the best examples of Fontane's unique mastery as a novelist of the art of high realism, which places him right at the head of the great and venerable tradition of the realistic novel of the nineteenth century. With almost photographic exactitude, he describes the cityscape and the landscape in and around Berlin, where the story takes place, so that in my reading a clear and vivid picture unfolded before my mental eye of what certain parts of Berlin, both city and surroundings, looked like in from 1875 to 1878, which is the time-frame of the story. From the perspective of 1888 a great deal of change had taken place since those three years; thus, as the narrator points out at the beginning, the large market garden in the midst of which, Lene, one of the novel's two central characters, and her disabled mother make their home, was to disappear completely. Ever since the Franco-Prussian war, Berlin was undergoing a thorough-going urban make-over as the capital of the newly created German Reich, with its population rapidly growing towards the one million mark. During this period, though, the traditional hierarchies and boundaries of class remained in place, and in the novel we see this in the eventually doomed love relationship between Lene Nimptsch and Botho Baron von Reinäcker.

Lene is a seamtress earning by piece work a meagre living for herself and her disabled and widowed foster mother, Frau Nimptsch; Botho is a Prussian aristocrat, whose family, though, has fallen on hard financial times, which makes the pressure on him to make a suitable and financially advantageous marriage all the greater. Already early on, his maternal uncle Baron Osten, confronts him in blunt words with this absolute necessity, and later his mother does the same, if in somewhat more genteel language, in a letter to him. Botho loves Lene dearly, above all for her keen intelligence and for her qualities of empathy and altruism, but marriage with her is not an option if he wishes to maintain his position in a class-conscious society and fulfill his duty towards his family. Immigration to the United States after marrying Lene is therefore out of the question, and his high moral standards, as well as, as he knows, Lene's, forbid an arrangement whereby he would keep her as his mistress after making the suitable marriage his mother and uncle hold out for him.

After an initially most enjoyable excursion of the two into the countryside which includes an overnight in a rustic inn, Lene foresees in her mind the inevitable end of the relationship. Botho suspects she is troubled and questions her, and the following exchange ensues:

Lene...

Do listen to me. Oh my own precious Botho, you're trying to it hide it from me, but it's all coming to an end. And quickly, I know it is.

What are you saying?

I admit it was only something I dreamt, Lene continued. *But why would I dream it? Because it was preoccupying me the whole day. My dream was just what I was turning*

over in my heart. But the other thing I wanted to say to you, Botho, the reason I ran these few steps after you, is that I still stand by what I said to you last night. Life through this summer has been a joy for me, a joy that can't be taken away, even I'm unhappy from this day onwards.

Lene, Lene, don't talk to me like this...

You can sense that I'm right yourself; it's just that your kind heart refuses to accept it, and doesn't want to admit it. But I know. Yesterday, when we walked through the meadow together chatting and I picked you the posy, that was our last real happiness and our last precious moment.

(translation by Peter James Bowman)

Lene is one of the most attractively realized women I have ever encountered in a novel. She is, above all, a profoundly good woman in whom, alongside the other qualities I have noted, a quiet fortitude stands out. Together with her capacity for love and caring, this stands out in the scene where her foster mother is on her death bed and she, without making any fuss, does her best to make her as comfortable as possible. As is shown by the just quoted passage, she does not descend to self-pity, let alone make a scene, when it becomes clear to her relationship with Botho cannot last; rather, she says she will always cherish in her memory what was beautiful in the love the two of them had for each other. She does indeed move on with her life as she eventually accepts the offer of marriage from Gideon Franke. He is considerably older than she is, a man of the world—he has a past of living and working in the United States—but like her, is a truly good and decent person who not only will be devoted to her but, employed as a factory foreman, will also offer her a good measure of material well-being. We know before the end of the novel that their life together will be good and fulfilling or both of them.

Botho, too, does not do badly. His arranged marriage with Kàthe works after a fashion, although in personality and character she is Lene's complete opposite, for she has about her a continual air of superficiality and giddy merriment. But the two, each in his or her own way, are devoted to each other and the reader has reason to think they will stay together. The novelist, however, ends the story with a brief scene where Botho makes an ironic quip at the expense of his wife's superficiality but also, unbeknownst to her, with an undertone of sadness over his loss of Lene. It happens when Kàthe reads in the newspaper the announcement of Gideon's and Lene's wedding and makes fun of the names “Gideon” and “Nimptsch,” finding the latter simply “comical.”

Botho took the newspaper, though only because he wanted to conceal his embarrassment behind it. Then he handed it back, and in as light as tone as he could muster, he said, “Kàthe. But what do you have against Gideon, Gideon's better than Botho.

(translation by Peter James Bowman)

On Tangled Paths is a jewel of a novel. Description, whether of city, countryside, modest home, imposing mansion, and milieu in general is meticulous with just the right of amount of detail. Fontane is supremely effective in making liberal use of directly reported dialogue and conversation for the purpose of revealing and developing character, above all of course Lene's and Botho's, rather than relying on the more conventional method of having recourse to the narrator's voice and indirect discourse—e.g (s)he said, thought, felt—in order to accomplish this.

The longer novel *Irretrievable* (German title, *Unwiederbringlich*) of 1891, which I have read in the translation by Douglas Parmée, merits similar praise. It reaches a little farther into the past, from 1859 to 1860. The story is set in Schleswig-Holstein, which at this time, just before the Danish-Prussian war of 1861, was still a semi-autonomous duchy and a member of the German Confederation, while Schleswig, the northern half, recognized the king of Denmark as its sovereign. Thus it is that Helmut Count Holk serves periodically as a courtier to the royal family in Copenhagen, at the beck and call, more or less, of the king's elderly aunt. The imposing home, built recently in neoclassical style, of Holk, his wife Christine, and their two teenage children, Asta and Axel, is situated amidst the dunes on the Baltic coast. Initially, their life as a family seems idyllic clouded over only by the recent death of the second son Estrid. However, as the story unfolds, the marriage of Holk and his wife begins to unravel and finally, at a critical juncture, falls apart. Ultimately, the main factor causing the break-up are the totally contrasting personalities of the two central persons: Holk, easy-goin and full of *joie-de-vivre,* but only so, according to his wife, because of his superficiality; and Christine, beautiful, intelligent, intensely religious, and, as her husband sees it, unbending and stubborn. Already well before the break-up tension between the two begins to mount and, in the end, as the result of a lengthy flirtation between the Count and the much younger Ebba von Rosenberg at the court of the king's aunt, Christine has had enough, and the couple moves towards separation and divorce. An apparent reconciliation and renewal of marriage vows, celebrated with abundant festivity at the marital home, does not bring a happy ending as at the very end Christine kills herself by drowning.

As might be expected, this tragic ending, completely unexpected and unmotivated as it seems, has been criticized: for one thing, how can the devoutly religious Christine do this to herself even if she did not believe a true reconciliation had taken place or was in fact possible. The only suggestion and partial answer I can offer is that Christine's religiosity, right from the beginning, was hiding a deep-going and what was to become a lasting depression which probably started with the death of her son, a tragedy that weighs heavily on her mind in the opening chapters.

With its array of meticulously depicted locales and milieus—the grand Holk mansion in its almost surreal park-like setting laid out amidst the dunes, the nearby rustic towns and villages, Copenhagen—then called the Paris of the North—the frivolous royal court and, not far away, Fredericksborg Castle (many of the details of time and place are historically authentic, as is noted in the Afterword by Philip Logate)—

and with its large gallery of personages representing all strata of society, and, finally and most of all, with its exquisitely drawn portrait of a failing marriage which ultimately comes to a tragic end, this is a work of prose fiction which is, in my judgment, a masterpiece of the nineteenth century realistic novel. Along with the numerous directly reported dialogues and conversations which are used to the same accomplished effect as in *On Tangled Paths*, come many, sometimes lengthy citations of verse recited at various times by one or other of the major and minor characters. (The translator leaves these in the original German, providing his translation at the bottom of the page.) The novel ends with the following couplet as the concluding words of a letter written by Julie von Dobschűtz, Asta's governess, the last two lines of a much longer poem which was recited earlier by Christine:

And you who were once my most beloved,
I do not want you back.

(my translation)

So I look forward to reading more of Fontane's works, especially *Effie Briest*, a lengthy novel which some consider to be his masterpiece. Here a woman is the central character whose fate illustrates grimly the repressive masculinist and aristocratic code of Second Reich Germany which ruled the lives of countless women, a theme which is developed powerfully elsewhere in his great later novels. In these, Fontane raises and develops raises issues of both social class and women's autonomy with a lucidity and sensitivity which still speak eloquently to me in the twenty-first century.