

**Theodor Fontane:
Literature and History in the
Bismarck Reich**

Gordon A. Craig

Oxford University Press

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To the memory of
Daniel Marcus Davin
Arthur Spring-Rice Pyper
Jerome Blum

In midst of all inconsequential things,
I find myself remembering other springs.

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INTRODUCTION

In his remarkable series of essays *The Spirit of the Age*, William Hazlitt wrote:

A really great and original writer is like nobody but himself. In one sense, Sterne was not a wit, nor Shakespear a poet. It is easy to describe second-rate talents, because they fall into a class and enlist under a standard; but first-rate powers defy calculation or comparison and can be defined only by themselves. They are *sui generis* and make the class to which they belong. I have tried half-a-dozen times to describe [Edmund] Burke's style without ever succeeding: its severe extravagance, its literal boldness, its matter-of-fact hyperbole, its running away with a subject and from it at the same time, but there is no making it out, and no example of the same thing anywhere else. We have no common measure to refer to, and his qualities contradict even themselves.¹

These words are worth bearing in mind when we think of Theodor Fontane. There are nineteenth-century German writers whom we would rank higher: Goethe certainly, who had the ability to do everything anyone else did just a little bit better; and Heine, who had no equal as a prose writer and whose satirical gifts recall those of Juvenal; and any number of lyricists whose talents were truer and fuller than

Fontane's. Even so, the products of Fontane's pen were so original and so diverse that their author's stature is as undeniable as his defiance of classification. There is no one like him. No writer in his time had a range as great as his, including as it did political journalism of the highest quality, ballads, songs, historical poems and *vers d'occasion*, a unique kind of travel literature, military history and historical essays on Prussian, English and Scottish history, extensive writings on the theater, novels that have been described as the most completely achieved of any written between Goethe and Thomas Mann, and a volume of correspondence that marks him as one of the most entertaining letter writers in German literature.

Nor does such a listing of categories succeed in giving a true sense of the uniqueness of his work. Anyone who picks up a volume of *The War against France* or *Wanderings through the Mark Brandenburg* with the expectation that it will conform to conventional nineteenth-century military or travel literature will be happily surprised, in the former case by the clarity and essentially literary quality of the style, which makes technical detail and complicated maneuvers comprehensible to the general reader, by the masterful description of the historical and political context and of the terrain in which the hostilities take place, by Fontane's eye for the critical turning points in battle and his dramatic re-creation of individual passages of arms, by his freedom from narrow national partisanship, and—above all—by his insistence upon entering into the minds and attitudes of the soldiers on the other side of the hill. It is these qualities that have assured the survival of his military histories, while the professional studies of the time, written by people who refused to believe that a mere civilian was capable of writing about their métier, have long since sunk into oblivion. Similarly, one can say of the *Wanderings* that there is no example of the same thing anywhere else—a kind of travel literature that enchants the reader with its mixture of description, history, and anecdote, that is studded with brilliant set pieces, like the story of the execution of Katte, the friend of Frederick II's youth, at Küstrin, and that is written in a style that varies between the circumstantial and the playful, *Sachlichkeit* consorting easily with *Plauderei*.

In his splendid biography, Hans-Heinrich Reuter has written that Fontane's greatest gifts were his power of acute observation, his crit-

ical capacity, and his sense of history, and that it was these, gradually developed and mutually self-supporting, that comprised his originality and determined the character of his finest work.² More will be said of all these qualities in the chapters that follow, but—since the author of these pages is himself a historian—the emphasis will fall upon the third, Fontane's affinity for history, which he came to naturally and which was his strongest passion.

At this point, I should confess that the genesis of my own admiration of Fontane was very belated and that, to the best of my recollection, I had neither heard his name nor read a page of his work until 1938, when I was twenty-five years old. This still seems a bit odd to me, for during my training in history at the university I had a strong interest in German literature, and I can only attribute it to the fact that, in American universities in the 1930s, departments of German literature did not pay much attention to the nineteenth-century novel. Beyond the *Laokoon* and the *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, and the writings of the Weimar *dioscuri*, and the Romantics, a great wasteland extended in which Schopenhauer and Wagner and Nietzsche were rumored to dwell but which was apparently forbidden territory for novelists, who had to go to Russia or France or Great Britain in order to ply their trade. It was not until I came back to Princeton from Oxford as a graduate student in history that I discovered that this view was exaggerated. At that time, my *Doktorvater* Raymond James Sontag gave me a book by Ernst Kohn-Bramstedt,³ and I heard for the first time the names of Gustav Freytag, Friedrich Spielhagen, Wilhelm Raabe, and Theodor Fontane.

Kohn-Bramstedt was a confirmed believer in the importance of the novel of society as a historical source, a belief that he emphasized at the outset:

To what extent can one rely on literature in depicting society? What likelihood is there that the social novel will help to a better understanding of society? By means of particular instances and sequences of events it can portray the specific character of social situations or of social types and illustrate even the smallest features of everyday life. Today a serious social novel implies just as exact an empirical knowledge of its subject as does a scientific sociological analysis.

Although, in contrast with science, the novel does not verify its results with the aid of a statistical method, it works with a combination of observation and intuition, involving the risk of inaccuracy, but conferring the advantage of a greater approximation of life.⁴

Had I been further advanced in my historical studies, I might have considered that statement as exaggerated or even dogmatic. But I was at the time under the spell of the great French and English social novelists and inclined to believe that Kohn-Bramstedt was right. And in any case, I was curious about the work of these German writers of whom I had never heard. What Kohn-Bramstedt had to say about their novels and the light that they threw on the manners and morals of nineteenth-century German society was both interesting and illuminating, and I sat down to read Freytag's *Soll und Haben*, Spielhagen's *Sturmflut*, and Raabe's *Pfisters Mühle* with enthusiasm and profit. Indeed, I learned more from them about early industrial development in Germany and the social consequences of the new capitalism and the financial collapse of 1873 than I had from any historical account that had yet come my way.

Of all these new discoveries, however, it was the novels of Theodor Fontane that seemed to me to focus most consistently upon the problems that had fascinated Dickens and Trollope and would later challenge the imagination of Proust—the decline of the aristocracy, the insidious effect of parvenuism on the middle class, and the general deterioration of values that flowed from all of this. As an apprentice historian, I was already working hard on the Bismarck and Wilhelmine periods, and from the beginning Fontane's novels struck me as an indispensable source of material, and one that could be read with the keenest intellectual and aesthetic enjoyment. I was captivated by their economy, their artful construction, and their urbanity, humor, and felicity of phrase, but no less by their author's skill in laying bare the essentials of social reality and class conflict by his delineation of his characters as social types responding to the problems of their time in typical ways.

In short, I admired the historian in Fontane more than the artist, of whom I was, of course, incapable of making any very sophisticated judgment. And yet, as I turned to his earlier works—the ballads, and the book on Scotland, and the wonderful *Wanderings through the*

Mark Brandenburg, and the war books, all works in which his historical gifts were more directly manifest than in the novels and which I read with enthusiasm and gratitude (rightly so, for what would my own book on Königgrätz have become had I not read Fontane's *German War of 1866?*)—I began to understand that Fontane was a gifted historian because he was a great artist, often arbitrary in his handling of the material the professional historians brood over endlessly in their search for accuracy, but more searching and incisive for all of that, intent on looking into history rather than on photographing it, and sometimes succeeding, despite a proneness to small mistakes of fact, in giving a more truthful picture of the past than his academic colleagues.

Fontane was himself not unaware of this. At the end of a dreary Sunday in London in 1856—a time when he was serving as press attaché to the Prussian envoy Graf von Bernstorff, doing work that did not challenge his talents, homesick and separated from his wife and son, and with only a handful of friends—he wrote in his diary:

Simpson's on Drury Lane. Mutton as usual. I can't stand it. I would give a *Reichsthaler* for a portion of green peas and beets or a bowl of sour milk. My stomach is done for, and it is an eternity till Christmas [when he would have home leave]—Café Divan. . . . Read Macaulay—the ever closer approach to the abyss, Tyrconnel in Ireland, the overthrow of the Hydes (Lord Clarendon, the viceroy of Ireland, and Lord Rochester, the First Lord of the Treasury)—all marvellous! Perhaps more of a work of art than a work of history in the common sense, but all the greater on that account.⁵

It is not unlikely that the lonely writer, putting his cares aside by burying himself in his oldest passion, history, recognized in Macaulay a kindred spirit and an example of that felicitous combination of history and literature that would characterize his own future work.

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THEODOR FONTANE

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1

History

Theodor Fontane's first published prose work was a story called "Sibling Love."¹ He tells us in his memoirs that on 19 December 1839, shortly after his twentieth birthday, he had gone to the local district physician, Dr. Natorp, for an oral examination in botany and related subjects and that Natorp had certified his promotion from apprentice to assistant apothecary. On the way back to Rose's pharmacy where he was employed, Fontane stopped off at the Heureuse Konditorei in the Kölln Fish Market to look at the *Berlin Figaro*, his favorite journal, and discovered his story in its pages. He had already had some poems published in the paper, but their appearance had never had the same effect upon him, he wrote, "perhaps because they were so short; but here, these four columns with the 'To be continued' at the bottom, that was marvelous. By everything that this afternoon had brought me, I was as if stunned, and had every reason to be so. In little more than half an hour I had been promoted by Natorp to a 'Herr' and by Heureuse to a writer of stories."²

It is perhaps significant that he says nothing about the story itself. Certainly anyone who reads it in the hope of discovering some sign of the great novelist to come will be disappointed. The theme is provocative enough, and has appealed to other writers, including Fontane's admirer Thomas Mann, in his unpleasant little story "The Blood of the Volsungs," but Fontane exploits none of its possibilities. His story is about Clärchen, a young woman who lives, in straitened circumstances, with a brother who has been blind from birth but has apparently reached man's estate without developing any talents except an extraordinary self-pity and the ability to play melancholy songs on a lute. The preacher in the local cloister church becomes interested in the pair, visits them frequently and has long talks with the brother, and gradually falls in love with Clärchen, and she with him. When the brother discovers that they intend to marry, he submits the lovers to every kind of moral blackmail and, when they persist in their plans, says that he never wishes to see them again. The parting, for he is true to his word, proves too much for his sister, who after a year of marriage becomes persuaded that God may have intended that her love should be reserved for her brother and becomes fatally ill. The preacher prevails upon the brother to give up his obduracy and come to her deathbed, where the siblings are reconciled. In death, her love makes the two men close friends for the rest of their lives. Indeed, they die within hours of each other, "and there above they found their faithful and true loved one and stilled their hot longing and forgot all the pains of separation in their blessed reunion with their Clärchen." Although the theme of incest, which was to occupy Fontane on later occasions, is touched upon here, the mawkishness of this tale, and of the interspersed verses that accompany it, is equaled by the lameness of its plot and the inertness of the style in which it is told, and Clärchen and her brother are both so colorless that no one could have predicted that their creator had a future as a writer.

Yet "Sibling Love" was certainly no worse than hundreds of other stories written and published in Germany in its time, and may indeed be described as a characteristic product of its age. Two years before its publication, the leader of the Young German movement, Karl Gutzkow, had written in his journal *Das Telegraph für Deutschland* that "the present generation of German writers seems destined only to open the way for a future one; great things will not develop

out of it; it will have to fill the trenches over which another race advances to victory.” He attributed this circumstance to the fact that contemporary writers had to contend with the suspicion of literature that dominated established bureaucracies, the illogic and lack of principle of the press laws, the crude pretentiousness of popular criticism, the timidity of the publishing industry, the pervasive mysticism and materialism, and, above all, “the ice-coldness of our daily experience,”³ that is, the fact that nothing exciting ever happened. In the daily lives of young writers there were simply too few things that helped them grow, and too many that cabined, cribbed, and confined them. The atmosphere in which they lived stifled talent, and the models that were available to them were antiquated, tradition-bound, and uninspiring.

In Prussia this was true not only of the provinces but also of Berlin, which in the late 1930s, in contrast to the capitals of other great nations, was a mere residential city, dominated by its court, its bureaucracy, and its military establishment, with a population that was predominantly lower middle class, with neither a self-confident bourgeoisie nor a sizable proletariat to challenge conventional ways of thinking, and with a heterogeneous class of actors, scribblers, and pseudo-intellectuals who congregated in its many cafés and pastry shops to read the newspapers or formed literary clubs and read their latest works to each other. Even the young assistant in Rose’s pharmacy, dreaming of becoming an independent writer one day, was vaguely aware that this might not be the best place in which to achieve his dreams. In one of those miscellaneous pieces that he began to submit to newspapers, he wrote in 1842:

There was a time when Berlin seemed destined to be Germany, to rule the world; the presentiment of this great destiny penetrated the hearts of its best men. But that time has passed, and the mission has been thrown into the rubbish bin, and anyone who still believes in it is a child. . . . Formerly over-confident, the Germanic Gascon, now it is modest and discomfited. Formerly giving itself airs as the leader of the spiritual power of Germany, now it runs around naked and unashamed as the promoter of the most reckless and outrageous stock-jobbery. . . . A foreigner who has lived here for a short time can say, “Berlin is a great city, a *Residenzstadt*; and as such it provides a mass of amusing ways to pass the time.” That, however,

is all that we can attribute to Berlin; of a genuine amusement and one that lasts, there can be no question. That is due to the complete lack of public life. Mere being together, talking together, sitting together, dancing together is far from being public life. A public life, a *Volksleben*, can only exist when the population is penetrated by a distinct character, as, for example, in Vienna or Paris. . . . Berlin is hardly more than a colony . . . in which all inclinations and opinions are contradictory, . . . and the *inner* unity, which in the case of a true *Volksleben* is mirrored in every face, is conspicuously absent. The heartless mania for making pitiless wounding witticisms about everything that people hold sacred comes in large part from this condition.⁴

For a time, the would-be writer felt that his talent might flourish elsewhere than in Berlin, and he seriously considered making his career in Leipzig or Dresden, where he worked as a pharmacist after leaving Rose's. In both cities he made friends but in the end found the atmosphere no livelier than that in Berlin, to which he returned in 1844 for his military service. In Leipzig and Dresden he became for a time interested in politics and became a critic of King Frederick William IV of Prussia and his increasingly conservative course. But this was backed by no real energy. At no time in his life did Fontane become interested enough in politics to give it more than superficial attention, and his own political position was always marked by contradictions and great lability, given his distrust of parties. Above all, aside from some poems in the Herwegh manner and a few not very profound articles in newspapers, nothing much resulted from his intermittent political activity, nor did it bring him any closer to his goal of becoming a real writer, that is, one who produced works of art.⁵

Finding nothing to challenge him in the present, Fontane therefore turned increasingly to the past. Since politics provided no inspiration for his muse, he sought it in history.

I

Fontane came to history naturally and never lost his passion for it. In a letter written to Theodor Storm in 1854, he said that even when he

was a child in Swinemünde, it was his favorite subject. His interest was stimulated by his father's encyclopedic knowledge of the campaigns of Napoleon Bonaparte and the delight he took in telling tales about the emperor and his marshals Ney and Lannes and "le premier grenadier de la France," Latour d'Auvergne.⁶ He told Storm that, when he was ten years old and was asked what he would like to become when he was grown up, he said stoutly, "Professor of history!" When he was twelve, he added, he was already

an ardent newspaper reader, fought with Bourmont and Duperre in Algeria, participated four weeks later in the July Revolution and wept when it was all up with Poland after the battle of Ostrolenka. . . . And then I went to the Gymnasium. As a thirteen-year-old third grader, and a mediocre student to boot, I had such a reputation in history that the first-graders took me on walks and allowed themselves to be—I can't think of any other way of putting it—crammed by me for exams.

His stock-in-trade was mostly names and dates, he admitted, but there was one occasion when he astonished his auditors with a highly colored description of the battles of Crécy and Poitiers.⁷

Fontane continued to play with the idea of making history his career until the midforties, but nothing came of it. Instead, he went to Berlin in 1833, lived with an uncle, and attended the Klodensche Gewerbeschule. Six years earlier Bettina von Arnim had wanted to send one of her sons to this school, which, she told her husband, was attracting more and more children from families "of our class," but Achim von Arnim was not persuaded, writing that the trade school, which had no classes in Greek or Latin, could not provide a first-class education.⁸ The young Fontane was by his later admission so given to truancy that his example is useless for testing Arnim's opinion. About all we know about his record is that he continued to impress people by his historical knowledge. Seeking to escape his school chores, which included the writing of a "German essay on a self-chosen theme," he spent a Sunday afternoon in 1833, trudging from Berlin to the village of Löwenbruch three miles south of the city, where he had family friends. On the way he was reminded that twenty years earlier, Bülow's army, composed mostly of Landwehr, had

marched under streaming rain in the same direction and, in the fields around the Großbeeren churchyard, had fought the great battle in which Oudinot's forces were driven into retreat and Napoleon prevented from reentering Berlin. He remembered also that on 14 August 1813, his mother, still a girl, had gone out with other women to tend the wounded left on the stricken field and that the first unfortunate she came upon was "a very young Frenchman who—with hardly a breath left in his body—when he heard his own language being spoken raised himself up as if transformed. Then, with one hand holding the beaker of wine and the other my mother's hand, he was dead before he could drink." That would be a good theme for the essay, thought the student Fontane, and when he got back to Berlin he wrote it and for once received a "Very good" from his teacher, instead of the usual "*Vidi* [Seen]."

Three years later, Fontane graduated from the trade school and, following his father's footsteps, became an apprentice in Rose's pharmacy in the Spandauerstraße next to the St. Nicholas Church. His passion for reading newspapers did not diminish, and he spent much of his free time in establishments that provided them for their patrons, mostly in the Konditorei Anthieny in the northeastern part of town but occasionally in the grander cafés like Stehely on the Gendarmenmarkt and Sparnapagni on Unter den Linden. The literary and political discussions that he heard in these places were probably the real cause of his determination to become a writer, and he started to experiment in various forms. Gradually he concentrated on what he considered to be his greatest strength and began to write historical verse. Thus, in the wake of the doleful "Sibling Love," he composed a poem on the battle of Hochkirch that was inspired by Chamisso's "Salas y Gomez," an epic called "The First Love of Henri IV," and his first ballad, "Retaliation," which dealt with the guilt, triumph, and end of Pizzaro.

Crucial in the development of his poetry was the fact that during his military service in 1844 he became fast friends with Bernhard von Lepel, an officer in the Kaiser-Franz-Regiment in Berlin who also had literary ambitions. Lepel was a member of a literary club called the Tunnel Over the Spree. Founded in 1827 by the Berlin wit M. G. Saphir, it was a kind of personal bodyguard to support him in his

endless feuds and to supply material for his paper, the *Berlin Express*. Originally dominated by a rowdy group of law students, young businessmen, actors, journalists, and lieutenants with an interest in the arts, the club had with the years become both more respectable and more conservative. In Fontane's time, it included such notables as the epic poet Christian Friedrich Scherenberg, the reader to the king Louis Schneider, the lawyer Wilhelm von Merckel, the painter Adolf Menzel, the art historian Franz Kugler, Rudolf Löwenstein, the editor of the new satirical journal *Kladderadatsch*, the military publicist Max Jähns, the artist and illustrator Theodor Hosemann, the Swiss philosopher Max Orelli, and the writers Felix Dahn, Paul Heyse, and Theodor Storm, who met periodically to read and discuss new verse and prose written by fellow members.¹⁰

There was a strong dilettantish cast to the Tunnel, and very few of its products—aside from Fontane's ballads and the much anthologized "The Heart of Douglas" by Moritz Graf von Strachwitz, a Silesian poet who died in 1847—have survived the test of time. The members took themselves very seriously and exercised their critical function with an energy that bordered sometimes on the ferocious. Alexander von Ungern-Sternberg, a highly regarded author of novels and stories of social criticism, found their pretensions faintly comical and refused membership because he said he would not submit his work to "students and soldiers who with the proven German philistine attitude would assure me that my stories were worthless," an opinion that might get out and lead booksellers to cut his royalties.¹¹ But this was an exaggeration from a writer whose novels might have profited from criticism, and in general the Tunnel gave a fair and often helpful hearing to new works.

This was certainly true in the case of Fontane. He was proposed for membership by Lepel in 1844 and began to attend meetings regularly after the conclusion of his military service. Apparently, his first presentations did not impress the membership, and every now and then they were inclined to feel that his later ones were frivolous or in violation of the society's prohibition of political themes. This would almost certainly have been true of his charming poem in 1848 urging his fiancée, Emilie Rouanet, to join him in exchanging the depressing political atmosphere of Berlin for that of the Cordilleras, where

Ohne Wühler dort und Agitator
 Frißt uns höchstens mal ein Alligator. . . .
 Und dem Kreischen nur des Kakadu
 Hören wir am Titicaca zu.

But in 1846, when Fontane read his ballad “The Old Derffling” to the Tunnel, his reception must have been very much like that accorded to the poet Hansen-Grell in the Kastalia chapter of his novel *Vor dem Sturm*: his audience’s enthusiasm far outweighed their criticism;¹² and, on 18 April 1847, the reading of “The Old Ziethen” and two other ballads about Seydlitz and Schwerin was an extraordinarily great success.¹³

He was encouraged, therefore, to stick to this vein and to develop it, a process that was facilitated in 1848 (when he had run out of Frederician marshals to write about) by his discovery of *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, a collection of ballads, sonnets, historical songs, and metrical romances published by Thomas Percy, later bishop of Drumore, in 1765, and *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, three volumes of ballads compiled by Walter Scott and, after some heavy-handed editing by him, published in 1802–1803. Fontane fell upon these with delight, and they became his favorite reading and his greatest resource, determining, as he wrote later, his taste and direction, and providing him with a source of deep enjoyment for the rest of his life.¹⁴

His skill in exploiting these sources soon brought his work to the attention of a wider audience than the Tunnel. His poems were printed and in time established themselves in the popular consciousness, so that even today, when he is chiefly remembered as a novelist, Fontane is well represented in popular anthologies of poetry, like Ludwig Reiners’s *Eternal Spring*,¹⁵ which in its 1958 edition had forty of Fontane’s poems, including the ballads, “The Old Derffling,” “Archibald Douglas,” “John Maynard,” “Jan Bart,” “Herr von Ribbeck auf Ribbeck im Havelland,” and the marvelous “Gorm Grymme,” with its chilling conclusion, telling how, after the death of King Gorm’s only son, his queen

. . . gab ihm um ein Mantel dicht,
 Der war nicht golden, nicht rot,