

The Political as Intensity of Everyday Feelings¹

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It's a convention, so I've been told, that whoever gets the Fontane Prize for literature says something about Fontane. And it should be in the form of an address that should be in some way festive. I have in consequence ventured upon the title: "What Fontane says to us for example." In doing so I wanted to stick to the "for example."

The consequence of this for me was that I had first to read Fontane thoroughly. It would certainly be easier for me if I were allowed to speak about Hölderlin, Kleist, Kafka, Döblin, Joyce, Arno Schmidt, or about Marx. Marx, for example, in literary and linguistic terms would be a great practitioner of the montage work of art. His apparently esoteric theory contains a startling number of narratives and stories. If you resolved the theory into the experiences and the stories it contains, you would very quickly notice, as soon as you tell it in the form of stories and narratives, that the theory has nothing to do with orthodoxy.

Back to Fontane. What occurs to me is that Fontane is often quoted but that these quotations do *not* fully grasp him. He shows a notable indirectness in everything that he writes; that is the *conversational tone*. And for that reason I don't want to try today to present you with a col-

1. Speech on the occasion of the award of the Fontane Prize for literature. Trans. by Andrew Bowie from *Freibeuter* 1 (Berlin 1979): 56-62. The text is a transcript of a partly improvised speech. The translator, while trying to retain as much of the quirky tone of the speech as possible, has occasionally resorted to paraphrase at points where the meaning of the improvised statements might otherwise be too obscure.

lection of quotations; instead, I want to argue roughly with the *attitude* (*Haltung*) taken by this realist who is so rare in Germany. Everything he writes corresponds to a certain attitude.

This fact has to do with celebratory hours like the present one, with the celebratory as such, and with all forms of address. Fontane would say: "That situation will never turn into a dialogue." It's unnatural. My mother, who is also sitting in this hall and who always argues very practically, says: "Help yourself by keeping it short." Fontane, it must be said, would have been indifferently sarcastic. He was, by the way, secretary for three months of the then Academy of Arts—that was still the Royal one. A biographical note states, "Once again his friends found a civil-service post for him: at the age of fifty-six he became secretary of the Academy of Arts. The work was boring but not exacting." Fontane himself says: "I'm longing for the moment when I again will be out of this pretentious nothingness which is clothed in ceremony". We don't honor Fontane if we consider him to be polite. He is calm, but he is sharp.

I grew up in Berlin in the time immediately after the war, so I went to school from Easter 1946 onwards. There we learned a lot about Brecht, Kafka, Klabund, Rilke, almost nothing about Fontane. We knew that Fontane wrote one of the absolute masterpieces of literature, of world literature, *Effi Briest*, that is as valued as Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. He wrote, by the way, a series of other novels with equal mastery, e.g., *Schach von Wuthenow*, *Stine*, *Irrungen und Wirrungen*, and above all *Der Stechlin*. What we didn't know is that he wrote 4,500 pages of war reportage: that is, he described very exactly the wars in 1864, 1866, 1870-1. In doing so, moreover, he risked his life, for he wandered around, out of curiosity, between the fronts of France. He was taken prisoner, condemned as a spy, was to be executed; eventually, because of Bismark's intervention, his captors only succeeded in having him banished to and confined in a fortress on the island of Oléron.

This is an attitude of his that I have a great respect for: his curiosity about the fronts, his crossing of lines, which is the natural form of dialogue. In this respect, it doesn't matter whether it's a question of nations fighting a war or whether it's a question of class barriers or other divisions. Curiosity drives him into the other camp in order to report in his camp, and this is exactly what he means by dialogue. It's not just talking. Georg Lukács classifies Fontane among the great realists of the nineteenth century. I don't want to explain any further *how* he does it and

according to which criteria he carries out his divisions. Realism is definitely not something simple. The problem of Realism is still today the key problem in dealing with language and literature. Bertolt Brecht says of it: "The situation becomes so complicated because now less than ever does a simple 'representation of reality' say something about reality. A photograph of the Krupp-Works or AEG yields almost nothing about these institutions. Reality has slipped into the functions. The reification of human relationships, the factory for example, no longer releases those relationships."

Realism consists, for this reason, of two quite different attitudes. One attitude consists of exactitude in the representation of real experiences. This is what is called a *realistic attitude*. But this attitude does not exist as a natural form. As a natural form there is ideology, i.e., the *contrast* between the wishes of people and a reality which does not answer these wishes and which does not satisfy them. Thus a disparity arises, and it is very unlikely that Realism will result in a plausible and direct solution.

The root of a realistic attitude, its motivation, is *opposition* to the misery present in real circumstances; it is, therefore, an Anti-realism of motivation, a denial of the pure reality-principle, an *anti-realistic* attitude, which alone enables one to look realistically and attentively. This is the dialectic of Realism: its practical side, though, is considerably more difficult, for our senses are very narrow windows. They are — as a natural form in society, therefore, in second nature — developed first of all as *senses for that which is near* (*Nähesinne*). A child grows up in a family and encounters original objects (*Urobjekte*), and it seems to it, for a long time, as if the world were regulated by concrete individuals. All the happiness or misery it experiences is measured by this sense for that which is near — that is a childhood wish. Sigmund Freud says that happiness is the fulfillment of a childhood wish and that such wishes demand they be continually fulfilled. This is a major factor in artistic production. It is, though, also a major factor in the experience flying round the heads of people who do not try to produce works of art professionally. These wishes make them see everything as being a result of what is able to be experienced near at hand. The real developments, though, the ones that can assault people, take place in the movement of history, i.e., the form of societal events about which our direct senses tell us little.

I want to make this clear with an example. There is a famous Höl-

derlin poem called "The Autumn." In it Hölderlin describes a foot of earth, about a square meter, upon which the Duke of Württemberg, Ulrich, is supposed once to have trod. Hölderlin describes this piece of forest ground in a very beautiful poem. And now pick up a biology book and see how a piece of forest ground is described there: 16x10 to the 57th lice, so-and-so many insects, so-and-so many spiders; and then it also says 10 to the minus 7 foxes and twice 10 to the minus six deer. You notice they are two quite different languages. One is the language of statistics: we deal with our surroundings in an *unsensuous* way, exactly as we do with the real relations in history. And we deal with lyric poetry in a *sensuous* way with our direct sense for what is near. The two fall apart. The big decisions in history are not made in the realm of what we can experience close at hand. The really big disasters take place in the distance which we cannot experience, for which we don't have the appropriate telescopes (or microscopes) in our senses. The two don't come together. In this sense man is not a social, not a political being. And experience shows that when he rebels he generally even smashes the few sensuous tools which link him to the social whole.

What is a love story against the liability for military service? Imagine a couple in love in August 1939. They have just gotten to know each other. And a love-story begins in the way that Fontane would describe the beginnings of love-stories. And now comes September 1, 1939, and the man has to go to his regiment. And he gets perhaps three periods of leave, if he is lucky. Once he even gets four days. That is too little time in which to love each other and too much to get on with each other. Now he comes back in 1953 from being a prisoner of war in Russia, and the couple is supposed dutifully to carry on the love-story of August 1939 which "was briefly interrupted for a few years." That is an example of the relationship of history to the stories of relationships of human beings, and we only have natural experience in the latter.

Fontane understood, without ever using the word dialectic, a lot about this ambiguity and radicalism of Realism. In great novels and novellas the concrete life-stories of people are dictated by social conditions — and people die of these conditions. That's what we don't have telescopes for, what we lack the perceptual tools for. You've got to try and imagine these tools of perception concretely. Look, there's the hammer and sickle, for example. But I suspect that they are tools which you can't do much with, either for the relation between people or for

social experiences. Neither can you saw or drill holes in history. A microscope for every natural scientist or a telescope for the astronomer only exists, as far as the experience of society is concerned, in the form of the human head's capacity for abstraction, which simply isn't as sensuous as an embrace.

Fontane tells precise stories about social conditions which we hardly have the tools to describe. But he doesn't narrate from the partisan side of the conditions, so to speak, in a dogmatic fashion. Instead, the details have *particular life* in the novels: the flower beds, for instance, the sundial in *Effi Briest*, a bush, i.e., the things with which people have established relationships. And to some extent these things or the relationships of the people to these things look critically on that which happens inevitably in the novel, that which leads to someone dying, and they protest against these constraints. Effi Briest, for example, is sold off like a commodity. Schach von Wuthenow is trapped in the claws of the pre-1806 concept of honor, as if in a prison. Fontane is in no way on the side of inevitable tragedy. He delineates these constraints very exactly, but from the opposite point of view to that of mourning (*Trauerarbeit*), in a cheerful spirit of opposition to destiny. He says, "Nothing can ever be won by despondency."

Fontane is for this reason also the discoverer of the *Novel of Diversity* (*Vielfältigkeitsroman*), that is, of a literary form that in some novels doesn't bother about plot (of which, of course, there is plenty in other, earlier novels by him); instead, the connections between many different plots are made, or reflection upon the events is extended. *Der Stechlin*, for example, is five hundred pages long. But what happens in it is that an old man dies and two young men get engaged. *Fontane is never in love with the terror of real circumstances; instead, he always looks for ways out*, and one reason for montage-technique, for novels of diversity in Fontane's sense, is precisely this search for ways out. In limited individual circumstances, these ways out do not exist; instead, they can only exist, if they are to exist at all, cooperatively, i.e., in connections (*Zusammenhänge*), and in the connection there is always a way out.

Let's just try, for example, to imagine what Fontane would say here to our Berlin, what he would mock, what his attitude would be if he observed the circumstances in Berlin which are clearly different from those of the Federal Republic — and from those of the GDR, of course. He would be curious enough, and his way would be to move between the fronts. First of all, he would come across the election results, the

“Hedgehogs”;² he would come across what Peter Glotz calls the majority culture, which decides the elections, and the minority culture, which sets itself up in an alternative manner in a kind of parallel society. They’ve all, he would say, replaced dialogue with the communiqué. That’s a sentence that I sometimes borrow from my teacher Helmut Becker: “Nous avons remplacé le dialogue par le communiqué.” He would say, “But they’re not talking to each other; you ought to give this speech twice: once in the style of the majority culture, another time in the style of the minority culture.”

Then he would carry on counting. He would compare the political labor power invested in the Federal Republic and in West Berlin for the purposes of building bridges in society with the teams who are concerned with pulling down bridges and possibilities of agreement. He would continue: there is, in all parties (and that has little to do with left or right), a grouping which is united in *one* thing, namely that it is against wars of religion and does not believe in the automatic nature of divisions; one could gather these people under the name of the *Unbelievers* (*Ungläubiger*). And for this party, which really does exist among us, and to which I reckon a great number of my friends belong, Fontane would be one of the best helpers I know. I say that after having carefully read the substantial oeuvre he wrote for precisely this point. I am still speaking about the concept of the realistic, for the removal (*Aufhebung*) of divisions belongs to the realistic. A realist drills. In that respect, he is unpleasant. He tends, for example, to set some things at nought. In Fontane’s case we can observe that this is also a source of cheerfulness and of a certain wit.

Let’s stay with politics — I am quite convinced that today and here Fontane would not speak about literature but about politics; that’s where the sources are which would most surprise him. After all it was he who said: “In parliamentary elections there is a battery of soldiers behind every voter” and “What’s the point of elections if there isn’t any power for the people?” Such words are not at all unusual at the end of the nineteenth century. He called himself a “doubtful passenger.”

In relation to politics he would, I presume, investigate first where the strangely rarified air comes from, which always appears when political matters are being dealt with. He would investigate whether real experience appears in the political field of language. And then he would

2. Part of the “Green movement. Trans.

probably investigate the working days of politicians to see if anywhere during such a full working day there is time, even if it's only ten minutes, to reflect calmly on politics. And he would ask where the actual possibilities for action are, if politicians, to a very great extent, have to be present at celebrations, have to make their own speeches or listen to speeches. According to the rules of time and motion surveys, then, there's not much there that can be politically active.

He would then calculate further. He would say: where is there, then, anything left for politics of German efficiency, of thoroughness, of the massive German capacity for work? He would, therefore, calculate as follows: Just as there are national aggregate calculations in commodity production, so there can be aggregate calculations for the labor power of the people who produce these goods. He would thus find out that a large part of labor takes place in industry, in the world of work. A further large part takes place in the area of socialization: in families, in love-affairs, in education, etc. And now in order to be able to face life in industry, at work, and in these relationships and not run away, one needs a further quantum of labor, which one would call *balance-labor* (*Balancearbeit*), labor for the dubious balance that must be maintained; and this labor is just as great as the labor that goes into the work place and into relationships or families. We overlook this balance-economy because it is unpaid. But it is the reason why the highly active internal organization of motivation (*Innenausstattung en den Motiven*) in people looks from the outside like passivity, so that minorities can be active in politics, repressively active, whilst the others look on patiently. But this passivity is inauthentic. The form of the appropriation of left-wing qualities by the right in the Fascism of the 1930s was activist: it marched on the streets and invaded foreign countries. Today this appropriation takes the form of the *mass-mobilization of passivity*. We can only investigate this form of mobilization if we study this balance-economy.

If you now take these three large main groups of human labor power — the stabilizing internal organization of motivation, where the main labor takes place; labor in industry and careers; and labor in relationships — and just calculate roughly how much this is, then about 1.5% of human social labor power is left for politics (*das Politische*). And this now divides itself again into left, right, and center; it is administered in the form of mistakes, of imperfect political production (*Politischer Halbproduktion*); it is divided again into extraparliamentary politics, the

executives, parliaments, and the Law, which supposedly has nothing to do with politics. Besides, Fontane would now say: "This is all based on the false conception that politics is a specialized area." But in fact it is *a particular degree of intensity of everything and everybody*, of everyday feeling, of every praxis. Fontane would conclude from this, for the use of language and therefore for literature, that it is time to change thoroughly these disproportions, that writers do not become political by sticking to a particular political praxis but by helping to recuperate (in the form of stories [*Geschichten*]) what is considered unpolitical as a political matter. This disproportion is present in all countries. But in Germany it is specific and is the cause of a whole series of catastrophes. You see, it is thoroughly unpractical if the emotional shock of German families, which would have meant something important for the victims of Auschwitz in 1942, is made up for in 1979; for today it is an essentially useless, that is, timeless form of shock. The fact that we in our country are always shocked at the wrong moments and are not shocked at the right ones — and I am now talking about something very bad — is a consequence of our considering politics as a specialized area which others look after for us and not as a degree of intensity of our own feelings.

Fontane was politically never left-wing. He was a conservative, but he was never a reactionary. As clearly as Fontane characterizes what is reactionary, on the one hand, he also says just as clearly, on the other hand, "If I met someone who had character and was reliable, for that's what matters to me, then he was a conservative." And what in *Der Stechlin* the son of Stechlin says "Off towards the New," Pastor Lorenzen, who conveys Fontane's main opinion in this book and is really the educator of the whole village, says: "No, hang onto the old, and only when it really has to be, move towards the New."

And this is the point that really matters. If it *has* to come about, accept the New. But we have in our country a tradition, a whole chain of traditions that the New is made when it ought not to be. And vice versa, if it has to be, it isn't made at all but is violently suppressed. You can imagine that in two thousand years rather a lot is stored up. And it doesn't, as my mother would say, just hang on the clothes (*das bleibt . . . nicht in den Kleidern hängen*). It is not a question of continually making new starts and breaking them off again. This principle of historical discontinuity is a specifically German recipe for devastating catastrophes. Rather it is a question of having a calm relationship to the history of

one's country, i.e., to admit history. *One has to be conservative if one is progressive.* We have got to start working on the history of our country. By that I mean something very concrete; one might start by telling stories in turn about it. Ernst Bloch says: "History does not repeat itself. But if it has not become history, if it is a failure, then it certainly repeats itself."

I should like slowly to come to the conclusion. The problem is that one thing separates us from Fontane, along with the many things that don't separate us from him, and that is a *radicalization of all temporal relations*. Fontane, for example, didn't know the bombing raids that many Berliners can still feel in their bones. In that situation, if one puts it graphically, there are always two strategies — a strategy from above and a strategy from below. Clausewitz wrote a certain amount about *strategy from above*, which is the strategy the bomber command has, and the bomber command has got the means for it as well. Strategy from below would be what a woman with two children down in a cellar could do to oppose the bombing. We must make it clear to ourselves that, if this relationship of person/bomb in the emergency is the model of how our modern world intends to deal with people and if we don't want to deceive ourselves in times of peace or apparent peace about the fact that this is precisely the point of the emergency, then we must ask ourselves whether there are any reasons which make us satisfied with the meagre means of a strategy from below in the emergency. The problem is that the woman in the bomb-cellar in 1944, for example, has no means at all to defend herself at that moment. She might perhaps have had means in 1928 if she had organized with others *before* the development which then moves towards Papen, Schleicher, and Hitler. So the question of organization is located in 1928, and the requisite consciousness is located in 1944. That's a very serious point, which is not answered with the old saying that one comes home cleverer from the town hall: one doesn't even get out of the cellar — that thought basically stops one from sheltering oneself either in an idyll or in a utopia.

Fontane would put all this in a much more easy-going way. We can't be easy-going in quite the same way: we can only be so in the perception of such relations. Marx always talks about the relation of production, and the capitalists make this relation of production. But I don't believe that a capitalist, an entrepreneur alone, has enough fantasy, so to speak, to think up Verdun or Stalingrad, or bombing raids, or Vietnam, or Chile. That's not an object of capital, it's a relation of production of the relations of production, and one can call that a historical

relation (*ein Produktionsverhältnis der Produktionsverhältnisse, und das kann man ein Geschichtsverhältnis nennen*). And in Germany this historical relation is really particularly dense, a thicket like in the fairytale (*Märchen*) Sleeping Beauty. Fontane worked precisely on this root. I consider it as one task of language, and thus of literature, to work on it and to clarify it.

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Volume 6 Number 1, April 1987, is a Special Issue entitled The Crisis of the Welfare State edited by Joachim Israel.

April, July, October and January

Subscription Rates Volume 6, 1986

Individuals: £16.50 (UK) £20.65 (overseas) US\$36.00 (N America)

Institutions: £47.50 (UK) £59.35 (overseas) US\$95.00 (N America)

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