

FONTANE: NATURE IN THE NOVELS OF FONTANE

NATURE IN THE NOVELS OF THEODOR FONTANE

by

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SCOPE AND CONTENTS: This study represents an analysis of the function of nature within the novels of Theodor Fontane. Nature is examined in its bearing on the form and content of individual novels, attention being given to the chronological development of Fontane's work. An attempt is made to assess the significance of nature in the writer's art as a whole.

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FONTANE'S NOVELS AND NOVELLEN

- 1878 Vor dem Sturm  
1880 Grete Minde  
1881 Ellernklipp  
1882 L'Adultera  
1883 Schach von Wuthenow  
1884 Graf Petöfy  
1885 Unterm Birnbaum  
1887 Cécile  
1888 Irrungen Wirrungen  
1890 Stine  
1891 Quitt  
1892 Unwiederbringlich  
1892 Frau Jenny Treibel  
1895 Die Poggenpuhls  
    Effi Briest  
1899 Der Stechlin

Published posthumously: Mathilde Möhring

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CHAPTER I  
INTRODUCTION

Fontane's use of nature in his novels is an aspect of his art which normally receives scant attention in critical studies. The reason for this is not hard to surmise. Fontane owes his position among the German writers of rank to his achievements in the social novel. The conventions and limits of this genre have been thoroughly analysed with special reference to Fontane in the study by Peter Demetz, Formen des Realismus: Theodor Fontane, Kritische Untersuchungen (Munich, 1964). Demetz uses the term "Roman der guten Gesellschaft", which he sees as characterised by a tendency to "Pragmatik, Nüchternheit and praktischen Anthropologie".<sup>1</sup> The attention of the narrator remains with the human characters, in their interplay with other characters within a fixed social milieu. Consequently, for writers like Jane Austen, as for Fontane, the occasions on which characters travel abroad from their customary environment represent pauses in the narrative, functional links between one social milieu and the next, in which the opportunities for landscape description are either

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<sup>1</sup>P. Demetz, op. cit., p. 115.

passed up entirely, or else are treated with a minimum of attention.<sup>2</sup> Demetz' conclusion is that nature is of no fundamental significance in the type of novel which was to become Fontane's most sophisticated art-form:

Fontane ist kein Dichter der Landschaft--aber er soll es auch nicht sein. Die Konventionen der Form, in der er sein besonderes Talent glücklich verwirklicht, lieben den Menschen im Kreis mit anderen Menschen, aber ausserhalb der grünenden Natur.<sup>3</sup>

Such judgements also show that the Fontane in whom critics are mainly interested is the writer of the Berlin novels, rather than the composer of pastoral "Lieder" and ballads, or of the earlier topographical work Wanderungen durch die Mark Brandenburg.

Fontane's own theoretical writings betray a cautious approach to the value of natural description in the novel. In an appreciation of Isegrimm by Willibald Alexis, one of his most important early models, he admires the landscape descriptions for their direct contribution to the mood and events of the narrative; but mere scene painting he rejects as artistically worthless:

Eine Sonne auf- oder untergehen, ein Mühlwasser über das Wehr fallen, einen Baum rauschen zu lassen, ist die billigste literarische Beschäftigung, die gedacht werden kann. In jedes kleinen Mädchens

<sup>2</sup>P. Demetz, op. cit., pp. 117-119.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 122.



Schulaufsatz kann man dergleichen finden; es gehört zu den Künsten, die jeder übt and die deshalb längst aufgehört haben, als Kunst zu gelten; es wird bei der Lektüre von jeder regelrechten Leserin einfach überschlagen und in neunundneunzig Fällen von hundert mit völligem Recht, denn es hält den Gang der Erzählung nur auf. . . .Die Landschaftsschilderung hat nur noch Wert, wenn sie als künstlerische Folie für einen Stein auftritt, der dadurch doppelt leuchtend wird, wenn sie den Zweck verfolgt, Stimmungen vorzubereiten oder zu steigern.<sup>4</sup>

The description of nature must serve the presentation of human events. This order of priorities refers in this case to the historical novel, a form in which the individual and the epic coexist: the fates of an individual or family are shown (for example, that of Lewin von Witzewitz in Fontane's Vor dem Sturm) and there is also presented some truth about human society in the historical perspective, an "idea" of the kind Fontane has in mind when he concludes from Isegrimm: "die 'Gesellschaft' taugte nichts, aber das Volk war gesund."<sup>5</sup> However, we may assume a similar duality for the social novel, whose focus of interest is both the individual characters and the broader guiding moeurs of a given part of society. One would therefore expect Fontane's views on landscape description to apply with equal validity to his theory of the social novel.

To talk in terms of nature as background description

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<sup>4</sup>Theodor Fontane, Schriften zur Literatur, ed. H.-H. Reuter (Berlin, 1960), p. 63.

<sup>5</sup>Schriften zur Literatur, p. 61.

is to consider its use from the aspect of form. It is difficult to define the point at which it becomes an essential part of the content of a work; but we can recognize when that stage has been reached from such extreme cases as Rousseau's Nouvelle Hèloïse and the German work it helped to engender, Goethe's Werther. In such works the feeling for nature forms a vital part of the spiritual and mental perceptions of the characters and cannot be discounted as mere narrative ornament, imposed externally. With Romantic writers ecstatic emotional response to nature is a distinguishing feature of the typical hero, persisting right through to such writers as Tieck. In its most morbid form the enthusiasm for nature comes to signify a form of release for individuals who have rejected the world in which they find themselves. In such works we may generally assume a large measure of identification of the narrator with his hero; or at least the latter is portrayed from a sympathetic standpoint.

We should expect, on the basis of his theoretical writings, that the use of nature to convey the sensitive individual's longing for release from a mundane existence would represent for Fontane an outmoded and discredited Romanticism. "Der 'Weltschmerz' ist unter Hohn und Spott längst zu Grabe getragen."<sup>6</sup> Demetz, at least, considers

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<sup>6</sup>Schriften zur Literatur, p. 8.

that within the social novel any association of nature with Weltschmerz is restricted to the misfits (whether temporarily or permanently so), and is therefore implicitly disowned by the writer:

Im Roman der guten Gesellschaft überlebt der klassizistische Humanismus auf besondere Art: deutsche Wälder, magische Schluchten, ragende Gebirge sind dieser Form ebenso wesensfremd wie der anakreontischen Lyrik; nur die Ratlosen, Irrenden und Abwegigen dürfen in problematischer Einsamkeit in Garten oder Park ihren trüben Gedanken nachhängen, ehe sie in die hellerleuchteten Räumlichkeiten des "status quo" zurückkehren.<sup>7</sup>

In view of these considerations it does not surprise us that the most methodical and complete study we have of Fontane's use of nature in his novels concludes that in this respect his skill is limited. Max Tau in Der assoziative Faktor in der Landschafts- und Ortsdarstellung Theodor Fontanes (Oldenburg, 1923) detects an artistic alienation between the writer and the objects of his natural description. Fontane's method of portraying a landscape is comparable to that of the plastic artist. Impressions are established in the mind of the reader by a process of filling in a scheme on a flat canvas, by such points of reference as "links", "rechts", "im Vordergrund", and "im Hintergrund", and through the addition of optical and acoustic effects; these may be supplied directly by the narrator or, very often, by a character in the story,

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<sup>7</sup>Demetz, op. cit., pp. 119-120.

who will also, very often, express his emotional response to the scene. The nature description which results from this approach is described by Tau as "gestellte Natur". Such descriptions are imposed externally, rather than arising as an organic part of the work. Fontane works with certain numerically limited motifs, conceived intellectually and dispensed at suitable junctures in the narrative. This fundamental truth clearly separates him from the great poets of nature:

Wenn. . .z.B. Matthias Claudius in seinem Abendliede sagt: "Der Wald steht still und schweiget", so wird über den Wald nicht nur eine gedankliche Aussage gemacht, sondern eine vom Dichter erstmalig erlebte Empfindung zur Anschauung erhoben. Es kommt dadurch eine neue Auffassung zustande, die in uns ein einheitliches Vorstellungsbild erweckt, das das Gewusste durch eine neue ungewusste Beziehung erweitert. Bei Fontane werden jedoch durch Verbindung von Teileindrücken, die reflektiert vermittelt sind, Aussagen zu einer Landschaftskomposition verbunden, deren szenisches Prinzip wir als gestellte Landschaft erkannten.<sup>8</sup>

Fontane's scenes of nature are "gestellt" also in that he can only make use of concepts already present in the minds of his readers. He exploits associations established by such predecessors as Keller or Storm, and this can lead to an over-rating of those scenes most reminiscent of these predecessors.<sup>9</sup> Tau concludes that this reliance on associations

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<sup>8</sup>Max Tau, op. cit., pp. 13-14.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 43.

not inherent in the creative work itself indicates an artistic flaw deriving from a lack of imagination ("Mangel an Phantasie"), which necessitates a heavy reliance on empirical reality.<sup>10</sup> It is precisely this which distinguishes the Kunsterzähler from the Dichter.

Demetz also refers to the limitations of Fontane's technique of natural description, his repetitiveness and apparent inability to rise beyond a few conventional and well-worn motifs.<sup>11</sup>

In the view of this writer one is bound to agree with such judgements, as long as one is concerned with questions of artistic technique, with the actual creative process rather than the overall content of the works and Fontane's aims. The former approach lays Fontane's art open to a comparison with some of the greatest writers of German literature. From such a judgement there can be no appeal, since the critic has his criteria established prior to his evaluation. The latter approach would allow a more indulgent assessment based on an understanding of what Fontane is trying to achieve.<sup>12</sup> The

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<sup>10</sup>Max Tau, op. cit., p. 65.

<sup>11</sup>Demetz, op. cit., p. 122.

<sup>12</sup>Cf. the article by Hubert Ohl (Jahrbuch der deutschen Schiller-Gesellschaft, 1967), 469 ff.), who attempts such an approach and qualifies Tau's findings on grounds similar to those advanced in this thesis.

criteria Tau uses appear to derive from an era in which nature was viewed as a sacred force, demanding special insight of the poet proposing to treat it. The concept of "Einfühlung" as a description of the empathy which binds the artist to nature, derives from Novalis and the Romantic writers.<sup>13</sup>

To the adherents of such a school Fontane's treatment of nature must appear as superficial and at times, as in his somewhat elaborate symbolism, even irreverent.

The present study proceeds from the recognition that nature is used a great deal in Fontane's novels, even in the social novels, and perhaps to a greater extent than critics like Demetz allow. It is of course true that the extent to which nature is used in the narrative varies considerably with the individual works. The intention of this thesis is to examine Fontane's use of nature, not with a view to eliciting the actual mechanics of his natural description in order to determine their intrinsic artistic worth; rather it is our intention to analyse the role of nature and natural description within the individual novels, so as to understand their actual function within the writer's narrative economy.

The study concentrates on the social novels, first, because it is to these chiefly that Fontane owes his position in the history of literature, and, secondly, because, as we

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<sup>13</sup>Cf. Ernst Bertram, Studien zu Adalbert Stifters Novellentechnik (Dortmund, 1907, reprint. 1966), p. 52.

have seen, the use of nature is not predominantly associated with this particular art-form: the thesis may thus help to illuminate some individual aspects of Fontane's art, which distinguish him from others in his field. The survey begins however with the early Novellen, Grete Minde and Ellernklipp, which, in the writer's view, contain significant themes and situations linking them with the later novels of contemporary society. Thereafter, the thesis proceeds broadly with a chronologically arranged survey of individual novels which seem characteristic of different periods. The possibility of a chronological development is borne in mind. Cross-references are made in discussing features which appear to be characteristic of many of the novels.

It is difficult in a study of this kind to limit terms of reference. It is not our intention to begin with a philosophical definition of nature, since it is exceedingly doubtful if Fontane had any such a priori concept in mind when he wrote. As Tau shows in his analysis of Fontane's descriptive technique, he willingly uses resources established by his predecessors, without necessarily sharing their inner understanding. If the critic must choose his methods to suit his subject, a pragmatic approach would seem justified in the case of Fontane, who, in his own words, was content to write as with a psychograph, i.e., by instinct. Under the rubric of nature are considered such aspects as the presentation

and function of landscapes, the relationship between characters and natural environment, the use of nature in symbols and the concept of nature indicating a style of life in contrast to the social. The justification for bringing together these seemingly diverse topics, some of which have more to do with form than content, lies, as I hope to show, in the works themselves. It is the writer's belief that all derive from the same creative source, an impelling fascination felt towards the world of nature on the part of a writer otherwise concerned with the pragmatic presentation of social realities.



## CHAPTER II

### NATURE IN THE EARLY NOVELLEN

Of Fontane's early Novellen Demetz writes: "Man wünscht, er hätte Grete Minde nie veröffentlicht, Ellernklipp nie geschrieben."<sup>1</sup> Such a judgement may arise from this critic's preconceived notion of where Fontane's true talents lie, namely in the study of contemporary society. Similar views, however, have been expressed by other critics, for example in Conrad Wandrey's study of the novels.

It is not within the scope of this thesis to consider the merits of these works in general terms. The importance of Grete Minde (1880) for this study is twofold: first it provides a point of departure in any chronological assessment; secondly, despite the atmosphere of medieval antiquity which appears to veil the work--an atmosphere suggested initially by the title "Gret Minde, nach einer altmärkischen Chronik"--, there are clear resemblances to the psychological novel of the type prevalent in the late part of the nineteenth century: the differences between this work and Fontane's later social novels are more superficial than at first sight appears.

The heroine is the daughter of a Tangermünd alderman, who, in the company of a friend, Valtin, flees the ill-treatment she suffers at home following her father's death; for years

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<sup>1</sup>P. Demetz, op. cit., p. 85.

they live a vagabond life among some travelling players, until Valtin dies of consumption; Grete is left with his child, and in accordance with her promise to him, she returns home to seek a reconciliation with her family, only to be rejected and denied her rightful inheritance. In the conclusion Fontane departs noticeably from the chronicle: where the historical Grete set fire to the town as an act of revenge, for which she was executed,<sup>2</sup> Fontane's heroine does so in a state of mental derangement and herself perishes in the flames.

Thus, within the form of a historical novel, we see the sufferings of a sensitive woman, her vain attempt to rise above them and her eventual spiritual collapse. The tragic catastrophe arises from the effect of adversity on inherent psychological factors in the heroine. Considerable attention is given to her psychological and physiological constitution, for example to hereditary factors (her mother was a Spanish Catholic), so that Demetz sees in the work an unhappy combination of historical fiction and the positivism of Taine: "Das Nebeneinander von erzwungenem Historismus und Vererbungslehre reflektiert, in Grete Minde, die Misere eines stillen Zeitalters anstatt sie artistisch zu überwinden."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>P. Demetz, op. cit., pp. 97-98.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 97.

In Grete Minde, two very different kinds, or levels, of narrative style are mixed. On the one hand it is an attempt at historical painting, in which the emphasis rests on the remoteness of time, and to a lesser extent, of place: superficially the events are viewed from the perspective of historical distance. But in its documentation of a psychological "Anlage" and the bearings of this on the fortunes of the heroine, the influence of nineteenth-century realism is clearly perceptible. From this introductory analysis of the character of the work we may proceed to consider the role of nature in the narrative.

Conrad Wandrey, who criticizes the work on grounds similar to those of Demetz, concludes his study with the view that the treatment of the landscape-settings is the saving grace and abiding achievement of the *Novelle*:

Nur der wenigen, eindrucksvoll mit der Geschichte verflochtenen Landschaftsbilder und -stimmungen sei besonders gedacht. Ihre Klarheit, ihr herber Farbenglanz wird in den späteren Romanen nicht mehr übertroffen, nur hie und da noch erreicht. Was Fontane in Grete Minde von der Schönheit des nördlichen Herbstes--schon vom Wanderer durch die Mark wieder und wieder gerühmt und noch in Effi Briest die einzigartige Verklärung des Endes-- festgehalten hat, ist das Bleibende des Werken. . . .<sup>4</sup>

Wandrey's mention of the way in which landscapes are "woven in" with the story is of interest, and this aspect will be developed, critically, in the following study.

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<sup>4</sup>Conrad Wandrey, Theodor Fontane (Munich, 1919), p. 145.

According to Fontane's own theory, background description in the novel should be used with similar effect to that of the scenery in drama, to convey moods which anticipate and enhance the action. In his review of the Alexis novel, mentioned above, he writes:

Gleich das erste Kapitel ist eine landschaftliche Ouvertüre zu dem, was kommt. Wir sehen ein märkisches Luch, an dessen einem Rande unser Isegrimm auf Haus Ilitz wohnt. Auf Meilen hin ein Moorgrund, eine Torfniederung; die ganze Geschichte der Landschaft hier herum knüpft sich an dieses Stück Stumpf und Sand. Hier vor tausend Jahren, wurde die grosse Wendenschlacht geschlagen. . . .Über dieser Landschaft liegt jetzt ein grau Gewölk; da, wo die Sonne sich durchzukämpfen trachtet, laufen fahle Streifen über das Grau hin; alles öde, leer; nur eine Krähe sitzt auf dem Stein. So das Bild, das die ersten Seiten vor uns entrollen. Und alles, was geschieht, es stimmt zu dem Ton, den Willibald Alexis hier einleitend anschlägt. Das ist Landschaftsschilderung.<sup>5</sup>

The action in Grete Minde takes place in a setting which is remote in place and time from the mundane world of the author and his readers; the origin of the chronicle demands and sustains this remote quality. The setting also follows a well established form, seen in, notably, Keller's Seldwyla Novellen. This is a story of village life, so that nature and its manifestations are familiar reality to the characters. Descriptions of an idyllic pastoral kind follow naturally from this narrative setting, adding to the somewhat

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<sup>5</sup>Theodor Fontane, Schriften zur Literatur, p. 63.

"märchenhaft" quality of the story. Nature often figures in the background descriptions as an emblem of peace and unchangeableness. Such a description occurs at the beginning, when Grete and Valtin are alone, outside the village:

Zu Füßen hatten sie den breiten Strom und die schmale Tanger, die spitzwinklig in den Strom einmündete; drüben aber, am anderen Ufer, dehnten sich die Wiesen, und dahinter lag ein Schattenstrich, aus dessen Lichtungen hier und dort eine vom Abendrot übergoldete Kirchturmspitze hervorblickte. Der Himmel blau, die Luft frisch; Sommerfäden zogen, und in das Geläut der ersten heimwärts ziehenden Herden mischte sich von weit her das Anschlagen der Abendglocke.<sup>6</sup>

Years later, when Grete returns home the environs of Tangermünd have remained unchanged through all the vicissitudes of the heroine's own fortunes. The peaceful aspect has remained, and this has a reassuring effect on Grete:

Der Weg ging anfänglich über Wiesen. Es war schon alles herbstlich; der rote Ampfer, der sonst in breiten Streifen an dieser Stelle blühte, stand längst in Samen, und die Vögel sangen nicht mehr: aber der Himmel wölbte sich blau, und die Sommerfäden zogen, und mitunter war es ihr, als vergässe sie alles Leids, das sie drückte. Ein tiefer Frieden lag über der Natur.<sup>7</sup>

It must be admitted that in these passages there is some conventionality of language and a repetition of motifs,

<sup>6</sup>Theodor Fontane, Sämtliche Werke, Nymphenburger edition (Munich, 1959 ff.), III, 40. This edition of the works of Fontane will be henceforth designated "Werke", with the volume given in Roman numerals and the page references in Arabic.

<sup>7</sup>Werke, III, 76.

so that here Tau's thesis, the excessive use of "gestellte Natur" by Fontane, is confirmed: the description seems to be intellectually contrived. Tau concludes from this that in Fontane the natural world is lacking in any independent informing force. This apparent negation of a dynamic view of nature is qualified, however, by Renate Schäfer, who remarks: "durch diese Negation darf man sich. . . nicht verleiten lassen, den leisen dunklen Ton des Grauens zu überhören, der zuweilen aus seinen Naturschilderungen dringt, eines fast Eichendorffschen Grauens vor ihrer sprachlosen, wilden, fremdartigen Dämonie, das freilich nur sehr unmittelbar ausgesprochen wird. . ." <sup>8</sup>

There are suggestions of such a "Dämonie" in the natural backgrounds against which the action of Grete Minde takes place. Grete's flight with Valtin takes them through a dark forest, which awakens in her a fear, and this leads her to forebodings concerning Valtin:

"Ich weiss nicht, was es ist, aber solange wir in dem Wald sind, Valtin, darfst du mich nicht zärtlich ansehen und mich nicht küssen. Unter den Sternen hier, da sieht uns Gott, aber in dem Wald drin ist alles Nacht und Finsternis. Und die Finsternis ist das Böse!" <sup>9</sup>

Here nature has an oppressive effect on a character by virtue

<sup>8</sup> Renate Schäfer, "Fontane's Melusine-Motiv", Euphorion, pp. 56, 74.

<sup>9</sup> Werke, III, 57.

of some sinister force which appears to inform it. Elsewhere, especially at moments of crisis or growing tension, the natural background appears to the reader to be controlled by an animate force, which, far from standing passively behind the events portrayed, comes forward and dictates their course. After the death of Valtin, which in addition to personal grief brings the problem of obtaining a Christian burial for him, one feels already that events are crowding in on the heroine, threatening to engulf her earlier dreams of happiness in chaos. In the wilderness of the churchyard, where Valtin is to be buried, nature appears to add to the mockery, and again the heroine feels oppressed as if by an animate presence:

Wo nicht Birnbäume mit ihren tief herabhängenden Zweigen alles überdeckten, standen Dill- und Fencheldolden, hoch in Samen geschossen; dazwischen aber allerhand verspätete Kräuter, Thymian und Rosmarin, und füllten die Luft mit ihrem würzigen Duft. Und sie blieb stehen, duckte sich und hob sich wieder, und es war ihr, als ob diese wuchernde Gräberwildnis, diese Pfadlosigkeit unter Blumen, sie mit einem geheimnisvollen Zauber umspinne.<sup>10</sup>

There is also a suggestion of a dynamic force in nature in the final chapter, where the catastrophe is related with a compactness which heightens the horror: there is an inevitability about the sequence of events in which human will no longer counts. Nature itself is filled with an uneasy presentiment which the heroine, too, senses; the almost

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<sup>10</sup>Werke, III, 71.

apocalyptic dimension of natural events seems to confirm her megalomaniac purpose:

. . .hinter dem Giebel stand ein dickes Gewölk. Zugleich fühlte sie, dass eine schwere, feuchte Lüft zog; Windstöße fuhren dazwischen, und sie hörte, wie das Obst von den Bäumen fiel. Über die Stadt hin aber, von Sankt Stephan her, flogen die Dohlen, unruhig, als ob sie nach einem anderen Platz suchten und ihn nicht finden könnten. Grete sah es alles. Und sie sog die feuchte Luft ein and ging weiter. Ihr war so frei.<sup>11</sup>

Impending doom is associated with natural manifestations whereby things are disturbed from their normal place or habit; fruit falls from the trees and jackdaws (traditionally associated with sinister events) refuse to settle: the reader catches faint echoes of certain scenes in Shakespeare in which the elements are in agitation prior to deeds of crime. At any rate, Fontane admired this aspect of Shakespeare's art: "das gewaltig Unerhörte, das geschieht, ist immer von verwandten Erscheinungen draussen in der Natur begleitet".<sup>12</sup>

Thus, in addition to enhancing, passively, the events portrayed, nature often shows a kind of complicity with them. This is one definition of that aspect of Fontane's art which is usually described as his symbolism, and some consideration must be given to this feature of his narrative, before

<sup>11</sup>Werke, III, 88.

<sup>12</sup>Theodor Fontane, Schriften zur Literatur, p. 63.



examining his use of nature in symbols.

Events or manifestations within the story preshadow a coming event, or give coherent expression to some truth of the characters' situation, without any necessary causal connection between symbol and object. Sometimes such symbols appear consistently throughout Fontane's novels, so that the reader must possess the key to their meaning before grasping their significance.<sup>13</sup> Sometimes the key is provided by the commentary of one of the characters. Symbols in the sense used here have no larger significance beyond the actual events of the story; only occasionally does Fontane use a symbol to convey some universal truth (notably the lake in Der Stechlin). Such symbols will therefore be referred to here as "narrative symbols". This aspect of Fontane's art is frequently criticised as mechanical ("gestellt!"), or on the other hand as esoteric.

Natural manifestations provide the most frequently used material for narrative symbols in Fontane's novels. We have already seen how he uses landscapes and natural surroundings to mirror the present or coming fortunes of the characters. We will examine this aspect with some further examples from Grete Minde.

Grete awakes from her sleep at the edge of the

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<sup>13</sup>Cf. the motif of the "wilder Wein", ch. 4, below.

Lorenzwald and finds the wind has blown a few foxglove petals over her. She wonders what significance this can have for her, and a short conversation with Valtin ensues:

"Was bedeutet es mir? es ist eine Märchenblume".  
 "Ja, das ist es. Und es bedeutet dir,  
 dass du eine verwünschte Prinzessin bist."  
 "Das darfst du nicht sagen".  
 "Und warum nicht?"  
 "Weil es Trud immer gesagt hat. . ."14

The symbol is, of course, neither striking nor subtle; Fontane makes use of popular associations, as in numerous other instances. Yet the incident "tones in" with the background atmosphere of the work, its idyllic and "märchenhaft" quality. This, part of the pastoral remoteness mentioned above, is sustained elsewhere in the natural description, as in Valtin's glimpse of the garden at Tangermünd: "durch die offenen Stellen des Laubes hindurch sah man die Malvenkrosen und die Strauchspitzen des tiefer gelegenen Gartens. Alles märchenhaft und wie verwunschen. . ."15

Beyond this, however, the symbol only has strength because the heroine senses its import: hers is precisely the kind of temperament, sensitive and anxious, which seeks personal significance in external signs, and her reaction to Valtin's interpretation shows how closely he has touched her

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<sup>14</sup>Werke, III, 59.

<sup>15</sup>Werke, III, 47.

own forebodings. On another occasion, too, a natural phenomenon, the glow of the setting sun shining through the windows of the church where Grete tries to pray after her father's burial, awakes an intuitive fear in her, as though she is unconsciously aware of her potentially demonic side: "Da war es ihr, als stünde die Kirche rings in Flammen, und von rasender Angst erfaßt, verließ sie den Platz, auf dem sie gesessen, und floh über den Kirchhof hin".<sup>16</sup> In such cases symbolic incidents are rendered credible by their being perceived through the heroine. Characterisation proceeds by self-revelation, the character's reactions to her surroundings.

This feature of Fontane's style has its effect on the depiction of nature. One of the most frequent ways in which Grete reveals herself, namely her sensitive, yearning temperament, is in her susceptibility to the moods and manifestations of nature. Moreover, this intimacy between character and nature provides the narrative with certain themes and motifs, which, when juxtaposed, heighten the tragic irony of the story. Grete suffers from a claustrophobic oppression, which she attributes to the narrow, hostile life at home, but which, in more general terms is a symptom of her temperamental restlessness: "eine feinere Sensibilität, Empfindsamkeit,

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<sup>16</sup>Werke, III, 35.

Selbstbefangenheit, die an Selbstsucht grenzt, ein Wechsel wild verhaltener Erregungen, fast elegischer Schwermut. . . ."17  
 This feeling of oppression shows in her reaction to the scene described earlier:<sup>18</sup>

"Ach, wie schön", sagte Grete. "Jahr und Tag, dass ich nicht hier oben war. Und mir ist fast, als hätt ich es nie gesehen".

"Das macht, dass wir einen so schönen Tag haben", sagte Valtin.

"Nein, das macht, dass es hier so frisch und so weit ist, und zu Hause ist es so dumpf und so eng. Da bin ich gefangen und eingemauert wie die Stendalsche Nonne, von der mir Regine so oft erzählt hat".<sup>19</sup>

Grete is one of the first in a long line of Fontane heroines (and occasionally heroes), who show vague yearnings for a freedom denied them in their daily existence. ". . . Als erregbare Sensibilität im dumpfen Kreis zählt sie, zugleich mit Marie Kniehase (Vor dem Sturm), mit Franziska Franz, der norddeutschen Schauspielerin in Ungarn (Graf Petöfy), mit der L'Adultera (der Genferin in Berlin) und mit der Konvertitin Ursula Hratscheck (Unterm Birnbaum), zu Fontane's Lieblingsfiguren".<sup>20</sup> This dissatisfaction with her present situation, which ultimately has its roots in temperamental factors,

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<sup>17</sup>Demetz, op. cit., p. 95.

<sup>18</sup>Note 6

<sup>19</sup>Werke, III, 40.

<sup>20</sup>Demetz, op. cit., p. 95. This aspect of Fontane's heroines is further considered in ch. 3 of this study.

shows itself in Grete Minde in a yearning for the infinity of nature. Before she tries to realise her yearning for freedom, through her flight, it is expressed in dreams, in which peace and happiness are found in a sphere most removed from the concrete world of suffering, the firmament:

[sic] wickelte. . . sich in ihre Decken und schwieg, aber nur, um sich in wachen Träumen eine Welt der Freiheit und des Glückes aufzubauen. Dabei sah sie sich am liebsten am Bug oder Steuer eines Schiffes stehen, und der Seewind ging, und es war Nachtzeit, und die Sterne funkelten. Und sie sah dann hinauf, und alles war gross und weit und frei. Und zuletzt überkam es sie wie Frieden inmitten aller Sehnsucht. . . , und an Stelle des bösen Engels, der ihren Tag beherrscht hatte, sass nun ihr guter Engel an ihrem Bett.<sup>21</sup>

The heroine shows a consciousness of nature as a symbol of the freedom she needs and the escape from a circumscribed existence. From this, the reader perceives more clearly that sensitive, melancholic, restless trait which is an essential part of her temperament, and which makes her eventual breakdown the more convincing.

These subjective associations are, however, not without effect on the overall impression produced by the depiction of nature, that is, as an element of the narrative. Many of the passages of background description, such as cited earlier, are coloured by some emotional response on the part

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<sup>21</sup>Werke, III, 49.

of the heroine: "'Ach, wie schön', sagte Grete". "Da war es ihr, als stünde die Kirche rings in Flammen." ". . . es war ihr, als ob diese wuchernde Gräberwildnis. . ." "mitunter was es ihr, als vergässe sie alles Leids, das sie drückte. . ." ". . . ihr war, als lege sich ihr eine Hand beruhigend auf das Herz. . . ." "Grete sah es alles. . . .Ihr was so frei."<sup>22</sup>

It is true that Jean Paul laid down the following precept for natural description:

. . .Jede [Landschaft] muss ihren eigenen einzigen Ton der Empfindung haben, welchen der Held oder die Heldin angibt, nicht der Autor. Wir sehen die ganze Natur nur mit den Augen der epischen Spieler. Dieselbe Sonne geht mit einem anderen Rote vor der Mutter unter, welche der Dichter auf den Grab-Hügel eines Kindes stellt, und mit einem anderen vor der Braut, welche auf einem schöneren Hügel dem Geliebten entgegensieht oder zur Seite steht. Für beide Abende hat der Dichter ganz verschiedene Sterne, Blumen, Wolken und Schmetterlinge auszulesen.<sup>23</sup>

The difference between this approach and that of Fontane appears to lie, however, in the artist's objectives. Fontane seems less concerned with producing convincing descriptions of landscapes than with revealing, through their emotive responses to such scenes, psychological truths about his characters. Fontane remains primarily the "Menschendichter".<sup>24</sup> We will

<sup>22</sup>Werke, III, 40, 35, 71, 76, 83, 88, respectively.

<sup>23</sup>Jean Paul, Vorschule der Ästhetik, ed. Miller (Munich, 1963), II, para. 80, 289. Emphasis mine (N.R.D.).

<sup>24</sup>Conrad Wandrey, op. cit., pp. 153-154, contrasts

note other ways in which the presentation of nature is coloured by the writer's preoccupation with the fortunes of the characters.

The night sky, the moon and the stars, consistently represent a realm of peace to Grete. We have already noted one example. It clearly has a divine significance for her.<sup>25</sup> This symbol alternates in the story with that of the crimson glow of sunset. It is here that the irony of the story, mentioned earlier, becomes evident.<sup>26</sup> The two symbols represent an alternation between hope and dreadful reality: the longing for the peace of God by a woman in the grip of diabolical forces. When Grete goes to see her brother Gerdt, in the hope of reconciliation, there is a brooding sense of the hopelessness of her mission: "sie war nicht im Bann der Stadt, sondern nur im Bann ihrer selbst". The town-hall is silhouetted against the red evening sky, reminding her of the fire at the puppet theatre, and reviving her own still irrational apprehension of the coming catastrophe.<sup>27</sup>

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the "Menschendichter" Fontane and the "Stimmungsdichter" Storm: with Fontane all narrative means serve the aim of presenting plastic human figures.

<sup>25</sup>Grete's religious susceptibility is brought out in several places.

<sup>26</sup>The nature of Fontane's irony is treated more fully in ch. 3, below.

<sup>27</sup>Werke, III, 79.

After she has been rejected by her family the turbulent emotions are in the ascendency, but there is still sufficient reason in her to make her question her own sanity, and the calming effect of the moon ("still und friedlich, als regiere sie diese Stunde,") enables her to resolve to try reason again in her quest for justice. In this frame of mind she goes to sleep and is awakened by the crying child:

. . .Als sie's gestillt und wieder eingewiegt, öffnete sie das Fenster, das den Blick auf die Vorstadtsgärten und dahinter auf weite, weite Stoppelfelder hatte. Der Mond war unter, aber die Sterne glitzerten in beinahe winterlicher Pracht, und sie sah hinauf in den goldenen Reigen und streckte beide Hände danach aus. "Gott, erbarme dich mein!". . .<sup>28</sup>

A scene of some lyrical beauty inspires hope anew, symbolised again by the night sky. That these hopes for divine peace are in vain is shown, however, with uncompromising harshness: when the puppet players resume their performance of the "Sündenfall", Grete has been replaced in her role of the angel.<sup>29</sup>

The whole story is in fact a process of disillusionment, whereby 'a hopeful Yes is constantly countered by a rigid No'.<sup>30</sup> But this process, whereby dreams are shattered, takes its toll of the overall idyllic quality of the work, which includes

<sup>28</sup> Werke, III, 84.

<sup>29</sup> Werke, III, 91.

<sup>30</sup> Demetz, op. cit., p. 99.



its natural settings. It has a destructive effect, in retrospect, even on those presentations of nature which are most idyllic. Thus, nature becomes associated with freedom, happiness and innocence, seeming to offer refuge from the troubles of the mundane world. Valtin cherishes such a vision:

" . . .Nein, Grete, nicht in die Stadt und nicht nach Haus, lieber weit, weit fort, in ein schönes Tal, von Bergen eingeschlossen, und oben weiss von Schnee und unten bunt von Blumen. . ."

"Wo ist das?"

"Ich weiss es nicht. Aber ich hab einmal in einem alten Buche davon gelesen, und da wurde mir das Herz so weit. Zwischen hohen Felswänden liegt es, und der Sturm geht drüber hin und trifft es nie; und die Sonne scheint, und die Wolken ziehen; und ist kein Krieg und keine Krankheit; und die Menschen, die dort leben, lieben einander und werden alt und sterben ohne Schmerz!"<sup>31</sup>

Inspired by such hopes, the children go out into the world. The scene before them is described in one of Fontane's most lyrical pieces of writing, seeming to confirm the promise earlier implied:

Und nun waren sie frei. Sie sahen sich an und atmeten auf, und der Zauber des um sie her liegenden Bildes liess sie minutenlang ihres Leids und ihrer Gefahr vergessen. Die Nebel waren fortgezogen, silbergrüne Wiesen dehnten sich hüben und drüben, und dazwischen flimmerte der Strom, über den der Mond eben seine Lichtbrücke baute. Nichts hörbar als das Gemurmel des Wassers und die Glocken, die von einigen Stadtkirchen verspätet nachschlugen.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>31</sup>Werke, III, 31.

<sup>32</sup>Werke, III, 56-57.

Yet any implied hope or promise is forgotten in the tragic outcome of the venture.

It is unlikely that Fontane is deliberately cynical in showing the vanity of longing for nature as a cure for Weltschmerz: in fact, where he appears to sustain this particular emotional state, as in the passages quoted, one feels he is himself carried along by the existing cliché, rather than building up visions of arcadia with a view to destroying them later. What we see, in general, is the use of "Natursehnsucht" as part of the psychological state of a character: the heroine of Grete Minde finds in nature not so much a kindred element--she is not a "Naturkind" in an alien world--, as a therapeutic counter-force to her inherently passionate temperament.

In analysing the use of nature in Grete Minde, we find that it is used, in accordance with the ostensible form of the Novelle, in background description aimed at achieving moods or "Stimmungen", these being idyllic remoteness--pastoral tranquillity and joyfulness, with certain hints of threatening danger. Here, in his object if not in the execution, Fontane follows established conventions, for which one has only to look to the use of nature in Goethe's Mailed on the one hand and his Willkommen und Abschied on the other. But in addition, Fontane uses nature, in a variety of ways, to assist in the psychological delineation of characters and

to heighten the narration of their fortunes. While this may ensure a close union between the "inner movement" of the story and the presentation of nature, so that the course of the narrative is not impeded by the kind of excessive description which Fontane professed to abhor,<sup>33</sup> it must be admitted that the overall lyrical tone of the work suffers from the process, mainly because the psychological processes depicted are too realistically, even clinically, conceived.

Our impressions gained from Fontane's first Novelle may be confirmed, or modified, by comparison with his next work, also a Novelle, Ellernklipp (1881). The two works have much in common. The action in both is remote in time and place from the world of the reader: "Ellernklipp, nach einem Harzer Kirchenbuch" is set in a valley of the Northern Harz in the seventeen-sixties; and both are crime stories, involving the psychological motivation of a violent deed.

The story evolves from the passion felt by the Heidereiter, Baltzer Bocholt, towards the orphan-girl Hilde, whom he has brought up as his daughter. His passion leads him to murder his own son, from jealousy. At the centre of the narrative is the figure of Hilde and the fatal fascination she comes to exercise, although unwillingly, over her guardian. It is of interest for the following study to note Fontane's

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<sup>33</sup>Cf. ch. 1, above.

sketch, based on his first draft on the Novelle:

Ellernklipp. Nach Aufzeichnungen eines Harzer Kirchenbuches. Spielt unmittelbar nach dem sieben-jährigen Kriege in einem Harzdorf. Eifersucht des Vaters gegen den Sohn. Der Sohn fällt als Opfer, bis zuletzt auch der Alte den Visionen seiner Schuld erliegt. Hauptfigur: ein angenommenes Kind, schön, liebenswürdig, poetisch-apathisch, an dem ich beflissen bin, die dämonisch-unwiderstehliche Macht des Illegitimen und Languissanten zu zeigen. Sie tut nichts, am wenigsten etwas Böses, und doch verwirrt sie regelrechte Verhältnisse. Sie selbst, ohne den Grundton ihres Wesens zu ändern, verklärt sich und überlebt das Wirrsal, das sie gestiftet.<sup>34</sup>

Two features intimated in this sketch, historical distance and an inexorable presentation of human fortunes--guilt and atonement, destruction and salvation imposed by an outside will--, recall Fontane's interest in the English and Scottish ballad, and the description "balladesque" has been applied to the work by Conrad Wandrey.<sup>35</sup>

Features of the ballad also show in the style, the compact nature of the narrative with its compression of successive events by means of such phrases as "Es war nun wieder Herbst", or "Wochen waren vergangen". This compactness is felt, in comparison with Grete Minde, in the absence of detailed description. While backgrounds are not presented through elaborate description, it is nevertheless in keeping

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<sup>34</sup>C. Wandrey, op. cit., pp. 148-149.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., pp. 137-138.

with the ballad that some attention should be given to mood and atmosphere, that is, the background is intimated rather than specifically delineated. Again, in this objective, the natural world is the most important source of material for the narrative. The character of the story, the rural setting with its superstitious and fatalistic inhabitants, is enhanced by associations with nature.

The presentation of the natural background is characterised by the use of symbols and motifs, and is reminiscent of Grete Minde. The same pastoral peacefulness is present at the beginning of the story: it is felt by Pastor Sörgel on his return from Hilde's home, where he has supervised her adoption by Bocholt:

Eine kurze Strecke noch, und die Grenzfurche bog nach links hin um eine kahle Felswand herum, in deren Front sie sich als mannsbreite Strasse fortsetzte. Die Felswand selbst aber hiess Ellernklipp. Ein mittelhoher Brombeerbusch wuchs hier als einzige Schutzlehne hart am Abgrund hin, und der alte Sörgel, indem er sich an dem Gezweige festhielt, sah in freudiger Bewegung in das Landschaftsbild hinein, das ihm heut, unter dem Einfluss einer besonderen Beleuchtung, als etwas Neues und Niègesehenes erschien.<sup>36</sup>

This is precisely the spot where the infamous deed will be committed; indeed, the first step in the chain of fatal events has just been taken; Ellernklipp itself, surmounted by a

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<sup>36</sup>Werke, II, 175-176.

single spruce, symbolises, as we come to learn, the eternal laws by which human affairs are governed.<sup>37</sup> This initial rural serenity we recognize, therefore, as one "movement" in the sequence of background moods, to be succeeded by others. Its counterpart is, again, a sense of the "Unheimliche" in nature, which provides the background for the murder and its consequences.

The principal symbol here is the full moon, which stands as a silent witness to Baltzer's crimes. The same motif will occur again in Fontane's other crime story, Quitt. In both stories the moon appears either at the moment the crime is committed or shortly after, shedding its light on the scene as though intent on exposing the deed.<sup>38</sup> In both novels, too, the moon is described as "fragend", and its reappearance causes terror to the miscreants by reminding them of their guilt:

Und nun erhob er sich und sah sich um. Und sah den Vollmond, der, eben aufgegangen, eine blutrote Scheibe, gross und fragend über dem schwarzen Strich der Tannen stand.<sup>39</sup>

The moon reappears when Baltzer goes to bury his son, and again three years later, when he imagines he hears his son calling from the abyss. It comes to symbolize conscience for Baltzer, reappearing in his thoughts when he returns home

<sup>37</sup>Werke, II, 269.

<sup>38</sup>Werke, VI, 73, Quitt.

after the deed:

In seinem Gedanken stieg er den Weg zurück, den er vor einer Stunde gekommen war, und nun war er oben, und die Mondesscheibe stand wieder über dem schwarzen Waldstreifen und sah ihn an und fragte wieder.<sup>40</sup>

To this extent, the haunting quality the moon appears to assume may be no more than the projection of a troubled mind. But others also sense the uncanniness of the scene; it causes inexplicable panic in Hilde:

Die Tür zu Martins Kammer stand weit offen, und sie sah, wie der Vollmond ins Fenster schien, ernster und grösser als sonst, als such er wen. Oder als woll er etwas sagen. Und von einer unendlichen Angst ergriffen, wandte sie sich ab und lief in ihre Stube hinüber.<sup>41</sup>

Again the influence of Shakespeare may be at work.

But more generally, the incidence of evil acts and a sinister background is a feature of the border ballads.

In addition, the night sky appears in a supernatural perspective when Baltzer imagines he sees the Angel of Peace descending and bypassing his own house:

. . .Indem er so hinstarrte, ward ihm zu Sinn, als sähe er jeden Stamm und dazwischen die Wasserlachen. Und in jeder einzelnen spiegelte sich der Mond. Und weil er des Bildes los sein wollte, wandte er sich ab und lenkte den Blick der anderen Seite zu. Da lag das Dorf

<sup>39</sup>Werke, II, 237.

<sup>40</sup>Werke, II, 238.

<sup>41</sup>Werke, II, 240.

und der Sternenhimmel darüber. Und als er hinauf sah in den ewigen Frieden, siehe, da war es ihm, als stiege der Engel des Friedens hernieder und segne jedes Haus. . .; aber als er sich seinem Hause näherte, wich er aus und stieg höher und höher, bis er hoch über dem Elsbruch stand. Bis in die Sterne hinein. Und nun erst senkte sich der Engel wieder, immer tiefer, bis er zuletzt in den Wipfeln der Bäume schwand.<sup>42</sup>

As in the incident in the later novel, Effi Briest, in which the heroine imagines her room haunted by a Chinaman, supernatural occurrences are given no more testimony than that of a mentally troubled individual; Fontane remains essentially a realistic writer. But at the same time, a sense of the Unreal, some foreboding awareness of a higher Being or fatality not reducible to concrete reality, is imparted to the narrative as a whole.<sup>43</sup> Natural phenomena are used in both Grete Minde and Ellernklipp to convey a sense of the unreal: it is especially effective in contributing to the "balladesque" quality of the latter work.

This same quality is, however, to a large degree dependent on the presentation of the characters, in particular

<sup>42</sup>Werke, II, 240-241.

<sup>43</sup>Cf. Lawrence O. Frye, "The Unreal in Fontane's Novels", GR., XXXVII, 106-115. His analysis applies to much of Fontane's "symbolism": "The characteristic which is essential to the idea of the unreal is that some relationship is established between the emotional state of the individual and a sphere which lies beyond the immediate sensuous contact of that individual. . . In Fontane, a character may often feel unconsciously or intuitively (as in dreams or waking premonitions) a situation or condition which does not actually exist at the moment of feeling. Or, an object or scene may



the heroine, as Fontane's sketch-notes suggest. In Grete Minde we noticed a frequent association between the presentation of the natural background and the depiction of the characters. Is this feature present in Ellernklipp, and if so, what is its effect?

Fontane describes his heroine as "Schön, liebenswürdig, poetisch-apathisch, an dem ich beflissen bin, die dämonisch-unwiderstehliche Macht des Illegitimen und Languissanten zu zeigen".<sup>44</sup> He is concerned both with the figure herself and the effect she produces on others. The sketch already suggests a heroine one might readily envisage in a symbolic drama: vague and enigmatic, apathetically detached from the prosaic world. These qualities do indeed characterise the heroine of Ellernklipp, particularly in the first part of the Novelle. Her origin is surrounded in mystery; she is a creature of melancholic yearnings and has a pagan detachment which induces Sörgel to say of her, "sie kennt nicht Gut und nicht Bö's".<sup>45</sup> She also shows from the beginning an instinctive and esoteric attachment to nature.

Hilde is closer to the moods and manifestations of nature than those around her. In her games she takes joy in the small and innocent beauties of the natural world, in

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evoke a sensation which has no apparent connection with the object itself".

<sup>44</sup>Cf. note 34.

<sup>45</sup>Werke, II, 176.

butterflies, birds,<sup>46</sup> and particularly flowers. In the second chapter, the cycle of changing seasons is mirrored in her own vacillations between lethargy and the joy of living.<sup>47</sup> Her responsiveness to nature is ripe, at an age when she otherwise shows no awareness of the happiness and tragedy of life. At her mother's funeral she pays her own homage to the dead by strewing the body with some flowers she has been picking: "aber sie weinte nicht und gab kein Zeichen tiefen Schmerzes. Es war vielmehr, als wisse sie nichts Deutliches von Tod und Sterben. . ." <sup>48</sup> Hilde may be described as an "elemental creature"--the concept has been evolved in connection with Fontane's characters by Renate Schäfer, in her study of Melusine in Der Stechlin.<sup>49</sup> Implied is that a character (who may in fact function normally in civilized society) shows a deep, unconscious affinity with a primitive element (which in the case of Melusine is water). Hilde is instinctively attached to the natural world, so that, as

<sup>46</sup>Werke, II, 182, ". . . [sie] hörte, wie. . . die Sperlinge, die sich nass und hungrig auf das Fensterbrett geflüchtet hatten, ängstlich und traurig zirpten und zwitscherten. Dann jammerte sie der Kreatur. . ."

<sup>47</sup>Werke, II, 182, ". . . wie das Wetter, so hatte sich auch Hilde vertauscht".

<sup>48</sup>Werke, II, 174.

<sup>49</sup>Op. cit.

we shall see, she suffers nostalgic longing when deprived of her "native element". In her case, in contrast to Melusine, such urges have not been even rationalised by social living, so that she remains naive and separate from the more sophisticated elders. Thus she imparts a poetic quality to the story, which is again in keeping with the "balladesque".

Hilde's elemental affinity with nature contributes to that "dämonisch-unwiderstehliche Macht" which attracts Bocholst to her and thus causes his downfall. Appropriately, natural motifs play a part in depicting this fateful process. When the Heidereiter takes charge of the orphan, after the burial of her mother, he does so with the prediction, "Wer den Toten Blumen streut, der streut die, denk' ich, wohl auch den Lebenden".<sup>50</sup> The words are repeated by Pastor Sörgel, as he considers the wisdom of entrusting the girl to the edifying moral influence of the Heidereiter. The full extent of the irony here becomes evident only later. The fatal attraction takes hold of Bocholt after two incidents: Hilde refuses to join the general opprobrium when he kills a poacher; then gratitude changes to passion when he finds his ward asleep at the edge of a wood. In the picture before him there is the unmistakable affinity of the child with the

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<sup>50</sup>Werke, II, 175.

natural surroundings: "Um sie her. . .summten ein paar Bienen, und die Sonne schien und das Heidekraut duftete".<sup>51</sup> Bocholt is reminded vividly of the remark Sörgel had made the previous autumn: "Die Hilde blüht".<sup>52</sup> In this setting Bocholt becomes aware of her as a woman, for the first time, and senses her own consciousness of the stirrings of pubescence.

A higher fatality is at work in Bocholt's demented obsession with the girl and blind jealousy of his son; unwittingly she inveigles his senses--"'Ich neid' [dem Jungen] das schöne müde Geschöpf, das müd' ist, ich weiss nicht um was. Aber um was auch immer, es hat mich gehext, und ich komme nicht los davon".<sup>53</sup> The deadly bond is symbolised by a motif from nature, the garland of "Levkojen" and "Reseda" which Hilde weaves as her tribute to her guardian on his birthday. "To bind with flowers" is a conventional image expressing the insolubility, but also the charm, of love, and Fontane uses the symbol in this sense in Irrungen Wirrungen:<sup>54</sup> here it is the iron bond of an adverse fate, a sinister, bewitching force. After Bocholt overhears a love-avowal between his son and Hilde, he tries to regain

<sup>51</sup>Werke, II, 203.

<sup>52</sup>Werke, II, 203.

<sup>53</sup>Werke, II, 236.

<sup>54</sup>Cf. ch. 3, below.

his composure by visiting the grave of his wife, to whom he owed his position of respect in the community. But in the grave-yard nature has run wild, reminding us of the similar passage in Grete Minde, and it is the presence of the stocks and mignonettes which finally confirms for him the hopelessness of his situation: the image of Hilde intervenes constantly between him and his conscience:

Er war seit langem nicht hier gewesen, und um das Gitter her hatte sich ein dichter Efeu geschlungen; aber nicht gehegt und gepflegt, sondern wie Unkraut. Und so standen auch die Blumen, ein wilder, halbverblühter Knäuel von Balsaminen und Rittersporn. Und auch von Levkojen und Reseda. Das waren dieselben Blumen. . . , die sie vor wenig Tagen erst von dem Gartenbeete drüben in seine Geburtstagsgirlande geflochten; und mit einem Male stand sie selber wieder vor ihm und sah ihn an. Er konnte ihr nicht entfliehen.<sup>55</sup>

The setting of the story, its rural character, and the remoteness sought by the author, account for the importance of nature and natural motifs. These are used with particular effect to depict the central character--the innocent, but strangely melancholic heroine--, and to suggest the bewitching power by which she causes a respectable and conscientious man to yield to the darker forces within him. This characterisation was Fontane's main object.

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<sup>55</sup>Werke, II, 234; Emphasis by Fontane.

In the analysis so far, we have attempted to show how the use of nature supports the overall "balladesque" character of the work. Occasionally, however, its use is less successful. The reason for this derives from the uneven presentation of the heroine. Hilde shares certain characteristics with Grete Minde. As the child of a nobleman and a disreputable Bohemian mother she too suffers from a taint of heredity-- "ihr eigen Blut wird es ihr sagen", is the prophecy made of her.<sup>56</sup> Considerations of temperament are involved in the depiction of the heroine, and her melancholic lethargy is accompanied by vague yearnings for "das Weite" und "das Offene" similar to those felt by Grete. Similar too is the attempt to show this through her reactions to landscapes:

. . .Ein Ausdruck von Glück überflog ihre Züge, so sehr gefiel ihr, was sie sah. Unmittelbar unter ihrem Fenster lag der Wirtschaftshof, auf dem die Tauben von einem Dachfirst zum anderen flogen; abwärts am Bach hin, in Entfernung weniger hundert Schritte, stieg der Rauch aus den Dächern des Dorfes, und immer weiter zu Tale dehnte sich das weite, flache Vorland aus und blinkte sonnenbeschienen in allen Herbstfarben. In all das sah Hilde hinein und sagte, während sie lang und tief aufatmete: "Hier will ich immer stehen. . .Ah!. . .Es ist so weit hier".<sup>57</sup>

Elsewhere it is the firmament which offers an escape from an unhappy reality, as she watches her former home destroyed

<sup>56</sup>Werke, II, 179. Cf. also 194.

<sup>57</sup>Werke, II, 177-178.

by fire:

Über dem Ganzen aber der Sternenhimmel.  
Und sie sah hinauf, und die Engel stiegen auf  
und nieder. Und es war wieder ein Singen und  
Klingen, und die Wirklichkeit der Dinge schwand  
ihr hin im Bild und Traum.<sup>58</sup>

The study of Fontane's later novels shows this presentation of nature through the eyes of a character as a familiar device. As in Grete Minde, the character herself shows through as a palpable, inwardly troubled creature of the modern age: to use Schiller's phraseology, she becomes "sentimentalisch" and reflective where art demands that she remain "naiv". An element of sentimentality (also in the standard sense of the word) colours the presentation of nature in a way which jars with the pastoral and idyllic and the bewitched or dynamic atmosphere we noted earlier. Nowhere is this more evident than in the banal symbol which heralds Hilde's inward recovery under the tutelage of the Countess von Emmerode. Allusion is made to Christmas with its promise of spiritual rebirth:

. . .In demselben Augenblick fast zerstreute sich draussen das Gewölk, das in endlos langem Zuge vorübergezogen war, und im tiefen Blau des Himmels erschien ein Stern und sandte sein friedlich Licht auf die Stelle, wo die beiden standen.  
"Unser Stern", sagte die Gräfin und wies  
hinauf.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup>Werke, II, 188-189.

<sup>59</sup>Werke, II, 268. Emphasis by Fontane.

This writer does not share the damning opinion of these early Novellen quoted at the beginning of the chapter. But our study of the specific aspect, the use of nature, shows that even in works whose form most lends itself to this particular narrative element, Fontane is what he will remain: fundamentally a "Menschendichter".



## CHAPTER III

### NATURE IN THE SOCIAL NOVELS

In the social novel events take place against the background of a determined social milieu. For example, in the "Roman der guten Gesellschaft" this will be the higher strata of society. Such a background is represented by localities, such as mansions and salons, and by characteristic rituals, such as conversations, balls, banquets, and so forth. Its stability is often underlined by the presence of various "spokesmen", characters of some insight and sophistication--perhaps to the point of perceiving the shortcomings of the system they represent,--but who in general affirm its mores: such a character is Mme von Carayon in Schach von Wuthenow.

Life in this kind of society is mundane and centred on the town. Any excursion into the countryside (other than for the purpose of travel) will be in the form of an organised social gathering, a picnic or boating-party.<sup>1</sup> The social situation, however, remains basically unaltered: thought and discourse are orientated towards the group.

Such are the preliminary impressions we derive from

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. Demetz, op. cit., p. 119.

Demetz' study of the form. They provide a point of departure which may be confirmed or qualified in the following study of the position of nature within Fontane's social novels.

In the Novellen so far examined, nature figured both as background description and also as a force perceived by, or influencing, characters in the story. In the social novel we should not expect to find nature settings, except in a very subordinate role, and any feeling expressed towards the natural world would be of a conventional, if not platitudinous, kind: anything deeper, or esoteric, would indicate an individualist preoccupation with vague realms beyond those familiar to the group consciousness.

Fontane's transition from "balladesque" Novellen to the social novel is seen in Schach von Wuthenow (1883). Although the action is set in the age before Jena, "aus der Zeit des Regiments Gendarmes", the novel has clear affinities with the novel of contemporary society. It takes place in a world peopled by officers and nobility, opening in the glittering salon of a social patroness, Mme von Carayon. It is a "Roman der guten Gesellschaft".

The structure of the plot is important for our analysis. Schach, the central figure, is compelled by the forces of convention to marry Victoire von Carayon, whom he has seduced. He tries to escape his commitment by fleeing to his estate, and when this fails, after the intervention of the King, he

commits suicide. At the beginning, Schach is seen in the context of the Berlin officer society, of which he is an integrated member who stands out only by virtue of his heightened sense of honour and patriotism. But his affair with Victoire von Carayon, which begins on the level of social courtesies, involves him more and more deeply in personal affairs, at the same time arousing the scorn of his fellow officers. Schach declines to take part in a mock sleigh-ride they stage satirising Luther; the schism is completed when some of his colleagues issue an anonymous circular ridiculing his relations with the two women. Thereafter Schach is caught up in a conflict which he must fight from a position of isolation: it is the realisation that he has been banished from society which induces him to take his life. Thus, the narrative represents a gradual movement from the social to the individual, from the conventional world of formal human relationships, to that of an isolated individual. This development of the plot is reflected in the contrasting succession of two distinct parts, one set in Berlin and the other on Schach's estate. How is the natural world viewed in the two parts?

To the members of the social world, responsiveness to nature depends on individual sensibility and taste. Most of the regimental officers are seen to be insensitive and cynical, typifying an inner decadence which reaches throughout

the Prussian state. The salon gathering at the beginning ends on an incongruous note when Victoire sings a Romantic folksong about a blossom which slumbers during the winter, then awakens in the spring and "steigt hinauf in die leuchtende Höh', wo strahlend die Brüderlein blühn". To most of the officers the song is incomprehensible. One, Bülow, is affected, however, and finds himself gazing into the night-sky and repeating the last line to himself. But there is a certain irony about the incident, as it is clear that for Bülow the song merely corresponds to his own mystical dream of a national renaissance. The writer adds the commentary: "Wider Wissen und Willen war er ein Kind seiner Zeit und romantisierte".<sup>2</sup>

To other characters, nature provides relief from the problems and constraints of their normal daily life. An excursion to Tempelhof, when Schach escorts the Von Carayons and their aunt, is such an occasion. Referring to the outing in a letter to a friend, Victoire writes: "Solche stillen Abende, wo man über Feld schreitet und nichts hört als das Anschlagen der Abendglocke, heben uns über kleine Rücksichten fort und machen uns freier".<sup>3</sup> In this setting she is able to reach a more natural and personal level of conversation

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<sup>2</sup>Werke, II, 283.

<sup>3</sup>Werke, II, 305.

with Schach. Frau von Carayon, frustrated in her first attempt to see the King concerning her grievance with Schach, orders her coachman to drive in the open: "Nur keine Schlösser, oder doch so wenig wie möglich; aber Park und Garten und Wiesen". For a while she forgets her depression and falls under the spell of the natural surroundings:

Endlich lenkte man. . . in einem neben einem See hinlaufenden Weg ein, dessen einreihig gepflanzte Bäume mit ihrem weit ausgestreckten und niederhängenden Gezweige den Wasserspiegel berührten. In dem Gitterwerke der Blätter aber glomm und glitzerte die niedergehende Sonne. Frau von Carayon vergass über diese Schönheit all ihr Leid und fühlte sich dem Zauber derselben erst wieder entrissen, als der Wagen aus dem Uferweg abermals in den grossen Mittelgang einbog. . .<sup>4</sup>

In such instances one still feels that the natural world is not far removed from the artificial: the effects of human cultivation are apparent in such details as "einreihig gepflanzte Bäume". Nature lies outside the normal sphere of social life and provides at best a temporary source of relief when the complications of society become too oppressive. Consequently the natural background is generally presented in a passive light, being admired on account of its beauty or peacefulness.

This process, whereby nature is viewed by members of the social world from the outside, is well illustrated

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<sup>4</sup>Werke, II, 365.

in the account of a reception given by Prince Louis at his country villa. After dinner the gathering moves to a marquee overlooking the River Spree and the park of Charlottenburg. One of the guests interrupts an embarrassing moment in the conversation by a rapturous appraisal of the scene:

"Wie schön", rief er und wies mit der Hand auf den westlichen, bis hoch hinauf in einem glühgelben Lichte stehenden Horizont.

Alle waren mit ihm an die Brüstung des Balkons getreten und sahen flussabwärts in den Abendhimmel hinein. Vor dem gelben Lichtstreifen standen schwarz und schweigend die hohen Pappeln, und selbst die Schlosskuppel wirkte nur noch als Schattenriss.

Einen jeden der Gäste berührte diese Schönheit. Am schönsten aber war der Anblick zahlloser Schwäne, die, während man in dem Abendhimmel sah, vom Charlottenburger Park her in langer Reihe herankamen, Andere lagen schon in Front. Es war ersichtlich, dass die ganze Flotille durch irgend was bis in die Nähe der Villa gelockt sein musste, denn sobald sie die Höhe derselben erreicht hatte, schwenkten sie wie militärisch ein und verlängerten die Front derer, die hier schon still und regungslos und die Schnäbel unter dem Gefieder verborgen, wie vor Anker lagen. Nur das Rohr bewegte sich leis in ihrem Rücken. So verging eine geraume Zeit.<sup>5</sup>

A striking phenomenon in the natural world becomes for a moment an object of attention and imposes silence on the social scene. The natural background temporarily holds the front of the stage, but then recedes again--". . .die Schwanenflotille [setzte sich] wieder in Bewegung und segelte

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<sup>5</sup>Werke, II, 321.

flussabwärts, wie sie bis dahin flussaufwärts gekommen war".

In a later novel, Unwiederbringlich (1891), there is a very similar situation, in which a social gathering is momentarily distracted by an intrusion from the natural world. The incident occurs at the "Hermitage", a country retreat of the King of Denmark, and merits quoting in full:

. . .Eine kleine Weile, so traten alle, vom Saal her, auf einen vorgebauten Balkon hinaus, von dem aus man einen prächtigen Fernblick auf die grosse, das Gesamtbild nach Westen hin abschliessende Waldmasse hatte. Der zwischenliegende Wiesengrund war von einer beträchtlichen Ausdehnung, an ein paar Stellen aber schoben sich Waldvorsprünge bis weit in die Wiese vor, und aus eben diesen Vorsprüngen traten jetzt Rudel Hirsche, zu zehn und zwanzig, auf die Plaine hinaus und setzten sich in einem spielenden Tempo, nicht rasch und nicht langsam, auf die Ermitage zu in Bewegung. Ebba war entzückt, aber ehe sie's noch aussprechen konnte, sah sie schon, dass sich, im Hintergrunde, der ganze weite Waldbogen wie zu beleben begann, und in gleicher Weise wie bis dahin nur vereinzelte Rudel aus den vorgeschobenen Stellen herausgetreten waren, traten jetzt viele Hunderte von Hirschen aus der zurückgelegenen Waldstreife hervor und setzten sich. . .in einen lebhaften Trab, anfänglich wirr und beinahe wild durcheinander, bis sie sich, im Näherkommen, ordnungsmässig gruppierten und nun sektionsweise an der Ermitage vorüberzogen. Endlich, als auch die letzten vorbei waren, zerstreuten sie sich wieder über die Wiese hin, und nun erst ermöglichte sich ein vollkommener Überblick über die Gesamtheit.<sup>6</sup>

In the incident from Schach, one of the swans comes right to the balcony and stretches its neck "als ob er etwas sagen

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<sup>6</sup>Werke, V, 92.

wollte". This provides the opportunity for a renewal of conversation: pleasantries are exchanged and one of the group succeeds in paying a witty compliment to the Prince. In Unwiederbringlich a conversation ensues on the importance of the stag in Danish and German folk-literature, and Princess Maria laments that only in such literature is there still a place for princesses. In both cases the natural background intrudes, physically as well as visually, upon the social situation and causes a temporary distraction; but then the social atmosphere reasserts itself.

Structurally, such lyrical interludes remain subordinate to the narration of the complexities of the social situation. Thus the attitudes of the characters are reflected in the narrative form. The descriptions themselves are constructed from an outside viewpoint, in the manner described by Max Tau as "gestellt":<sup>7</sup> The picture is composed of elements in a static spatial relationship to each other: "vor dem gelben Lichtstreifen standen. . .die hohen Pappeln"; "an ein paar Stellen. . .schoben sich Waldvorsprünge. . .in die Wiese vor"; "im Hintergrunde. . .". But this descriptive technique is required by the situation; the social world views the natural scene but does not partake in it. A great many of Fontane's natural descriptions have this kind of

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<sup>7</sup>Cf. ch. 1, above.



structural relationship to the narrative. There is hardly a novel in which a character, or a group of characters, does not go to a window, or onto a balcony, to contemplate the natural world, whether for conventional aesthetic reasons or through a momentary need for solitude and reflection, but without leaving the sphere of the social world. Since in such instances the natural setting is no more than a passive object of contemplation, it is often presented as a two-dimension picture. In the following example from Cecile (1887) the actual imagery used indicates that the author is to a large degree following the aims of the landscape-painters:

Der grosse Balkon von Hotel Zehnpfund war am anderen Morgen kaum zur Hälfte besetzt, und nur ein Dutzend Personen etwa sah auf das vor ihnen ausgebreitete Landschaftsbild, das durch die Feueressen und Rauchsäulen einer benachbarten Fabrik nicht allzuviel an seinem Reize verlor. Denn die Brise, die ging, kam von der Ebene her und trieb den dicken Qualm am Gebirge hin. In die Stille, die herrschte, mischte sich, ausser dem Rauschen der Bode, nur noch ein fernes Stampfen und Klappern und ganz in der Nähe das Zwitschern einiger Schwalben, die, im Zickzack vorüberschiessend, auf eine vor dem Balkon gelegene Parkwiese zu flogen. Diese war das Schönste der Szenerie, schöner fast als die Bergwand samt ihren phantastischen Zacken, und wenn schon das saftige Grün der Wiese das Auge labte, so mehr noch die Menge der Bäume, die gruppenweise von ersichtlich geschickter Hand in dies Grün hineingestellt waren. Ahorn und Platanen wechselten ab, und dazwischen drängten sich allerhand Ziersträucher zusammen, aus denen hervor es buntfärbig blühte: Tulpenbaum und Goldregen und Schneeball und Akazie.

Der Anblick musste jeden entzücken. . . .<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Werke, IV, 132-133. Emphasis mine (N.R.D.).

Such scenes have little effect on the characters going beyond the visual, or auditory, senses. Structurally, they have only tenuous links with the main action.

To return to Schach von Wuthenow, it will be possible to see whether this weak structural connection between the natural background and the main action holds in the second part of the narrative, that in which the hero has withdrawn from society. It should be noted that the motives for his flight derive from social necessity; he is unable to reconcile self with the pressure of outward convention. There is, then, no suggestion that a hypersensitive individual is seeking solace in nature, though he is moved for a moment by the view of his castle by starlight, on arriving in Wuthenow. In general Schach is as urban-minded as his associates. When he catches sight of the meadow beyond his park, strewn with sorrel and ranunculi, over which a pair of storks are striding, this becomes for Schach a symbol of the kind of life he dreads, exiled from society: ". . . Dann gehe ich mit Victoire durch den Garten, und aus dem Park auf die Wiese, dieselbe Wiese, die wir vom Schloss aus immer und ewig und ewig immer sehen, und auf der der Ampfer und die Ranunkeln blüh'n. Und dazwischen spazieren die Störche. . ."9

In the course of Schach's exile, nature does not

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<sup>9</sup>Werke, II, 358.

maintain the subordinate and passive role hitherto assigned to it. When he is alone at night and in a heightened nervous state, the natural world seems to him to take on a more active, somewhat sinister character. He is awakened from his sleep by an invasion of moths and butterflies, and his efforts to beat them off only increase their number. No doubt Fontane is making use of a narrative symbol here to underline the helplessness of Schach's situation, in his conflict with outside forces. The oppressive atmosphere of his room drives him into the garden:

Die dicht vor dem Salon gelegene Gartenlage bestand aus einem Rondell mit Sonnenuhr, um das herum, in meist dreieckigen und von Buchsbaum eingefassten Beeten, allerlei Sommerblumen blühten: Reseda und Rittersporn, und Lilien und Levkojen. Man sah leicht, dass eine ordnende Hand hier neuerdings gefehlt hatte. . . . Alles hatte. . . den Charakter eines wuchernden Blühens angenommen, und ein schwerer und doch zugleich auch erquicklicher Levkojenduft lag über den Beeten, den Schach in immer volleren Zügen einsog.<sup>10</sup>

The motif of the garden run wild, of nature imposing its rule of anarchy on human cultivation, is a recurrent one with Fontane, as we have seen.<sup>11</sup> Here too it is at least suggested.

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<sup>10</sup>Werke, II, 352.

<sup>11</sup>Cf. above, ch. 2, note 10, p. 17.

Eventually, Schach conceives the desire to take a boat on the lake: his journey, prompted by nostalgic memories of childhood, begins on an inlet--"ein blosser toter Arm des Sees, nicht der See selbst"--, from which he passes out into the lake itself: "endlich aber war er in dem grossen und eigentlichen See". He then allows the boat to follow its own course, and the narrative concludes with an allusion to the heavens: "Immer blasser wurden die Sterne, der Himmel rötete sich im Osten, und er schlief ein".<sup>12</sup> The whole excursion, which began with the hero's need to escape the claustrophobic oppression of his room, thus involves a gradual movement away from the world of men towards ever wider expanses of nature. The natural world represents, for the character, temporary relief from the burdens of social living; in contrast to this, nature is unlimited and orderless. In the narrative, too, there is probably a prefiguration here of the hero's later death, namely in the allusion to the firmament.<sup>13</sup>

In this section the character himself is more alive to the tangible aspects of nature, than in the earlier parts examined: to its smells--"erquicklicher Levkoienduft. . . , den Schach in immer volleren Zügen einsog"; or its more

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<sup>12</sup>Werke, II, 354.

<sup>13</sup>Cf. below, p. 76.

subtle sounds--"Schach hörte nichts als ein leises Wehen und Rauschen, und den Ton des Wassers, das sich glucksend an dem Schilfgürtel brach".<sup>14</sup> The character seeking self-communion in isolation from the social world has an intimacy with nature not possible in the world of the salons; the barrier dividing the two spheres, noted earlier, is removed. And at the same time, nature itself ceases to be a mere two-dimensional object of contemplation or background scenery, but instead is a separate and independent force, with its own laws of life. When Schach returns to the shore, it is teeming with various wild-life:

[er] bog. . .wieder in die kurz vorher so stille Bucht ein, in deren Schlif jetzt ein buntes und bewegtes Leben herrschte. Die darin nistenden Vögel kreischten oder gurrten, ein paar Kiebitze flogen auf, und eine Wildente, die sich neugierig umsaß, tauchte nieder, als das Boot plötzlich in Sicht kam.<sup>15</sup>

In this latter part of the narrative, the natural background is both quantitatively more prominent and qualitatively fuller than in the earlier part; it is integrated fully into the narrative. There is a closer contact between character and natural surroundings. This has as one result that the narrator is able to use the latter in showing the inner state of the character, as by means of symbolic allusions.

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<sup>14</sup>Werke, II, 354.

<sup>15</sup>Werke, II, 354-355.

Nature has no significant place in the narrative where this is concerned with the social relationships of men and the discussion of ideas, (even if the scene takes place in a rural setting). This much has been shown by Demetz.<sup>16</sup> In Fontane, however, nature has greater importance for characters isolated from society. In Schach von Wuthenow, as in most of Fontane's novels--indeed with the sole exceptions, possibly of Die Poggenpuhls and Der Stechlin--the focus of attention in the narrative is twofold: however fully a particular social milieu may be examined and depicted,--and this aspect is particularly noticeable in the frequent use of the "Gespräch" in his novels,--an important object of his fiction lies in the presentation of individual characters who are involved in conflicts of an essentially personal kind. The conflicts arise from the difficulty of reconciling obligations imposed from the outside, for example by the existing social order, and some aspect of personal disposition which yearns for independence, for example, Schach's overweening pride. In a work such as Grete Minde, the source of the conflict lies with the gods: the heroine's unstable temperament clashes with an oppressive fortune. In the social novel, of which Schach is an example, the oppressive circumstances arise wholly from the operations of a system, namely society,

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<sup>16</sup>Cf. ch. 1, above.

of which the character himself is part. The result is an ironic commentary on both, society and character, and this will be considered again later.

In Schach, therefore, we note a close structural relationship between the natural background and those areas of the narrative in which the personal conflict is most acute. The use of nature in Schach suggests a reason for this: nature represents limitlessness and freedom from order, in contrast to the elaborately disciplined social world. It is thus associated with a certain escapism. The natural world becomes a substitute for the normal one of human intercourse, so that in the absence of human communication a character may respond to moods and manifestations in nature which he feels to reflect his own particular fate. By such means does the narrator, too, strengthen the psychological delineation of the character, by the use of symbolism as in the early Novellen.

A fuller appraisal of this aspect of Fontane's art will be possible, if we analyse the relationship between nature and natural description and the presentation of the central figures in three other novels of this period. In all three the central conflict involves a woman. L'Adultera (1882), the first of Fontane's "Eheromane", deals with the fortunes of the high-born Melanie van der Straaten, whose marriage to a Berlin parvenu ends with her adultery with the

Jewish Rubehn. In Graf Petöfy, (1884), a North German actress, Franziska Franz, marries a Hungarian nobleman many years her senior, for companionship and security rather than for love, then has an affair with a nephew of the count; the latter subsequently commits suicide. In Cécile (1889), the heroine is a partial exile from society on account of a questionable past; whilst sojourning in the Harz with her husband she meets the impetuous, but somewhat light-headed, Englishman, Gordon, who as a result of a quarrel concerning her is killed in a duel with her husband. All three heroines are involved in conflict with the values of the particular social milieu to which they belong.

In Melanie van der Straaten sociability is offset by a tendency to retreat to a silent "communion" with nature, when the strains of social living, heightened by her growing irritation with her husband's vulgarity, become too great. Summer days spent alone in the open air provide her with the inner recuperation she needs:

Wohl liebte sie Stadt und Gesellschaft und den Ton der grossen Welt; aber wenn die Schwalben wieder zwitscherten und die Flieder wieder zu knospen begann, da zog sie's doch in die Parkeinsamkeit hinaus, die wiederum kaum eine Einsamkeit war, denn neben der Natur, deren Sprache sie wohl verstand, hatte sie Bücher und Musik, und die Kinder.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>Werke, IV, 38.



A woman of cultured sensibilities finds relief in nature when these are affronted by the circumstance of her daily life. This seems to be linked with constitutional and temperamental factors, as we saw in the case of Grete Minde. Melanie is of Swiss-French ancestry, and the ambiguous statement is made at the beginning: "Alle Vorzüge französischen Wesens erschienen in ihr vereinigt. Ob auch die Schwächen? Es verlautete nichts darüber".<sup>18</sup> Certainly the delineation and motivation is strongly tinted with notions of temperament, that is, characters' actions are determined largely by constitutional factors not fully in their control. Melanie's responsiveness to nature seems to derive from such factors. In one scene we learn the extent to which her reactions are conditioned by her surroundings. The crisis whereby she succumbs to her love for Rubehn occurs in the "Palmenhaus" at the Van der Straaten villa: Melanie, whose fine nerves and languid constitution normally need the bracing effect of the open air, loses her powers of resistance in the heavy exotic atmosphere of the tropical plants:

Es atmete sich wonnig aber schwer in dieser dichten Laube; dabei war es, als ob hundert Geheimnisse sprächen, und Melanie fühlte, wie dieser berausende Duft ihre Nerven hinschwinden machte. Sie zählte jenen von äusseren Eindrücken, von Luft und Licht abhängigen Naturen zu, die der Frische bedürfen, um selber frisch zu sein. Über ein Schneefeld hin, bei rascher Fahrt und

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<sup>18</sup>Werke, IV, 8.

scharfem Ost,--da wär ihr der heitere Sinn, der tapfere Mut ihrer Seele wiedergekommen; aber diese weiche, schlaffe Luft machte sie selber weich und schlaff; und die Rüstung ihres Geistes lockerte sich und löste sich und fiel.<sup>19</sup>

Melanie's behaviour is thus strongly conditioned by her temperamental responsiveness to nature and its moods.

Nature inspires her with excessive optimism, but which proves tragically misplaced, when she goes to see her children for the first time after her separation from Van der Straaten:

Es war ein klarer Tag und eine milde Luft, und nur ein paar weisse Wölkchen schwammen im Blau. . . . Ach, wie wohl ihr diese Luft tat! Und sie blieb öfters stehen, um sie begierig einzusehen und sich an den stillen Bildern erwachenden Lebens und einer hier und da schon knospenden Natur zu freuen. . . .<sup>20</sup>

It is of interest that here, as in other instances in Fontane, a character is impelled to take a certain line of conduct under the influence of his surroundings. Although questions of temperament are involved, the particular combination of internal state and outward mood is the work of fate, so that as Wandrey suggests, one cannot attribute Fontane's character motivation solely to the tradition of Taine. Wandrey cites an encounter of Fontane with Ibsen in which the latter explains how the heroine in one of his dreams would not have taken her life, if it had not been a sombre winter's day: Fontane was greatly interested in this

<sup>19</sup> Werke, IV, 73.

<sup>20</sup> Werke, IV, 110.

interpretation.<sup>21</sup>

Melanie's awareness of nature affects her in more subtle ways. She is alive to the symbolic significance of natural phenomena, which intrude on her thoughts in moments of reflection providing them with visual form. The most notable instance of this is the fascination she feels for the snow-flakes whirling and falling in the wind. To her they suggest a form of existence in which the capricious pursuit of independence is coupled with the thrilling danger of ultimate downfall, a danger which is accepted in return for the privilege of tasting the heights and depths of life, untrammelled by the normal bonds of living:

"Über dem Ganzen. . .lag ein grauer Himmel, und ein paar Flocken federten und tanzten, und wenn sie niederfielen, wurden sie vom Luftzuge neu gefasst und wieder in die Höhe gewirbelt. Etwas wie Sehnsucht überkam Melanie beim Anblick dieses Flockentanzes, als müsse es schön sein, so zu steigen und zu fallen und dann wieder zu steigen. . .<sup>22</sup>

She recalls the scene a year later, when she flees from her home to begin her life with Rubehn.<sup>23</sup> Here a character betrays a significant side of her character--lightness of spirit, Faustian urges for the absolute--through her recognition of a kindred spirit in nature. Demetz sees this symbol as part of the presentation of a recurrent trait in many of

<sup>21</sup>Conrad Wandrey, op. cit., p. 183.

<sup>22</sup>Werke, IV, 11.

<sup>23</sup>Werke, IV, 92.

Fontane's heroines; it is seen also in Effi Briest's attachment to the swing and climbing pole of her childhood games.<sup>24</sup>

Elsewhere, a boat-trip with Rubehn, when she first tells him of her dissatisfaction with her present life, occasions a feeling of aimless drifting: as in Schach von Wuthenow, the fortuitous movement of the water underlines the uncertainty of human affairs: "Die Sterne. . .funkelten und spiegelten sich und tanzten um sie her, und das Boot schaukelte leis und trieb im Strom, und in Melanies Herzen erklang es immer lauter: Wohin treiben wir?"<sup>25</sup>

L'Adultera, the first of the Berlin novels, contains little actual landscape description, yet it is of interest to note that motifs from nature continue to play a significant part in the characterisation. In this connection, moreover, a certain type of Fontane heroine begins to emerge: Grete Minde, Hilde Bocholt and Melane van der Straaten, while showing wide individual differences, have in common a certain restless longing for spheres beyond their immediate grasp; they are ill-adapted to their society; in all cases their longing is crystallised in an exceptional sensitivity to the natural world. While, in the earlier works, nature is not far removed from the daily lives of the heroines, in L'Adultera

<sup>24</sup>P. Demetz, op. cit., pp. 204-217.

<sup>25</sup>Werke, IV, 60-61.

its intrusive character is unmistakable. The possibility suggests itself of an opposition between the social and the natural worlds resulting in a tension within the heroine between adherence to the social form--duties to family and rank--and the inner urge to escape from it all. We may see how this opposition develops in later novels.

In Graf Petöfy the heroine, the actress Franziska Franz, achieves flight from the social world by marrying the aged Count Petöfy and going to live with him on his Hungarian estates at Arpa, outside the social orbit of Vienna. In this she professes to follow her instinct for the simple and unsophisticated way of life, an instinct which she attributes to her North German origin: "Wir empfinden tief das Unausreichende des bloss Angelernten. Eine Sehnsucht nach dem Einfacheren, Natürlicheren, regt sich beständig in uns, und diese Sehnsucht ist vielleicht unser Bestes".<sup>26</sup> Such sentiments, which would be noble when spoken by certain characters,<sup>27</sup> are less than convincing on the lips of the retired actress who is eventually driven by boredom to seek the more exciting company of the Count's nephew, Egon.

The physical setting provides greater opportunities for landscape description, although such descriptions are

<sup>26</sup> Werke, II, 17-18.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. the study of Irrungen Wirrungen, below.

often undistinguished--"die Wiener und ungarische Topographie, leblos, aus dem Reisehandbuch".<sup>28</sup> Critics of Fontane seem to be in agreement that his attempts to reproduce environment of which he had no first-hand experience, such as his descriptions of America in Quitt, are unsuccessful. The description of natural surroundings and moods is however occasionally linked with the feelings and aspirations of the characters, which has at least the effect of introducing a rhapsodic note into the descriptions. The castle and estate at Arpa, usually associated with the park, the terrace and its cypresses, the lake and its weeping-willows, become identified with the idea of "Stille". It is this which commends Arpa to Franziska: "Es ist mir so recht, wie's ist. Das ich dir's gestehe, mich erquicket diese Stille geradezu".<sup>29</sup> She is moved by the peacefulness of the scene, when on the night of their arrival the two are sitting on the veranda where an embarrassment, their need to conceal an awareness of the incongruity of their union, threatens to overtake them:

Der Abend brach endlich herein, und ein Kühlerer Luftstrom kam von See her, aber es war kein Wind. . . . Endlich wurde der Mond über dem Gebirge sichtbar und stand so licht and klar da, wie wenn er den Frieden besiegeln wolle, der drunten ausgebreitet lag. Franziska blickte still und tief aufatmend

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<sup>28</sup>Demetz, op. cit., p. 117.

<sup>29</sup>Werke, II, 97.

hinauf, und auch der Graf schwieg, als er sah, wie das Bild sie berührte.<sup>30</sup>

Franziska's hankering for peace and withdrawal is linked with a contemplative streak which accords poorly with her former life. She writes to the Count's sister: "Mir will es scheinen, dass ich, wenn nicht für die Stille, so doch für die Kontemplation geboren und in dem, was mir zurückliegt, in einem Irrtum befangen gewesen bin. Ich habe noch eine Sehnsucht, aber diese Sehnsucht ist nicht die Welt. . . ." <sup>31</sup> Thus she turns, in her contemplative moments, to the natural world.

On such an occasion she is brought to the realisation that she has not found the satisfaction she seeks in her present life and that her undefinable feelings of longing are as urgent as before. Her uneasiness is roused by a reading of Rousseau's Confessions, to which an unknown annotator has added the lines: "Vor jedem steht ein Bild des, was er werden soll. Solang er das nicht ist, ist nicht sein Friede voll". <sup>32</sup> She awakes from a troubled sleep and goes onto the balcony. The scene is as peaceful as any other she has witnessed at Arpa: an earlier mist has dispersed and the forested foothills of the mountains are visible in the moonlight;

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<sup>30</sup>Werke, II, 80.

<sup>31</sup>Werke, II, 110-111.

<sup>32</sup>Werke, II, 119-120.

but this time her attention is drawn by the thundering noise of a stream as it rushes, swollen by the rain, over the cliff-face. The monotonous roar recalls the concluding stanza of a song she used to sing and which had so captivated the Count; its relevance to herself now becomes vividly clear: "Hörbar rauscht die Zeit vorüber/ An des Mädchens Einsamkeit".

Franziska's attitude to nature is inconsistent and wholly self-orientated; she perceives and responds to its various moods only in as far as they seem applicable to her own confused motives and uncertain aspirations.

Franziska is not the only character for whom nature is full of relevance to human fortunes. Petöfy is moved by the sight of the setting sun, whose contour remains visible in the glow on the horizon when the sun itself has sunk from view. To him it is a symbol of human life in old age, a mere shadow of earlier life, lingering but transitory. Without being fully aware, he underlines the hopelessness of his own attempt to recapture youth.<sup>33</sup> On his last early-morning ride through Vienna before his suicide, he witnesses a scene which seems to demonstrate the cruel inevitability of life as a fundamental law of nature. A colony of field-mice, threatened with flooding, emerge from their holes and scramble for safety. But once they reach higher ground they fall

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<sup>33</sup> Werke, II, 110.



victim to the crows which swoop upon them from a nearby poplar. Petöfy comments on this savage drama: "Überall dasselbe; keine Flucht vor dem, was einmal beschlossen".<sup>34</sup>

Characters preoccupied with some personal dilemma, or with questions bearing on their present situation or future fortunes, carry on an inner dialogue with themselves. In this state they are alive to the suggestive power of outside forces, even if these are no more than the inarticulate manifestations of nature. This is essentially the means by which nature was introduced into the narrative in Schach von Wuthenow. In Graf Petöfy, we note that even where the action takes place for the most part in a rural setting away from the centres of social life, the most vital depictions of nature are those which are closely linked with the psychological conflicts and crises of the characters--, whose conflicts are in the last resort related to the values of the social world.

The theme of withdrawal from society reoccurs in Cécile. For Cécile St. Arnaud a resort in the Harz offers the hope that new surroundings will bring a new beginning and a break with her troubled past. It is true that scepticism is mingled with hope in her appraisal of the journey's

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<sup>34</sup>Werke, II, 163.

prospects, so that her husband, Pierre, must reassure her:

"Vielleicht ist das Glück näher, als du denkst, und hängt im Harz an irgendeiner Klippe".<sup>35</sup> In their undertaking, the central characters explicitly reject the town-life in favour of the less rigid life of travel. Cécile makes the distinction clear when she says to Pierre:

". . .Wir hätten uns statt der grossen Stadt einen stillen Platz suchen sollen, da wär uns manch Bitteres erspart geblieben. Einen stillen Platz, oder lieber gleich ein paar, um mit ihnen wechseln zu können. Wie leicht und gefällig macht sich hier das Leben. Und warum? Weil sich beständig neue Beziehungen und Anknüpfungen bieten. Das ist noch der Vorzug des Reiselebens, dass man den Augenblick walten und überhaupt alles gelten lässt, was einem gefällt".<sup>36</sup>

Such sentiments may reflect the typical yearning of the late nineteenth-century townsman, who is in all respects fully adjusted socially, for a temporary retreat into the country: Fontane's own letters to Friedlaender often betray this sentiment. With Cécile, however, the feeling is deeper, as we learn from her final meeting with Gordon. She talks of her world-weariness and her distaste of the great questions which occupy humanity. For her, happiness lies in idyllic simplicity: "'Über Land fahren und an einer Waldecke sitzen, zusehen, wie das Korn geschnitten wird und die Kinder die

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<sup>35</sup> Werke, IV, 131.

<sup>36</sup> Werke, IV, 173.

Mohnblumen pflücken, oder auch wohl selber hingehen und einen Kranz flechten und dabei mit kleinen Leuten von kleinen Dingen reden. . .'" is the ideal life for which her whole being yearns.<sup>37</sup> In this writer's view, Cécile St. Arnaud (who is fuller than Melanie Van der Straaten and Franziska Franz, and in contrast to these is both tragic and sympathetic) is the earliest embodiment of that "mal de fin du siècle" which influences increasingly the theme and characterisation of Fontane's later social novels.

The heroine of Cécile, therefore, sees her journey into the Harz as a quest for a "Glück" denied her in her normal urban society. The Harz landscape thus takes on special significance for her. Environment is linked with issues of personal fortune from the outset. Even the changing scenery visible as the train nears its destination seems to imply promise, so that Pierre makes a gently bantering comment:

Das Land, das man passierte, wurde mehr und mehr ein Gartenland, und wie sonst Kornstreifen sich über den Ackergrund ziehen, zogen sich hier Blumenbeete durch die weite Gemarkung.

"Sieh, Cécile", sagte der Oberst. "Ein Teppich legt sich dir zu Füßen, und der Harz empfängt dich à la princesse. Was willst du mehr?"<sup>38</sup>

Cécile seeks recuperation from the stresses of her past life, which have left her in delicate health and a

<sup>37</sup> Werke, IV, 261.

<sup>38</sup> Werke, IV, 132.

somewhat neurotic state of mind. The open air is the most obvious means of cure. Besides this she shows hankerings after the scenes of her childhood, which are inseparably linked with the mountainous landscape of her native Silesia. She shows her delight in the Harz landscape on a number of occasions. Pierre is conscious of her need, as we have seen, and uses it to exploit the side of her nature which cannot resist the appeal of small gallantries--"ihre ganz auf Huldigung and Pikanterie gestellte Natur".<sup>39</sup> During a trip to Lindenburg the St. Arnauds pause to rest and admire the landscape. The peaceful, somewhat lethargic, mood of the natural surroundings induces similar feelings in the heroine:

Helles, sonnendurchleuchtetes Gewölk zog drüben im Blauen an ihnen vorüber, und ein Volk weisser Tauben schwebte daran hin oder stieg abwechselnd auf und nieder. Unmittelbar am Anhang aber standen Libellen in der Luft, und kleine graue Heuschrecken, die sich in der Morgenkühle von Feld und Wiese her bis an den Waldrand gewagt haben mochten, sprangen jetzt, bei sich steigernder Tagesglut, in die Kühle Kleewiese zurück.

Der Oberst nahm Céciles Hand, und die schöne Frau lehnte sich müd und auf Augenblicke wie glücklich an seine Schulter.

Then, her attention is attracted by large swarms of butterflies which come right to the bench on which the two are sitting.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup>Werke, IV, 159.

<sup>40</sup>Werke, IV, 187.

A similar situation occurred the previous day during the couple's morning walk at the hotel. A sudden gust of wind blows some rose petals towards Cécile: ". . .Im selben Augenblick sanken die herangewehten Blätter, denen das Fliegergebüsch den Durchgang wehrte, zu Füßen der schönen Frau nieder". Pierre remarks piquantly that even nature is thus paying her homage.<sup>41</sup>

The significance of this remote rural setting, the Harz landscape, proves deeper for Cécile than she anticipated, since it is here that her fatal relationship with Gordon is cemented. It is characteristic of Fontane's taste for the suggestive power of backgrounds that Gordon himself is conscious of the "haunted" quality of the region, whereby the legendary connections with witches and witchcraft have almost real power over the imagination:

Allen Ernstes, die Landschaft ist hier so gesättigt mit derlei Stoff, dass die Sache schliesslich eine reelle Gewalt über uns gewinnt, und was mich persönlich angeht, nun so darf ich nicht verschweigen: als ich neulich, die Mondsichel am Himmel, das im Schatten liegende Bodetal passierte, war mir's, als ob hinter jedem Erlenstamm eine Hexe hervorsähe.<sup>42</sup>

It is only retrospectively, when Gordon calls on Cécile in Berlin, that we learn the extent to which both were influenced

<sup>41</sup>Werke, IV, 175.

<sup>42</sup>Werke, IV, 150.

by their experience in the Harz, whose environs has left them with indelible associations. Gordon blames her present claustrophobic existence for her ailing health, and adds:

" . . . Was Ihnen fehlt, das ist nicht Luft, das ist Licht, Freiheit, Freude. Sie sind eingeschnürt und eingezwängt. . . , und dies eingezwängte Herz, das heilen sie nicht mit totem Fingerhutkraut. Sie müssten es wieder blühen sehen rot und lebendig wie damals, als wir über die Felsen ritten und der helle Sonnenschein um uns her lag. Und dann abends das Mondlicht, das auf das einsame Denkmal am Wege fiel. Unvergesslicher Tag und unvergessliche Stunde."<sup>43</sup>

The tragedy of the relationship of Cécile and Gordon, which leads to both their deaths, spring from the incompatibility of two vastly differing social backgrounds and codes of conduct. It is thus a product of the existing social conditions. Yet Fontane attempts to superimpose on this social study elements of a supernatural fatalism, which is assisted above all by the suggestive power of the Harz landscape. Cécile, like Gordon, senses a sinister quality here, and this accords with her somewhat neurotic sensibility. After her return to Berlin she explains to Pastor Döffler why she fears a renewal of her acquaintance with Gordon. She relates how she, Gordon and St. Arnaud had paused to pick flowers on the bank of the Bode in the late afternoon, when a glowing red light suddenly dazzled her.:

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<sup>43</sup> Werke, IV, 260.

Und als ich aufsah, sah ich, dass es die niedergehende Sonne war, deren Glut durch eine drüben am anderen Ufer stehende Blutbuche fiel. Und in der Glut stand Gordon und war wie davon übergossen. Und sehen Sie, das ist das Bild, von dem ich fühle, dass es mir eine Vorbedeutung war und wenn nicht eine Vorbedeutung, so doch zum mindesten eine Warnung.<sup>44</sup>

On an excursion with Gordon to Altenbrak they pass an abandoned hunting-lodge known as Todtenrode. Both the name and the desolation of the scene contribute to the sinister character of the spot:

[sie] hielten vor einer von einem Plankezaun eingefassten und hoch in Gras stehenden Wiese, darauf nichts sichtbar war als in einiger Entfernung drei ziemlich gleich aussehende Häuschen, die totstill und wie verwunschen in der grellen Mittagssonne dalagen. Keine Grille zirpte, kein Rauch stieg auf. . .<sup>45</sup>

The same evening, on the return journey, on which they are joined by St. Arnaud, Cécile is startled by a blackbird which darts from the shadows in front of them as though trying to bar their passage. She calls the bird "unheimlich" and St. Arnaud mocks her for anticipating "ein Stück Romantik" on their nocturnal journey. Nevertheless, she proposes returning by the other bank of the Bode, so as to avoid Todtenrode.<sup>46</sup>

In the early Novellen, Grete Minde and Ellernklipp,

<sup>44</sup>Werke, IV, 234.

<sup>45</sup>Werke, IV, 197.

<sup>46</sup>Werke, I, 213-214.

the uncertainty of human fortunes was often intimated by means of a sinister force in landscape and natural surroundings, which, as we saw, Fontane may have copied from Shakespeare. The dark atmosphere created accorded well with the character, the "balladesque" remoteness, of these works. In contrast to this, the haunted background of Cécile is perceived entirely by characters of the modern age, sophisticated and worldly whose fears stem not from superstition but from guilt. The natural surroundings and their effect are for the most part described by such characters rather than by the narrator himself. Consequently there is a noticeable lack of "feeling" in such description. Possibly this is one of the features which lead Frau Fontane to describe the novel as "tedious".<sup>47</sup> Considerable use is made of what Max Tau has described as the "associative technique" in landscape-description.<sup>48</sup> Characters claim to sense a "spukhaft" quality, and then enumerate the names of mountains and the legends connected with them. In the incident of the blackbird described above, Gordon and St. Arnaud discuss the various forms of "Unheimlichkeit" traditionally associated with birds. For the first time to any noticeable degree the presentation of nature has become primarily a subject of the social

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<sup>47</sup>Th. Fontane, Briefe an Friedlaender, ed., Kurt Schreinert (Heidelber, 1954). Letter of 9 April, 1886.

<sup>48</sup>Cf. ch. 1, above.



"Gespräche", with which Fontane's later novels are increasingly concerned.<sup>49</sup> Consequently the motifs which in earlier works were characteristic of the narrator's concern for background "mood" often approach the level of parody. The alternative would be a return to Romanticism, with its "mystische Vergeheimnissung des Naturinnern, das allenthalben in bedeutsamen Zeichen, in heimlichen Schauern, in verhüllten Ahnungen einer rätselhaften Hintergrundswelt zum Menschen redet. . ."50 While hints of this remain in the narrative technique (although hardly the content) of earlier works, it is not compatible with the subject of Cécile.

Beyond this, the view we have of the natural world is often conditioned, as in the early part of Schach von Wuthenow, by the proximity of the social world. In many of the scenes in which nature figures, the influence of human cultivation is felt: in parks and hotel gardens, with their ornate flower-beds, trees and trimmed shrubs. The excursions into the neighbouring countryside are generally social occasions, or else, as we have seen, they represent a crucial confrontation of characters in which personal fortunes are to the fore in dialogue and thought, whilst natural phenomena are brought in, in dilettantish manner, when characters see some

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<sup>49</sup>Cf. C. Wandrey, op. cit., p. 199, on the fusion of "Gespräch" and "Naturschilderung" in Fontane's social novels.

<sup>50</sup>Bertram, Stifters Novellentechnik, p. 51.

relevance to their own situation.

In *Cécile*, therefore, the world of nature and that of late nineteenth-century Berlin society coexist in a way which is not favourable to the presentation of the former. There remains the question of whether the idyllic life envisaged by *Cécile* emerges from the novel as a promising alternative to the social world. In general this is not the case, mainly because the author maintains an ironic detachment in his treatment of the heroine. Irony, with Fontane, does not constitute a significant stylistic or thematic element of his entire output as is the case with Thomas Mann. For one thing, the dissonances in Fontane's characters, seen particularly in *Cécile* and, later, in *Effi Briest*, are usually resolved through recourse to a standpoint of philosophical acceptance, which reminds one of the bourgeois novel of the Enlightenment and strikes some critics as sentimental. But irony is evident in significant parts of novels like *Cécile*. It consists in showing the discrepancy between a character's longings and the reality of his situation, a reality which often results from some other aspect of the same character. This feature is stronger in some of the later novels, notably *Stine*, which is considered below. This type of irony is similar in its source to that which occurs in Thomas Mann. R. Baumgart writes of Mann: ". . .Erfahren in Nietzsches Dekadenz-Psychologie und herkommend von der Willensphilosophie Schopenhauers. . .weiss er, dass 'im Grunde alle Psychologie

Entlarvung und ironisch-naturalistischer Scharfblick für das vexatorische Verhältnis von Geist und Trieb' ist".<sup>51</sup>

Fontane differs from Mann in his psychology in that for him dissonances within characters are not a matter of philosophy and ironic comedy, but rather of psychological realism, showing the limitations of all human aspirations. The heroine of Cécile cannot escape the reality of her social position and her compromising past life.<sup>52</sup> This irony inevitably influences to some extent the overall effect of the natural description. The world which receives the heroine like a princess, a "märchenhaft" world of flower-plantations, infinite vistas of mountains and sky, and peaceful glimpses of "die lebendige Natur", contains the sinister Todtenrode. The princess feels the imminence of the demonic. A woman comes to a mountain resort in search of happiness, and there begins a chain of events which leads to her own death and that of a friend in the cause of social propriety. The natural world provides no cure for the sufferings of the fugitive from urban society.

In Cécile, weariness with the complexities and artificialities of social life and the accompanying urge

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<sup>51</sup> Reinhard Baumgart, Das Ironische und die Ironie in den Werken Thomas Manns (Munich, 1964), pp. 41-42.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. letter to Schlenther, 2 June 1887, (Gesammelte Werke XI, 128): Cécile illustrates the dictum: "Wer mal drin sitzt, gleichviel mit oder ohne Schuld, kommt nicht wieder heraus".

to escape to the sphere of nature are portrayed from a standpoint of ironic distance: one sees too clearly the psychological shortcomings of the characters through whom such feelings are expressed. Similarly, in Graf Petöfy, the heroine's passion, her innate need for emotional stimulation, shows through her professed yearning for the simple and idyllic life away from the mundane world. But it would be a mistake to assume that Fontane, often regarded as one of Germany's most urbane writers, was not aware of a nobler alternative to the kind of life engendered by subservience to the mores of the town. As early as 1884, he wrote to Friedlaender:

Bismarck, der so oft Recht hat, hat auch Recht in seiner Abneigung gegen die Millionen-Städte. Sie schreiben selbst "bei weniger 'Carrière' hätten wir mehr Wahrheit in der Welt". Gewiss. Und nicht blos mehr Wahrheit, auch mehr Wissen, Gründlichkeit, Tüchtigkeit überhaupt. Und was heisst Carrière machen anders, als in Berlin leben und was heisst in Berlin leben anders, als Carrière machen. Einige wenige Personen brauchen ihrem Berufe nach die grosse Stadt, das ist zuzugeben, aber sie sind doch verloren, speziell für ihren Beruf verloren, wenn sie nicht die schwere Kunst verstehn, in der grossen Stadt zu leben und wiederum auch nicht zu leben.<sup>53</sup>

The frame of mind revealed in this outburst--revolt against the false social values signified by life in the town--finds artistic expression in the novel Irrungen Wirungen (1888), with which we propose to conclude this study of the role of nature in the social novels. In Irrungen Wirungen nature

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<sup>53</sup>Briefe an Friedlaender, p. 3. Letter of 21 December, 1884.

plays a significant part both in the description and theme of the novel.

The hero is the young baron Botho von Rienäcker who is in love with a seamstress, Lene Nimptsch. His love is partly motivated by an aversion for the social class into which he was born, with its preoccupation with rank, career and wealth, and a corresponding attachment to a style of life directly opposed to his own. To him Lene signifies "das Natürliche":

Jeder Mensch is seiner Natur nach auf bestimmte, mitunter sehr; sehr kleine Dinge gestellt, Dinge, die, trotzdem sie klein sind, für ihn das Leben oder doch des Lebens Bestes bedeuten. Und dies Beste heisst mir Einfachheit, Wahrheit, Natürlichkeit. Das alles hat Lene; damit hat sie mir's angetan, da liegt der Zauber, aus dem mich zu lösen, mir jetzt so schwer fällt.<sup>54</sup>

One of his associates says of Botho: "Rienäcker, der überhaupt in manchem seinen eigenen Weg geht, war immer fürs Natürliche".<sup>55</sup> His conception of the "natural" is applicable to a modest way of life and contentment with small things. To him the lower classes are natural. For this reason he envies them a happiness that men of his own class do not seem to possess. His frequent visits to the Dörr household, with its communal gatherings around the hearth, show his attachment

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<sup>54</sup>Werke, III, 170.

<sup>55</sup>Werke, III, 132.

to the style of life it represents. He tells Lene's mother: ". . .Sehen Sie sich mal um hier, wie leben Sie? Wie Gott in Frankreich. Erst haben Sie das Haus und diesen Herd und dann den Garten und dann Frau Dörr".<sup>56</sup> During a lone horse-ride he is moved by the sight of a group of workers taking their mid-day meal outside a rolling-mill. Their wives, some with babes in arms, stand around talking and laughing. "Rienäcker, der sich den Sinn für das Natürliche mit nur zu gutem Rechte zugeschrieben, war entzückt von dem Bilde, das sich ihm bot, und mit einem Anflug von Neid sah er auf die Gruppe glücklicher Menschen".<sup>57</sup> It is interesting to contrast this romantic view of artisan life with the treatment in Fontane's contemporaries such as Zola.

In Irrungen Wirrungen, therefore, there is a clear contrast between two sets of values: the "naturalness" of lower bourgeois life on the one hand, and the artificiality of high society and its pursuit of "alles Unwahre, Geschraubte, Zurechtgemachte, Schick, Tournüre, Savoirfaire", on the other.<sup>58</sup>

In earlier social novels characters occasionally showed an antipathy towards society and a tendency to withdraw from it, either through a personal emotional incompatibility

<sup>56</sup>Werke, III, 109.

<sup>57</sup>Werke, III, 171.

<sup>58</sup>Werke, III, 170.

with social life, or through ill-luck which brought them into variance with society's values. The social world itself was generally taken for granted as a stable, if imperfect, constant. In Irrungen Wirungen the inherent deficiencies of a whole section of society are seen--both in the perceptive sentiments of Botho and in the characterisation of his associates--, whilst a wholesome alternative is intimated. The dominant theme of this alternative is set by the epithet "natürlich". Fontane wrote of contemporary literature at this time: "Aller modernen Kunst ist der Sinn für das Natürliche verlorengegangen, und gerade diese Kunst nennt sich naturalistisch".<sup>59</sup>

If Fontane wishes to portray "natural" human life, this will be found primarily in the characterisation and the presentation of human relationships: in Irrungen Wirungen principally in the relationship of Lene and Botho. But it is perhaps of symbolic importance to the whole novel that in the presentation of the love-relationship the world of nature itself plays a large supporting role.

The settings of the novel are divided between those of high Berlin society and the secluded scenes of the lovers' trysts. The two spheres are entirely separate. The meetings

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<sup>59</sup>Jost Schillemeit, Theodor Fontane. Geist und Kunst seines Alterswerks (Zürich, 1961), p. 23.

of Botho and Lene and the development of their relationship are associated with a few settings which are remote from those of urban society: the Dörr' garden (Chapter 5), which is representative of a number of such meetings and shows the couple content to enjoy their happiness with no urgent concern for the "real" life outside; Wilmersdorf (Chapter 9) and Hankels Ablage (Chapters 11 to 14) in which they leave Berlin physically; the Dörrs' garden again (Chapter 15), where the scene of their former happiness is the setting in which they renounce each other in the interest of social reality. Apart from these deliberately chosen isolated settings, no contact is possible between the lovers. When Lene sees the Baron among his peers in Berlin she must watch from a distance, "weit zurück in einer Seiten-Alle".<sup>60</sup> Side-paths and byways are a leitmotif for the settings in which the love-relationship is conducted. In the garden, Lene suggests they take a "Seitenweg" shaded by tall raspberry bushes.<sup>61</sup> The path they take to Wilmersdorf leads from "ein verstecktes Seitenpförtchen": Lene calls it "der hübscheste Weg und der einsamste".<sup>62</sup>

The importance of these settings is clear. They are of symbolic importance in the presentation of the love-story,

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<sup>60</sup>Werke, III, 120.

<sup>61</sup>Werke, III, 115.

<sup>62</sup>Werke, II, 134.



since the happiness of the lovers can only be assured away from the main-stream of the social world. The traditional theme of illicit love receives a modern treatment, whereby the anonymous forces of social prejudice become the main antagonist. Lene remarks at the end of their walk in the garden: "Weisst du, Botho, wenn ich dich nun so nehmen und mit dir die Lasterallee druben auf und ab schreiten konnte, so sicher wie hier zwischen den Buchsbaumrabatten, und konnte jedem sagen: 'Ja, wundert euch nur, er ist er und ich bin ich, und er liebt mich und ich liebe ihn,'--ja, Botho, was glaubst du wohl, was ich dafur gabe?"<sup>63</sup>

However, the condemnation of society is never more than implicit in the narrative; the focus of attention remains essentially on the lovers and their relationship, and the artistic merits of the novel hinge entirely on the presentation of this relationship. We have noted the significance of the background settings in this respect. Wandrey writes:

Die Menschen verbinden sich der Landschaft in einer so durchgefuhlten Einheit, dass man versucht ist zu erklaren, hier ware auf kleinstem Raum und in zwingender Form mehr von markischem Geist gegeben, wie in den funf dicken Banden der "Wanderungen".

.....

Wie die herbe Schonheit der markischen Landschaft sich dem warmen Ernste im Charakter Lenes eint und dann die abendliche Stille und Versunkenheit eine seltsame Gefuhlsweichheit hervorbringt, wie diese Liebenden wissen, dass jeder Augenblick, den sie hier weilen, den ferneren Lebensweg

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<sup>63</sup>Werke, III, 118.

durchklingen wird, und nun jede Kleinigkeit,  
 jedes Wort, jedes unscheinliche [sic] Ding  
 Fülle gewinnt und Glanz von dem seltenen  
 Glück der Stunde und zu zärtlichem Verweilen  
 zwingt!<sup>64</sup>

If we analyse the four scenes which mark the development of the love relationship we will see how the background settings, which are essentially natural settings, effect the presentation of this central relationship.

During the first walk in the garden, the main focus is on the conversation, which owes its charm to an unconstrained intimacy, a playfulness with serious overtones: Lene shows her true personality, the common-sense realism with which she grasps the nature of the Dörrs relationship, her affection for Botho combined with an anticipation of their inevitable separation; Botho is inspired by the surroundings with sentimental memories of his childhood and also shows less readiness to accept that their relationship is no more than a transient dream. The natural background enhances the charm of this encounter, less through elaborate description (of which there is little in the whole novel) than through references interposed at suitable junctures. The key-note of the scene is its deep peacefulness, contrasting with the bustle of Berlin life beyond the confines of the garden. A few words of introductory description convey the still evening atmosphere and the heavy

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<sup>64</sup>C. Wandrey, op. cit., pp. 227 f.

fragrance of the vegetation, bringing to prominence the minuter aspects of the scene which would ordinarily escape attention in the rush of daily life. This provides a suitable prelude to the ensuing conversation: intimate and nuanced, in which, as Wandrey remarks, "every detail, every word, every imperceptible thing gains fullness":

Drinnen im Garten war alles Duft und Frische; denn den ganzen Hauptweg hinauf, zwischen den Johannis- und Stachelbeersträuchern, standen Levkojen und Reseda, deren feiner Duft sich mit dem kräftigeren der Thymianbeete mischte. Nichts regte sich in den Bäumen, und nur Leuchtkäfer schwirrten durch die Luft.<sup>65</sup>

They wander at will among the plantations and bushes; Lene takes a strawberry between her lips: "Botho war auch nicht säumig, pflückte die Beere von ihrem Munde fort und umarmte sie und küsste sie".<sup>66</sup> Later, it is the moon over the Tiergarten which attracts their attention and causes a pause in the conversation, accompanied by a momentary deepening of affection:

"Und nun lassen wir die Frau Dörr und setzen uns lieber und sehen in die Mondsichel." Wirklich, der Mond stand drüben über dem Elefantenhaus, das in dem niederströmenden Silberlichte noch phantastischer aussah als gewöhnlich. Lene wies darauf hin, zog die Mantelkapuze fester zusammen und barg sich an seine Brust.<sup>67</sup>

The natural surroundings thus provide the scene with motifs--

<sup>65</sup>Werke, III, 115.

<sup>66</sup>Werke, III, 116.

<sup>67</sup>Werke, III, 116.

nocturnal peace, moonlight--, which, while unexceptional in the depiction of a love-scene, derive added charm from their importance to the characters themselves.

The walk to Wilmersdorf follows Lene's suggestion that they should go out of the town: "Bloss ins Feld, ins Grüne, wo du nichts haben wirst als Gänseblümchen und mich".<sup>68</sup> More intimate conversation is prevented this time by the presence of Frau Dörr. She provides, however, a touch of humour through her somewhat earthy references to country customs and superstitions, thereby embarrassing Lene:

. . .Der Pfad. . .mündete. . .in einen etwas grösseren Feldweg ein, dessen Pappelweiden eben blühten und ihre flockenartigen Kätzchen über die Wiese hin ausstreuten, auf der sie nun wie gezupfte Watte dalagen. "Sieh, Lene", sagte Frau Dörr, "weisst du denn, dass sie jetzt Betten damit stopfen, ganz wie mit Federn? Und sie nennen es Waldwolle".

She espies a stork on the marsh-land:

"Sieh doch den Tümpel da, wo der Storch steht und kuckt gerade hierher. Na, nach mir sieht er nich. Da könnte er lange sehn". Endlich. . .war doch eine Pause da, während welcher man in langsamen Tempo weiterschritt, bis man zuletzt an einen Höhenrücken kam, der sich hier plateauartig von der Sprée nach der Havel hinüberzieht. An eben dieser Stelle hörten auch die Wiesen auf, und Korn- und Rapsfelder fingen an, die sich bis an die vorderste Häuserreihe von Wilmersdorf zogen.

"Nun bloss da noch'rauf", sagte Frau Dörr, "und dann setzen wir uns und pflücken Butterblumen und flechten uns einen Stengelkranz. Jott, das

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<sup>68</sup> Werke, III, 133.

macht immer so viel Spass, wenn man den einen Stengel in den andern piekt, bis der Kranz fertig ist oder die Kette".

"Wohl, wohl", sagte Lene, der es heute beschieden war, an kleinen Verlegenheit gar nicht herauszukommen.<sup>69</sup>

Throughout the scene the rural background is conveyed by a few details, into which a human element, the ingenuous chatter of a country-woman, is successfully integrated. The whole demonstrates precisely the "naturalness" to which Botho is drawn.

The excursion finishes as the sun is setting. This small background detail is not without symbolic significance. The trio are still in a happy and playful spirit when Lene suggests they should sing. Frau Dörr suggests a song about the morning, which Lene rejects as depressing: "'Nein, das nicht. . ."Morgen in das kühle Grab", das ist mir zu traurig. . .'"<sup>70</sup>

One would tend to expect the morning to represent hope, the optimism of a new day beginning. To Lene, however, the morrow signifies a reawakening to the cold, unsympathetic reality of the "Alltagsleben". In other novels the background of a setting-sun represents a happiness which characters feel to be transient while hoping to prolong as long as possible. In Graf Petöfy the setting sun symbolised precisely this sense

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<sup>69</sup>Werke, III, 134-136.

<sup>70</sup>Werke, III, 138.

of a beautiful ending, which a character sought to hold against the reality of the future. It is an important motif in Fontane's next novel, Stine (1890), which in its theme--the attachment of a nobleman to a woman of inferior rank--nears obvious affinities with Irrungen Wirrunen. The meetings of Count Waldemar and Stine become associated with evening and sunset. After Stine has rejected him (like Lene, from a sense of social reality), Waldemar writes in a farewell note before taking his life: "Die Stunden, die wir zusammen verlebten, waren, vom ersten Tage an, Sonnenuntergangsstunden, und dabei ist es geblieben. Aber es waren doch glückliche Stunden".<sup>71</sup> In the outcome Lene Nimptsch is better reconciled to loss of happiness than Petöfy or Waldemar; but there is, symbolised in the evening setting to the conclusion of this carefree excursion, a suggestion of the tragedy which lies in the confrontation of personal happiness and reality: the opposition of "Traum" and "Wirklichkeit" which is discussed below, as one of the novel's central themes.

The climax of the relationship of Botho and Lene is marked by the visit they make alone to "Hankels Ablage". It is their most ambitious attempt to gain the happiness they long for, in perfect isolation from anything at all associated

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<sup>71</sup>Werke, III, 307.

with their respective backgrounds. In this they are successful, and at times the narrative has a lyrical charm hardly surpassed in Fontane's novels. The outing ends disastrously, however, after a party of Botho's society friends intrude on their solitude. This is the crisis which induces Lene to renounce her lover; but, as the outcome of the novel shows, their experience on this occasion forges a bond between them which cannot be broken by a simple act of will: it has a lasting psychological effect on them both.

This excursion into the solitude of the countryside has a noticeable psychological effect on the characters. For Lene, in particular, the mere act of getting away from her daily environment is significant. "Ihr lag nur daran, mal hinauszukommen und in Gottes freier Natur, möglichst fern von dem grossstädtischen Getreibe, mit dem geliebten Manne zusammen zu sein".<sup>72</sup> When they arrive at Hankels Ablage, a wooded area on the Spree, with a single inn converted from a fishing cottage, and where the lovers are the only guests, Botho notices the change which comes over Lene: "Etwas Entschlossenes und beinahe Herbes, das sonst in ihrem Charakter lag, war wie von ihr genommen und einer ihr sonst fremden Gefühlsweichheit gewichen, und dieser Wechsel schien ihr selber

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<sup>72</sup>Werke, III, 143.

unendlich wohl zu tun".<sup>73</sup> The natural surroundings thus have a beneficial psychological effect on Lene, enabling her to show a more spontaneous, carefree side of her nature. The reader perceives, without being specifically told, how this side is normally suppressed by her customary milieu, the lower-class urban background and the attention to day-to-day necessities. Fontane shares with his contemporaries the awareness of the interaction of environment and temperament in determining human behaviour, while not sharing their mania for scientific detail.

The change in Lene shows itself in a child-like curiosity, so that objects of the natural surroundings are described with a freshness as though experienced for the first time:

Auf einem der herabhängenden Ulmenzweige wiegte sich ein in einem niedrigen Nachbargebüsch nistender Fink; Schwalben fuhren hin und her, und zuletzt kam eine schwarze Henne mit einem langen Gefolge von Entenküken an der Veranda vorüber und stolzierte gravitatisch auf eine weit in den Fluss hineingebauten Wassersteg zu. Mitten auf diesem Steg aber blieb die Henne stehen, während sich die Küken ins Wasser stürzten und fortschwammen. Lene sah eifrig dem allen zu.<sup>74</sup>

At Lene's suggestion, they take a boat-trip, from which they land in a pine-wood. ("Die roten Stämme desselben glühten

<sup>73</sup>Werke, III, 144.

<sup>74</sup>Werke, III, 145.



prächtig im Widerschein der schon tief stehenden Sonne, während über den Kronen ein bläulicher Nebel lag".) In this setting the two continue in jestful mood. Lene shows an intimacy with objects in nature which must find little satisfaction in her normal daily life. Botho looks in vain for flowers with which to make her a bouquet. Lene teases him: "'Du siehst nur keine, weil du zu anspruchsvoll bist." "Und wenn ich es wäre, so wär' ich es bloss für dich.'" After she has gathered the flowers he was unable to find himself, Botho attempts a facetious interpretation of the symbolic value of the various plants. Again Lene chides him for his lack of feeling in such matters: "'Du hast kein Auge für diese Dinge, weil du keine Liebe dafür hast, und Auge und Liebe gehören zusammen.'" She prepares a new bouquet, supplying her own interpretations: "'Vergissmeinnicht. . .kein falsches, sondern ein echtes;. . . Ehrenpreis. . .wirst du doch auch wohl gelten lassen?. . . Teufel-Abbiss. . .eigens für dich gewachsen.'" Finally, she adds Frau Nimptsch's favorite flower, "Immortellen", (a plant habitually associated in Fontane with death) and which Botho later places on the old lady's grave. Thus, the two engage throughout in a light exchange of comments "à double entendre", jests with an overtone of seriousness regarding their present situation and the future. When Botho asks for a lock from Lene's hair with which to bind the bouquet, she at first refuses--"weil das Sprichwort sagt: Haar bindet. Und wenn

ich es um den Strauss binde, so bist du mitgebunden".<sup>75</sup> Botho later feels the accuracy of this prophecy.

Within the framework of a realistic novel an innocuous love-scene is portrayed in which a background of nature contributes, without any elaborate description, as much of freshness and charm as in a medieval Minnesang. In this there is no trace of parody, or of ironic distance, just a hint of fatalism, (which is however presented without the sinister atmosphere evoked in some novels). The scene is, in fact, central to the whole novel, showing the love-relationship at its purest and most intimate.

Beyond this, as we saw, the incident shows a new dimension in Lene, the expansive pleasure she shows in simple things in nature. She is faintly reminiscent of Hilde Bocholt, the heroine of Ellernklipp, in this respect. The episode under discussion brings out other aspects which link her with others of Fontane's heroines. She has a certain sensibility, which results from instinct rather than schooling, and when this is offended it is the natural world which provides her with a source of solace. After their return to the inn, alone in her room, she notices a picture on her wall, entitled "Si jeunesse savait". Its sensual motif has a profoundly disturbing

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<sup>75</sup>Werke, III, 146-147.

effect on her emotions: "Ihre feine Sinnlichkeit fühlte sich von dem Lüsternen in dem Bilde wie von einer Verzerrung ihres eigenen Gefühls beleidigt". In her confusion she goes to the window. Under the influence of the night air coming from the outside, the perfect silence, with only the gentle wind, and the sight of the moon-lit scene outside, she recovers her composure and again feels the completeness of her present happiness. The description is among Fontane's most lyrical, and one feels the genuine responsiveness of a character whose emotions are attuned to such a communion:

Eine tiefe Stille herrschte; nur in der alten Ulme ging ein Wehen und Rauschen, und alles, was eben noch von der Verstimmung in ihrer Seele geruht haben mochte, das schwand jetzt hin, als sie den Blick immer eindringlicher und immer entzückter auf das vor ihr ausgebreitete Bild richtete. Das Wasser flutete leise, der Wald und die Wiese lagen im abendlichen Dämmer, und der Mond, der eben wieder seinen ersten Sichelstreifen zeigte, warf einen Lichtschein über den Strom und liess das Zittern seiner kleinen Wellen erkenne. "Wie schön", sagte Lene hochaufatmend. "Und ich bin doch glücklich", setzte sie hinzu. Sie mochte sich nicht trennen von dem Bilde.<sup>76</sup>

Fontane has, as we have seen, many instances in his social novels in which a character is alone and contemplates the natural world in the quest of inner peace. But so often the process appears superficial: the natural world is the object of passing admiration, while in the last resort the character

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<sup>76</sup> Werke, III, 154.

is merely seeking pause before resuming his attempt to come to terms with society. Most of the characters are themselves too much of a sophisticated social system for them to be at home for long outside its sphere. Lene comes closest to showing a deeper "Einfühlung", so that the natural world has real spiritual benefit for her, going beyond surface sentimentality.

For Botho, the excursion has an arcadian attraction; for him the beauties of nature are enhanced by their contrast with the world of society. Assuring his host at the inn that he has slept well, he talks rhapsodically of "die Mondsichel, die uns gerade ins Fenster schien, und die Nachtigallen, die leise schlügen", and adds: "... Ja wer wollte da nicht schlafen wie im Paradies? Hoffentlich wird sich kein Spreedampfer mit zweihundert und vierzig Gästen für heute nachmittag angemeldet haben. Das wäre dann freilich die Vertreibung aus dem Paradiese".<sup>77</sup>

The Dörrs' garden is the setting of the final meeting between Botho and Lene; Botho has in the meantime become reconciled to Lene's decision to renounce him. The meeting is both a recapitulation of their former happiness on an elegiac note and a leave-taking in which courageous resignation takes the place of bitterness. As before, motifs from nature are

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<sup>77</sup>Werke, III, 156.

used, if sparingly, to produce a background mood, one of peace and seclusion, appropriate to the intimate character of the scene. A few words convey this atmosphere of peace; as before, the moon is present: ". . .Nur vom Felde her hörte man ein Gezirp, und der Mond stand über ihnen". This time, the firmament fills Lene with thoughts of death. This symbolic association is one of Fontane's recurrent motifs; in Grete Minde, and again later in Effi Briest, the heavens represent an infinite realm of peace and freedom, in which the dissonances of earthly strife are resolved and the thought of death loses its terror. Lene, however, is conscious of the beauty of death while, unlike several of Fontane's heroines, having sufficient reason to reject it as a solution: "Ich wäre gern da. Da hätt' ich Ruh. Aber ich kann es abwarten". They take the path across the fields to Wilmersdorf again: "Der Turm war deutlich sichtbar unter dem sternenklaren Himmel, und nur über den Wiesengrund zog ein dünner Nebelschleier".<sup>78</sup> Possibly the contrast in the two levels, "oben" and "unten", in which only the "here below" is shrouded in mist, with the church steeple soaring into the clear transcendental heights, confirms the wisdom of Lene's patience: with Fontane we cannot always be sure of what is intentional symbolism, of only because so many

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<sup>78</sup>Werke, III, 173.

of his symbols are made explicit. But in this last elegiac "Ausklang" of Fontane's most perfect love-relationship, the natural background continues to enhance the narrative.

The analysis of these scenes suggests, however, that in addition to functioning as an embellishment to the narrative, the natural settings are significant to the theme of the whole novel. In these settings the characters appear to attain a deeper, more intimate relationship; they act freely and without constraint, in a way which undoubtedly conforms with Botho's own ideal of "Natürlichkeit". There is a clear antithesis here both with the physical sphere of the social world in Berlin, and the artificiality of its manners and ambitions. This contrast is reflected moreover in the narrative structure of the work, whereby scenes alternate between the world of upper-class urban society (Botho's town apartment, Hiller's restaurant and the officers' club) and the simpler milieu of the Dörrs' dwelling and "die grünende Natur". This antithesis, which is fundamentally an antithesis of values, conforms with J. R. Cary's thesis that antithesis is a fundamental feature of Fontane's art, running through the construction of his novels, the discussion of ideas within them and the mechanics of style.<sup>79</sup> To the characters themselves

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<sup>79</sup>J. R. Cary, Antithesis as a Principle of Structure and Technique in the novels of Theodor Fontane, diss. John Hopkins, 1954.

in Irrungen Wirrungen the contrast is between "Traum" and "Wirklichkeit". On the return from Hankels Ablage, when it is clear to Lene that their separation is imminent, she describes the whole affair as a dream, but which for a while had been reality for her: "'Warum hab ich es geträumt? Weil es mir den ganzen Tag vor der Seele steht. Mein Traum war nur, was mir mein Herz eingab'".<sup>80</sup> During their last walk to Wilmersdorf, she explains why she is so composed: "'Ich hab es so kommen sehen, von Anfang an, und es geschieht nur, was muss. Wenn man schön geträumt hat, so muss man Gott dafür danken und darf nicht klagen, dass der Traum aufhört und die Wirklichkeit wieder anfängt'".<sup>81</sup>

It is necessary to consider the sympathies of Fontane. If these lyrical interludes constitute a passing dream of the protagonists, are they dismissed by the narrator, the realistic and ostensibly pragmatic (Demetz' term) commentator of society's complexities, as a form of escapism, which, for all its transient charm, is hopelessly incompatible with the "status quo" of society? The question is pertinent, since in other social novels we have considered, especially the "Romane der guten Gesellschaft", such attempts to withdraw to nature were

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<sup>80</sup>Werke, III, 166.

<sup>81</sup>Werke, III, 174.

given at best qualified acceptance and often ironic treatment. In Irrungen Wirungen, too, consideration of social order win the day. Botho comes round to the view that "das Herkommen unser Tun bestimmt. Wer ihm gehorcht, kann zugrunde gehn, aber er geht besser zugrunde als der, der ihm widerspricht".<sup>82</sup> From this standpoint he advises a friend with similar inclinations towards "einfachen Formen, nach einer stillen, natürlichen Lebensweise, wo Herz zum Herzen spricht, und wo man das Beste hat, was man haben kann, Ehrlichkeit, Liebe, Freiheit",<sup>83</sup> that these ideals cannot be brought at the cost of breaking with the customs of one's class. In Irrungen Wirungen, however, one cannot avoid the impression that the system of society which binds men to values against their inclination is itself under critical scrutiny. The pragmatic commentator of society shows indications of becoming an "engaged" critic of it, a tendency which will become more apparent still in the later novels such as Effi Briest.

Fontane sympathises with the uncultured simplicity of his heroine. The consternation she feels on seeing the painting in her room at the inn is preceded, ironically, by a reference to her awareness of her lack of culture, a gulf which separates

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<sup>82</sup>Werke, III, 171.

<sup>83</sup>Werke, III, 221.



her from Botho; the cause of this awareness is her inability to understand the foreign captions under the paintings.<sup>84</sup> The sympathy shows in the whole depiction of the heroine, the fortitude with which she accepts her separation from her lover in his own interest. In another context, Schillemeit uses the term "schöne Seele" in reference to Lene, and the description applies well to her whole bearing.<sup>85</sup>

The most conclusive evidence that Fontane's view of these "lyrical interludes" is wholly positive is the fact that they are associated with a concept which was of peculiar importance to him, namely "Glück". It is important to understand the significance of this concept for Fontane. It is, as Jost Schillemeit has shown, a positive humanist ideal, free of the taint of banality with which it is often associated in German letters, so that in spirit Fontane reminds us of the optimism of the Aufklärung.<sup>86</sup> However, he distinguishes between true happiness, which is difficult to obtain and to retain, and a false one. The latter we find enters into his growing distaste for town life, with the mad social hunt for happiness: "die grosse Stadt hat nicht Zeit zum Denken, und

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<sup>84</sup> Werke, III, 154.

<sup>85</sup> Jost Schillemeit, op. cit., p. 45.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., p. 44.

was noch schlimmer ist, sie hat auch nicht Zeit zum Glück. Was sie hunderttausendfältig schafft, ist nur die Jagd nach dem Glück", he wrote to Friedlaender in December 1844.<sup>87</sup> Several years before he had conceived the idea of depicting the "hunt for happiness" in its many possible forms in the uncompleted social novel Allerlei Glück (1877-79).

Lene and Botho find true happiness in their transient love affair, and the concept is used specifically of their experiences together at Wilmersdorf, Hankels Ablage and the Dörrs' garden. Botho, married to one of his own class, later recalls with painful nostalgia: "Der Dörrsche Garten, der gang nach Wilmersdorf, die Partie nach Henkels Ablage. Das war der letzte schöne Tag gewesen, die letzte glückliche Stunde".<sup>88</sup> Almost identical words were used by Lene on their return from the outing to the Spree: "' . . . Ich weiss es: gestern, als wir über die Wiese gingen und plauderten und ich dir den Strauss pflückte, das war unser letztes Glück und unsere letzte schöne Stunde' ".<sup>89</sup> During that outing, indeed, their happiness wrought a visible transfiguration in Lene, as we saw above, which strikes Botho with something like amazement: "'Du

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<sup>87</sup> Briefe an Friedlaender, p. 4. Letter of 21 December, 1884.

<sup>88</sup> Werke, III, 214.

<sup>89</sup> Werke, III, 166.

siehst ja aus, wie ich dich noch gar nicht gesehen habe. Ja, wie sag ich nur? Ich finde kein anderes Wort: du siehst so glücklich aus".<sup>90</sup> The relationship thus remains as an experience of permanent value to her: "'Dass ich diesen Sommer leben konnte, war mir ein Glück und bleibt mir ein Glück, auch wenn ich von heute ab unglücklich werde'".<sup>91</sup>

In Irrungen Wirungen, therefore, the characters achieve true happiness outside the maelstrom of society. We have seen how the natural settings to their meetings impart a lyrical charm to the relationship. Beyond this the notion of "naturalness" is treated positively within the novel and stands in opposition to the values of Berlin society. For this reason, the form of the social novel, as defined for example in Demetz' study, is extended to allow an incorporation of scenes from nature which contribute significantly to the overall theme of the work, without in any way being qualified by recourse to a narrative standpoint of irony, nor incurring the charge of sentimentality. It is also noticeable that less use is made of natural motifs for the limited purpose of characterisation: the natural world has a lyrical atmosphere of its own.

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<sup>90</sup>Werke, III, 155.

<sup>91</sup>Werke, III, 166.

## CHAPTER IV

### NATURE IN FONTANE'S LATER NOVELS

An attempt to divide Fontane's novels into clearly delineated chronological stages would run the danger of oversimplification and inaccuracy. Since they are compressed into the last twenty years of his life they are probably best considered as the final realisation of a life-time's accumulation of experience and reflection. "So lächerlich es klingen mag", he wrote in his sixtieth year, 1879, "ich darf--vielleicht leider--von mir sagen: Ich fange erst an".<sup>1</sup> Such a concentration of activity precludes the possibility of dramatic changes in subject or technique, so that we constantly find repeated in later novels themes and features of style which appeared to have been already discarded.

With this reservation, however, it is possible to detect a broad trend in Fontane's novels from his earlier to his later works. The transition is seen most clearly, perhaps, in Irrungen Wirungen. Here we see a more urgent concern with the wider aspects of the dilemmas of individuals, not only as they concern the immediate society of these individuals but

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<sup>1</sup>Letter to Hertz, 18 August 1879 (Gesammelte Werke, X, 418). Emphasis by Fontane.

in their bearing on Society--contemporary society--as such. The change is, in effect, one of emphasis; in novels like Schach von Wuthenow, L'Adultera, Graf Petöfy, or Cécile, the principal focus of interest was on the individual characters; the portrayal of social conventions, e.g. those concerning the obligations of marriage or honour, served the secondary aim of providing outside forces, generally antagonistic, which helped determine the actions and fortunes of these characters. The social criticism implicit in this was tempered by being restricted to the specific events concerned and also, frequently, by making the characters themselves assume a large measure of the guilt for their own misfortunes. The narrator's standpoint in these earlier social novels appears to be one of an urbane acceptance of society, with all its imperfections, and a conciliatory attitude towards its wayward members. This indeed is the interpretation which, until recently, governed the criticism of all of Fontane's novels, until the publication of the correspondence with Friedlaender revealed in the aging Fontane a hitherto overlooked impatience with the society of his day, in particular its conservative sections, and refuted finally, in Fritz Martini's words, the notion of a "heiteres Darüberstehen".<sup>2</sup> In recent years, therefore, Fontane's novels

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<sup>2</sup>Fritz Martini, Forschungsbericht zur deutschen Literatur in der Zeit des Realismus (Stuttgart, 1962), p. 71.

have been studied with a view to eliciting his political beliefs.<sup>3</sup> In such studies, the greatest source of material is provided by the later novels such as Effi Briest and Der Stechlin. It is mainly these later works on which the Marxist critic Georg Lukács bases his interpretation of the aging Fontane as a critical realist in all but allegiance.<sup>4</sup> These novels are distinguished from the earlier ones mentioned by virtue of a keener and more critical interest in the values which govern and shape the Prussian society of his day. Evidence of this can be seen already in Irrungen Wirungen, mainly in the discussions and reflections which arise among Botho and his aristocratic associates concerning the relative importance of love and social ambition.

One would expect this change in emphasis to be reflected in the narrative technique. Such a change can be seen in the increasing importance of the "Gespräch" as a feature of the narrative, which results from the shift of interest from the presentation of human events to the discussion of ideas, the consideration of topics of a sociological, political, cultural kind, and the like. Conversations make up a large part of Die Poggenpuhls (1895), a gentle satire upon the

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<sup>3</sup>Cf. Joachim Remak, The Gentle Critic: Theodor Fontane and German Politics 1848-1898 (Syracuse, 1964)

<sup>4</sup>In Deutsche Realisten des 19. Jahrhunderts (Bern, 1951).

preoccupation of an impoverished Junker family with its own dynastic survival, and of Der Stechlin (1899), which will be considered later. Noticeable in both these works is their dearth of plot. Fontane's changing interest can also be seen in his new use of satire, as in Frau Jenny Treibel (1892), which shows the uneasy attempts of Berlin parvenu society to reconcile its pretensions of culture with worship of the perennial "golden calf".

In such novels, with the new emphasis on the discussion of ideas, nature seems even less appropriate as an element of the narrative than in the "Roman der guten Gesellschaft". In the case of the latter, we saw that Fontane incorporates the natural world by linking it with the perceptions and fortunes of the characters. Frequent use was made of natural settings which often corresponded to deep-felt longings (whatever the psychological reason for them) to escape from the oppressive complexities of urban society. In such novels, the finest example of which is Irrungen Wirrungen, nature is represented both physically and through the emotive responses of the characters.

This is absent from the short novel Stine (1890), whose theme is, as noted in the preceding chapter, otherwise very similar to that of Irrungen Wirrungen. Count Waldemar uses words to express his attachment to the lowly Stine, which may have equally well been uttered by Botho von Rienäcker:

"Ich fühle mich zu diesem liebenswürdigen Geschöpf, das nichts ist als Wahrhaftigkeit, Natürlichkeit und Güte, nicht nur hingezogen, . . . ich fühle mich an sie gekettet".<sup>5</sup> But this is a tragic affair, briefly related: the meetings of the sick young Count and the delicate Stine, who has fallen in the world through childhood misfortune, take place in her lodgings; the count seeks to extend companionship to love, then when the girl rejects him, in deference to social reality, he takes his life. This short personal drama takes place against a social background consisting of scenes at the heroine's home where her sister Pauline, an honest soul but with a "past", entertains a "demi-monde" of bored aristocrats and theatrical society, or of discussions between Waldemar, Baron Papageno, his uncle Sarastro and Pauline, in which the sacredness of the social order is stringently upheld. Conversations form by far the greater part of the narrative: sometimes spirited and elegant, often inspired by sensuality or determined self-interest. Stine is perhaps the most naturalistic of Fontane's works.

Here there is little place for nature. The action is bound physically by the confines of Widow Pittelkow's Berlin lodgings, or the bachelor quarters of Count Waldemar. Only Waldemar's last turn around the squares and boulevards of

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<sup>5</sup>Werke, III, 290.



Berlin before the suicide brings some fresh air into the action, and here the hero is already functioning as an automaton.

It is of interest, therefore, that Fontane still contrives to bring nature into the narrative. He does so in ways which depart little from the technique noted in earlier novels: the two main characters are each endowed with a high degree of sensibility towards nature and natural phenomena.

The most concrete instance of this is seen in the way they are moved by the vision of the setting sun, to which reference was made in the preceding chapter. Waldemar first notices and is moved by this phenomenon during the first visit he pays alone to Stine. After allaying her initial fears he claims that he is too sick to be concerned with sensual aims:

Er hatte sich, während er diese letzten Worte sprach, erhoben und sah, seine Hand auf Stines Stuhl lehrend, in den Sonnenball, der eben zwischen den nach Westen stehenden Bäumen des Invalidenparks niederging. Alles schwamm in einem goldenen Schimmer, und das Schweigen, in das er verfiel, zeigte, dass er auf Augenblicke von nichts als von der Schönheit des sich vor ihm auftuenden Bildes hingenommen war.<sup>6</sup>

At first it seems that this background might add a lyrical aura to the relationship comparable to that in Irrungen Wirrungen: a thing of beauty, in nature, is admired, so that

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<sup>6</sup>Werke, III, 263.

the meeting is effectively lifted from the prosaic social reality that surrounds it. The motif, which reoccurs in connection with Waldemar's visits, is however of purely symbolic significance and is used moreover with a large degree of irony.<sup>7</sup> Waldemar refers to these meetings as "Sonnenuntergangstunden" in his farewell note to Stine. It is the moon which succeeds the setting sun during a later visit: "Über dem Parke drüben stand der Mond und warf seinen Schimmer auf einen frei zwischen den Bäumen stehenden Obelisk; die Nachtigallen schlugen, und die Linden blühten in aller Pracht".<sup>8</sup> The obelisk is a memorial to the victims of a sea disaster, and the memory seems to instill in Waldemar more envy than pity.

Both characters are inspired by yearnings to escape from their immediate reality. Involuntarily, Stine demonstrates this urge after Waldemar's first visit, by going to the window and breathing in the fresh air from the park outside.<sup>9</sup> It is this feeling which causes her to dwell with nostalgia on the idyllic scenes of her childhood, with their excursions

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<sup>7</sup>Cf. L. O. Frye, op. cit., p. 112, who shows that the sun seems to offer "a release from reality's problems and pressures" while in fact associated with forebodings of death; there are however several factual errors, e.g., the setting sun is present not at Waldemar's funeral but when he commits suicide.

<sup>8</sup>Werke, III, 268.

<sup>9</sup>Werke, III, 267.

into the country, "bis in die Einsamkeit, bis an eine Stelle, wo nur ein einziges Haus mit einem Schilfdach dicht am Ufer gestanden habe". The lyrical description remains detached from the narrative; the subjunctive is used (a means of underlining the narrator's detachment), and what the reader sees is the sentimental Waldemar vicariously enjoying a bliss and simplicity which his emotions have never known at first hand.<sup>10</sup>

Lyrical beauty has no genuine presence in this story as was the case in Irrungen Wirrungen, since lyrical feeling is distorted by the sick sensibilities of the characters. Fontane himself was fully aware of this when he wrote to Paul Schlenther, on June 13, 1888:

. . . Nun spricht diese Stine im Stine-Stil statt im Lene-Stil. Warum? Ich denke mir, weil es eine angekränkelte Sentimentalitätswelt ist, in die sie durch ihre Bekanntschaft mit Waldemar hinein- versetzt wird. Und so wird die Sentimentalsprache zur Natürlichkeitssprache, weil das Stück Natur, das hier gegeben wird, eben eine kränkliche Natur ist. Dadurch geht freilich ein Reiz verloren, und an die Stelle von Seeluft tritt Stubenluft, aber der psychologische Prozess. Vorgang und Ton sind eigentlich richtig.<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, with Waldemar:

. . . Ein typischer Letzter seines Geschlechtes, ohne Initiative, früh gestrandet, ohne rechtes Glück, aber auch ohne Talent zum Glück. . . . Jene vielen sorgfältig gekleideten jungen Herrn [sic] des Wiener Autors [i.e., Schnitzler], die aus lauter Beschäftigungslosigkeit immer und ewig an ihrem kleinen Seelenproblem laborieren, haben in Waldemar, Graf Haltern,

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<sup>10</sup> Werke, pp. 269-270.

ihren nördlichen Vorgänger und Leidensbruder.  
Decadente sie alle, Einsame, Stiefkinder der  
Natur und des Geschicks.<sup>12</sup>

Thoughts of death preoccupy Stine as she watches a lark ascending after Waldemar has been buried.<sup>13</sup> Waldemar is, as we saw in connection with the obelisk, obsessed with the thought of death, as a release from a burdensome life. This disposition colours all impressions he receives from the natural world:

. . . [Er] sah von der Brückenwölbung auf die tief unten am Quai sich hinziehenden Weiden, aus deren graugrünen Blattwerk einige tote Äste wie Besen hervorragten. Es waren seine Lieblinge, diese Bäume. "Halb abgestorben und immer noch grün".<sup>14</sup>

The narrator interposes in these subjective soarings of emotion the coldness of reality:

Eine frische Brise ging und milderte die Hitze, von den Beeten aber kam ein feiner Duft von Reseda herüber. . . . Unser Kranker sog das alles in vollen Zügen ein. . . .<sup>15</sup>

Die Sonne war im Niedergehen, und er entsann sich jenes Tages, als er, von Stines Fenster

<sup>11</sup> Schriften zur Literatur, p. 319.

<sup>12</sup> C. Wandrey, op. cit., p. 242.

<sup>13</sup> Werke, III, 311.

<sup>14</sup> Werke, III, 304.

<sup>15</sup> Werke, III, 304.

aus, dasselbe Sonnenuntergangsbild vor Augen gehabt hatte. . . "Wie damals", sprach er vor sich hin. Und er sah in die röter werdene Glut, bis endlich der Ball gesunken und volle Dämmerung um ihn war. Auf seinem Schreibzeug lag ein kleiner Revolver. . .<sup>16</sup>

Stine is totally lacking in any lyrical element.

Nevertheless Fontane continues to introduce nature into the narrative; it is restricted to vague yearnings for freedom, which are carried even to the point of physical extinction, on the part of two psychologically ailing people whose vain search for happiness is conducted on the periphery of real life. Noticeable is Fontane's continued use of favorite motifs: sunset as a foreboding of misfortune (Grete Minde, Cécile), the invigorating scent of flowers (Schach, Irrungen Wirrungen), the sky as a symbol of peace in death (Ellernklipp, Irrungen Wirrungen and later in Effi Briest).

Consideration must be given to Effi Briest (1895), which in the view of many critics (by no means all) is the crowning achievement both of Fontane's later period and his whole work, "Die Novellen der Mittelzeit gipfeln in Irrungen Wirrungen, die Spätwerke in Effi Briest. Irrungen Wirrungen wird in der deutschen Literatur immer einen hohen Rang einnehmen. Mit Effi Briest ragt Fontane in die Weltliteratur".<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Werke, III, 305.

<sup>17</sup> C. Wandrey, op. cit., p. 266. Cf. also J. P. M. Stern, MLR, LII (1957), 363 ff.

One reason for this claim to world rank undoubtedly lies in the way personal tragedy is combined with a vigorous treatment of the moral foundation of contemporary Prussian upper-class society, whose "Fragwürdigkeit" Fontane portrays with a directness not found in his earlier novels. Effi, the heroine, is brought up in an atmosphere of freedom on her parents' estate at Hohen-Cremmen, and is betrothed at the age of eighteen to the much older Baron Geert von Innstetten. Their life together at the Baron's estate at Kessin on the Baltic coast imposes a great strain on her, partly because of the strangeness of Kessin and its people, and partly because of Innstetten's stiff rectitude which she feels incapable of emulating. From despair or defiance she has an affair with the Baron's friend, Major Crampas, but breaks it off on the grounds of conscience. When Innstetten is obliged to move to Berlin, she sees the change as a heaven-sent chance to make a new start in her marriage. But years later Innstetten discovers by accident the truth of her relations with Crampas and kills the major in a duel, then divorces her. This is preceded, however by a scene, one of Fontane's most powerful, in which Innstetten reveals to a friend that these measures are required of him by the customs of society, while he feels no personal animosity towards the people he is about to destroy. Effi lives there after as a social outcast, disowned even by her parents, until they repent and invite her home, where she

dies in the surroundings of her childhood.

The first thing to note about the action of Effi Briest is that it has moved out from the tight confines of the salons and embraces settings from the Brandenburg countryside and Northern coast. The settings are not without symbolic importance in the development of the action and the presentation of the characters' fortunes. But one result, for the narrative, is that nature is depicted with some frequency throughout.

Elaborate "block" descriptions of backgrounds would not accord with the careful composition, the close linking of motives and events to produce the inevitable end, evident in this novel. "Die Schilderungen von Land und Leute sind nicht mehr selbständige Komponenten wie noch in Cécile".<sup>18</sup> But it must be admitted that in the course of the narrative Fontane succeeds in conveying some clear, detailed impressions of the settings. Thus with Kessin and its environment, occasional references to the sand, the dunes and the sparse dune-grass, and above all the constant presence of the sea, serve to convey an impression of wilderness and loneliness, with a suggestion of the weird. It is true that this atmosphere is often created through the words of the characters who react to it, as in the description by Innstetten of the grave of

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<sup>18</sup>C. Wandrey, op. cit., p. 278.

the Chinaman:

"Es liegt zwischen den Dünen, bloss Strandhafer drum'run und dann und wann ein paar Immortellen, und immer hört man das Meer. Es ist sehr schön und sehr schauerlich".<sup>19</sup>

Effi feels the oppressive monotony of the barren coast: "Sand und wieder Sand, und nirgends eine Spur von Schatten".<sup>20</sup> Occasionally, however, Fontane achieves this background "Stimmung" through direct description, as in the following which ranks among the occasional outstanding passages of natural description we have noted in other works. Effi and Crampas picnic alone in a landscape where the fading beauty of autumn adds a melancholy note. Sea and weather contribute an element of wildness:

Über das von den Sturmtagen her noch bewegte Meer goss die schon halb winterliche Novembersonne ihr fahles Licht aus, und die Brandung ging hoch. Dann und wann kam ein Windzug und trieb den Schaum bis dicht an sie heran. Strandhafer stand umher, und das helle Gelb der Immortellen hob sich, trotz der Farbenverwandtschaft, von dem gelben Sande, darauf sie wuchsen, scharf ab.<sup>21</sup>

The mood here is strongly reminiscent of Storm, whose fascination for the sea was best expressed in the Schimmelreiter, seven years before Effi Briest.

<sup>19</sup>Werke, VII, 205.

<sup>20</sup>Werke, VII, 261.

<sup>21</sup>Werke, VII, 287.



Fontane shows, however, a characteristic urge to comment on nature's moods and to clarify their relevance to the characters. Thus the quality of the Kessin landscape is subsumed under the abstract notion of the "Northern", just as the Harz landscape was described as "haunted" in Cécile. The description of the eerie moon-lit scene during Effi's first journey to Kessin dissolves in discussion:

Kupferfarben stand die grosse Scheibe hinter einem Erlengehölz und warf ihr Licht auf eine breite Wasserfläche, die die Kessine hier bildete. Oder vielleicht war es auch schon ein Haff, an dem das Meer draussen seinen Anteil hatte.

Effi war wie benommen. "Ja, du hast recht, Geert, wie schön; aber es hat zugleich so etwas Unheimliches. In Italien habe ich nie solche Eindrücke gehabt, auch nicht als wir von Mestre nach Venedig hinüberfahren. Da war auch Wasser und Sumpf und Mondschein, und ich dachte, die Brücke würde brechen; aber es war nicht so gespenstig. Woran liegt es nur? Ist es doch das Nördliche?"<sup>22</sup>

It becomes clear that Fontane seeks to associate specific concepts to his settings, concepts moreover that are not directly attributable to nature. The natural description is subservient to this end. The counterpart to Kessin is the Briest estate at Hohen-Cremmen. Here the action is begun (Ch. 1 to 5) and concluded (34 to 36). The book begins with a description of Hohen-Cremmen, in which all is serene

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<sup>22</sup>Werke, VII, 207.

and peaceful and devoid of human activity; the curtain opens on an empty stage. In this opening passage certain motifs are introduced which thereafter become leitmotifs associated with Hohen-Cremmen: the pond, the gardens, the plane-trees, the park with its sundial. The overall impression conveyed by these opening lines is one of peacefulness and unchangeableness. This impression is intensified when Effi pays her first visit home after the marriage:

Effi und Frau von Briest. . .rückten ans offene Fenster und sahen, während sie sprachen, auf den Park hinunter, auf die Sonnenuhr oder auf die Libellen, die beide regungslos über dem Teich standen. . .<sup>23</sup>

And years later, when Effi's doctor sends the Briests the news of her failing health, his letter finds them in a setting which has remained unchanged throughout the events which have taken place elsewhere:

. . .Beide sassen auf dem schattigen Steinfließengange, den Gartensaal im Rücken, das Rondell mit der Sonnenuhr vor sich. Der um die Fenster sich rankende wilde Wein bewegte sich leicht in dem Luftzug, der ging, und über dem Wasser standen ein paar Libellen im hellen Sonnenschein.<sup>24</sup>

But Hohen-Cremmen represents more than peaceful seclusion. Explaining his attachment to the life there, Briest says to Innstetten: "Hier leb ich so frei weg und freue mich über jedes grüne Blatt und über den wilden Wein, der da drüben in

<sup>23</sup>Werke, VII, 270.

<sup>24</sup>Werke, VII, 410.

die Fenster wächst".<sup>25</sup> This plant is used in many of Fontane's novels to symbolise freedom, possibly because it represents nature in a particularly abundant and wilful form.<sup>26</sup> Its symbolic importance is explicit in this novel. During Effi's first meeting with her future husband, one of her play-mates appears at the window and calls her back to join them. The window is described as "von wildem Wein halbüberwachsen". The incident fills Innstetten with apprehension during the above conversation with Briest:

[Er] nickte mechanisch zustimmend, war aber wenig bei der Sache, sah vielmehr, wie gebannt, immer aufs neue nach dem drüben am Fenster rankenden wilden Wein hinüber. . . Er glaubte nicht an Zeichen und Ähnliches, im Gegenteil, wies alles Abergläubische weit zurück. Aber er konnte trotzdem von den zwei Worten nicht los, und während Briest immer weiter perorierte, war es ihm beständig, als wäre der kleine Hergang doch mehr als ein blosser Zufall gewesen.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, the natural motifs which are repeatedly associated with the Hohen-Cremmen setting indicate the general concepts of seclusion and freedom. The concepts are in their bearing on the inner action quite independent of the realm of nature. Wandrey writes: "Der innere Fortgang wird. . . dem Wechsel der Schauplätze verknüpft. . . Immer entspricht der Ortveränderung ein seelischer Einschnitt".<sup>28</sup> The changing settings

<sup>25</sup> Werke, VII, 183.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Max Tau, Der assoziative Faktor, p. 18.

<sup>27</sup> Werke, VII, 183.

<sup>28</sup> C. Wandrey, op. cit., p. 272.

bear directly on the fortunes of the heroine.

The tragedy of Effi Briest is that of a woman who is made to take up burdens of social and moral responsibility which by nature and inclination she is ill-equipped to bear. As Demetz shows in his chapter "Flug und Flocke: Ein symbolisches Motiv" Effi's whole being is attuned to a light, free and capricious form of existence.<sup>29</sup> It is by virtue of this that she is really rooted in her native Hohen-Cremmen. Life here signifies freedom, verging on anarchy, a lack of the constraint of social form; it consists of play. Tragedy is caused by her being transplanted to a foreign way of life, the responsibilities of adulthood, which is intensified by her removal to a new environment which is also strange and forbidding. Kessin, "das Nördliche", oppresses and unbalances a creature whose temperament is more of the south, with her need for gaiety and unrestrained living. This dark, forbidding Northern landscape directly causes her downfall, in fact. The fatal incident occurs during the return from Uvagla when Effi finds herself in Crampas' sleigh. They are obliged to make a detour through a dark forest, but even prior to this the eerie night atmosphere and the sea had played on her overwrought imagination, so that she imagines she heard the singing of mermaids. The oppressive

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<sup>29</sup>P. Demetz, op. cit., pp. 204-217. Cf. also ch. 3, note 24, above.

force of the night and the thick forest bring her to a state of panic which then gives way to a numb sense of being utterly lost:

Effi schrak zusammen. Bis dahin waren Luft und Licht um sie her gewesen, aber jetzt war es damit vorbei, und die dunklen Kronen wölbten sich über ihr. . . . Sie fürchtete sich und war doch zugleich wie in einem Zauberbann und wollte auch nicht heraus.<sup>30</sup>

In this state of surrendered judgement she takes the fatal step of expressing intimacy towards Crampas. This makes the whole incident strongly reminiscent of the scene in the Palmenhaus in L'Adultera (see ch. 3), where the heroine makes a fatal move under the influence of her surroundings. Such occurrences are relevant to the whole question of human will and destiny in Fontane.

Effi's true home is Hohen-Cremmen and its environment, so that it is here she returns at the end to find some revival of her childhood happiness and also reconciliation with a life that has treated her badly. It is in the light of this soul attachment of a character to a particular setting that we have the perspective from which to consider much of the natural description in Effi Briest. The rural serenity which we saw as an attribute of Hohen-Cremmen also answers a yearning in

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<sup>30</sup>Werke, VII, 308.

Effi's being. "Effi gleicht einem Wesen im Naturstand. . ." <sup>31</sup>  
 In this respect she is something of an "elemental being" in the sense used to describe Hilde in Ellernklipp. (See ch. 2). Briest uses terminology expressive of this concept when he calls her a "Tochter der Luft". At any rate, on several occasions we see that nature has a special appeal to her, often distracting her from more serious business, as when she and her mother work on the wedding preparations:

Es war ein wunderschöner Tag; der in einem zierlichen Beet um die Sonnenuhr herumstehende Heliotrop blühte noch, und die leise Brise, die ging, trug den Duft davon zu ihnen herüber.

"Ach, wie wohl ich mich fühle", sagte Effi, "so wohl und so glücklich; ich kann mir den Himmel nicht schöner denken. Und am Ende, wer weiss, ob sie im Himmel so wunderschönen Heliotrop haben." <sup>32</sup>

In her sensibility towards nature Effi resembles many of Fontane's earlier heroines, as will be seen from preceding chapters. Later in the work we realise just how essential agreeable natural surroundings are to her emotional well-being--serene and idyllic landscapes such as are found only at Hohen-Cremmen. If the dark and demonic Northern country-side contributed to her ruin, the friendly spring landscape at Hohen-Cremmen provides some healing balm in her closing days.

<sup>31</sup>C. Wandrey, op. cit., p. 275.

<sup>32</sup>Werke, VII, 190.

She gives up the artistic hobbies she had taken up in Berlin:

Sie bildete statt dessen die Kunst aus, still und entzückt auf die Natur zu blicken, und wenn das Laub von den Platanen fiel, wenn die Sonnenstrahlen auf dem Eis des kleinen Teiches blitzten oder die ersten Krokus aus dem noch halb winterlichen Rondell aufblühten,--das tat ihr wohl, und auf all das konnte sie stundenlang blicken und dabei vergessen, was ihr das Leben versagt, oder richtiger wohl, um was sie sich selber gebracht hatte.<sup>33</sup>

We find that Fontane has kept his most lyrical passages for these final pages. Effi takes long, solitary walks with her dog, Rollo, during which she seems to find at last, in nature, a panacea for the sufferings she has received from life. One notes however that the recurrent themes are "Träumen" and "Vergessen".

An solchen Tagen ging sie wohl auch auf die Felder hinaus und ins Luch, oft eine halbe Meile weit, und setzte sich, wenn sie müde geworden, auf einem Hurdenzaun und sah, in Träume verloren, auf die Rabukeln und roten Ampferstauden, die sich im Winde bewegten.<sup>34</sup>

An allem freute sie sich, atmete beglückt den Duft ein, der von den Raps- und Kleefeldern herüber kam, oder folgte dem Aufsteigen der Lerchen und zählte die Ziehbrunnen und Tröge daran das Vieh zur Tränke ging. Dabei klang ein leises Läuten zu ihr herüber. Und dann war ihr zu Sinn, als müsse sie die Augen schliessen und in einem süßen Vergessen hinübergehen.<sup>35</sup>

The lyrical tone of these final scenes has been acclaimed critically as a transfiguration, whereby the heroine, one presumes,

<sup>33</sup>Werke, VII, 412-413.

<sup>34</sup>Werke, VII, 416.

<sup>35</sup>Werke, VII, 422.

achieves spiritual compensation for her sufferings at the hands of society.<sup>36</sup> Certainly Frau von Briest proclaims the superiority of their idyllic life over that of the busy social world, saying (like Christiane Holk in Unwiederbringlich): "Jetzt weiss ich, dass unsere Stille besser ist als der Lärm und das laute Getriebe von vordem".<sup>37</sup>

Undoubtedly Fontane wishes his heroine to finish her days happily, reconciled to life. (Like Goethe he seems to have a distaste for unmitigated tragedy). But to conclude that life in the bosom of nature is in the final analysis exalted over the complexities of social life is at best irrelevant. Effi Briest is a social novel, concerned with the human situation as it is. But it is not even clear whether nature functions as an ideal, if impracticable, way of life as is the case, for example, in Irrungen Wirrungen. There the characters enjoyed a brief spell of supreme happiness in idyllic settings, but knew that it would have to end and give way to the reality of life. In Effi Briest, retreat to nature is the last resort of a spiritually broken woman who has failed in the expectations placed on her not only by society but by herself. This writer

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<sup>36</sup>Cf. ch. 2, note 4, above, and also Wandrey, op. cit., p. 292: "Nie hat Fontane einen schöneren Schluss gebildet. Alles menschliche Weh verrauscht in die geliebte heimatliche Landschaft".

<sup>37</sup>Werke, VII, 423.



does not see in the lyrical aura which surrounds the ending a necessary opposition to the social life. The natural surroundings of Hohen-Cremmen simply provide emotional and spiritual solace to a woman whose whole temperament reacts to this particular therapy. Indeed, an element of irony appears in the conclusion. Like several other heroines in Fontane *Effi* becomes increasingly preoccupied with the prospect of death as a means of release from the burden of life, and sees the heavens as a symbol of this release. It is while she is contemplating the stars and considering her prospects of entering heaven that she contracts the pneumonia from which she dies.<sup>38</sup> After this "slip" Fontane permits the natural world to sublimate the heroine's death:

Die Sterne flimmerten, und im Park regte sich kein Blatt. Aber je länger sie hinaushorchte, je deutlicher hörte sie wieder, dass es wie ein feines Rieseln auf die Platanen niederfiel. Ein Gefühl der Befreiung überkam sie. "Ruhe, Ruhe".<sup>39</sup>

In *Effi Briest*, as in earlier social novels, characters do occasionally turn to the natural world and seek there peace and spiritual relief from the complexities of life. Years after *Effi* has broken with Crampas, but before the discovery, she is alone in her room at Hohen-Cremmen reflecting

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<sup>38</sup>Werke, VII, 424: "Arme *Effi*, du hattest zu den Himmelswandern zu lange hinaufgehen und darüber nachgedacht. . ."

<sup>39</sup>Werke, VII, 426.

on these events and the feelings of guilt they inspire in her, feelings which arise, however, not from the deed itself but from the awareness that she is incapable of feeling the remorse that conventional morality requires. She rouses herself at length from her abject state and goes to the window:

Als sie sich wieder aufrichtete, war sie ruhiger geworden und sah wieder in den Garten hinaus. Alles war so still, und ein leiser, feiner Ton, wie wenn es regnete, traf von den Platanen her ihr Ohr.

Earlier in this scene the peaceful nocturnal setting had indeed provided Effi with inner contentment:

Wie tat ihr das alles so wohl. Neben dem Kirchturm stand der Mond und warf sein Licht auf den Rasenplatz mit der Sonnenuhr und den Heliotropbeeten. Alles schimmerte silbern, und neben den Schattenstreifen lagen weisse Lichtstreifen, so weiss, als läge Leinwand auf der Bleiche. . .

The situation is similar to that in Irrungen Wirungen where Lene finds relief for her troubled feelings in the nocturnal beauty of nature. But in Effi Briest, by contrast, the natural world seems unresponsive:

Dann wurde der Lärm wieder schwächer, endlich erstarb er ganz, und nur der Mondschein lag auf die Platanen rauschte es nach wie vor wie leiser Regen nieder.

Aber es war nur Nachluft die ging.<sup>40</sup>

With these words the chapter ends. Nature provides no solace

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<sup>40</sup>Werke, VII, 358-359.

for the anguished heroine, whose loneliness is here underlined with a degree of pathos hardly found elsewhere in Fontane.

This loneliness is that of a woman who finds herself inwardly divorced from the social and moral conventions of her age. She is not the only character who suffers from this plight, as Innstetten is forced to perceive when considering the motivation for his duel with Crampas. Natural human feeling and outward standards have parted company. In this it is the society of the time that is condemned rather than the characters themselves. But the resulting conflicts, and the masterly way in which they are portrayed--Effi's deliberations in the scene just mentioned, or Innstetten's discussion with Wüllersdorf--, provide the mainstay of the work and account for its artistic greatness.

The elements of natural description do not play a substantial role in portraying these conflicts, although they undoubtedly add a poetic element to the work; also the alternating backgrounds, in whose portrayal nature plays a substantial part as we have seen, provide the story with epic dimensions.

Mention must be made of one respect in which the natural world is put in direct opposition to human portrayal of Effi's Newfoundland dog, Rollo. Fontane's animals are generally vague and somewhat farcical; spoiled lap-dogs or fussy cockatoos in cages are associated with bourgeois

vulgarity in such works as Frau Jemy Treibel or Mathilde Möhring. Rollo is the only animal to be depicted in any depth. He comes to symbolize loyalty, remaining with his mistress when her own kinsfolk disowned her. Years before this, Briest, in many ways Fontane's "mouthpiece", extols this canine virtue:

"Und das tut solch Tier immer. Und nun nimm dagegen die Menschheit! Gott, vergib mir die Sünde, aber mitunter ist mir's doch, als ob die Kreatur besser wäre als der Mensch".

The contrast is made forceful when, unconscious of the irony, Effi tries to defend mankind: "'Rollo würde mich ja natürlich retten, aber Innstetten würde mich auch retten. Er ist ja ein Mann von Ehre'".<sup>41</sup>

In Effi Briest nature is important, as we have seen, largely for its symbolic value. It provides the means of introducing concepts (e.g. freedom) which are relevant to the central conflict but are not themselves direct attributes of nature. This is true of Fontane's symbolism throughout his novels, but in the examples we have considered so far (e.g. Grete Minde, L'Adultera, Cécile) the symbols were implicitly believed in by the characters; they were usually the projections of the mental state of the characters (particularly the

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<sup>41</sup>Werke, VII, 271.

heroines), in whom feelings of anxiety combined with a sensitive imagination to give these symbolic occurrences in nature an appearance of reality. In addition the phenomena themselves often had a sinister aspect: in Cécile Gordon appears bathed in the glow of the setting sun, whose rays filter through a "Blutbuche".<sup>42</sup> Such visions seem to be inspired by the same sense of a sinister quality in nature as that expressed in the early Novellen. Consequently these symbols are felt by the reader to be artistically serious; he exercises a "willing suspension of disbelief" and attributed to the machinations of nature a fatality which his reason knows it cannot have.

In Effi Briest an occasional jesting note creeps into the symbolic use of nature. The character responsible for this is the amiable and slightly frivolous Briest. His reference to the "wilder Wein" at Hohen-Cremmen is not meant in the serious way that Innstetten takes it, and yet it is, as we have seen, serious within the novel. Fontane achieves the purpose of the symbol while at the same time making light of it, as though parodying one of his own favorite narrative devices. Also through the words of Briest he introduces the preposterous image of Effi and Innstetten which utilizes their first names: "Geert, wenn er nicht irre,

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<sup>42</sup>Cf. ch. 3, note 44.

habe die Bedeutung von einem schlank aufgeschossenen Stamm, und Effi sei dann also der Efeu, der sich darumzuranken habe".<sup>43</sup>

The reference is prompted by Innstettens physical shape and causes an amusing embarrassment to those present. Yet the relationship described by this situation in nature corresponds precisely to the respective temperaments of Innstetten and Effi, the one stiff and unyielding, the other volatile and in need of external support. The image gains poignancy when the support is removed and the heroine inevitably falls.

In such instances Fontane does not even keep up a pretence of seriousness, so that the "Verfremdung" which disturbs critics like Tau in their analysis of Fontane's relation to nature is here at its most evident: the writer plays with nature. There is a suggestion of self-parody, that of his predilection for using the weather to symbolise human fortunes, in Unwiederbringlich prior to the reconciliation of Holk and Christiane:

Und was Holk geträumt, es erfüllte sich oder schien sich doch erfüllen zu wollen. Johannistag war, und ein sonniger, blauer Himmel stand über ganz Abgeln, am sonnigsten aber über Schloss Holkenäs. . . .<sup>44</sup>

The tendency to treat nature and natural occurrences

<sup>43</sup>Werke, VII, 181.

<sup>44</sup>Werke, V, 212.

lightly (that is, with the reverse of the serious lyricism of the awe found in the early Novellen) is most evident in Fontane's final novel, Der Stechlin (1899). Criticism of this novel ranges from rejection to acclamation as Fontane's masterpiece. The reason for this lack of agreement must lie in the fact that the work differs in character from any of the others. It shows, taken to the extreme, the tendency referred to at the beginning of this chapter, whereby Fontane's later novels are concerned increasingly with general sociological, political and cultural forces in contemporary society. Stylistically this is reflected in the almost total predominance of discussions among the characters, supported by the thinnest of plots.

Here Demetz' analysis of the role of nature in the Gesellschaftsroman seems to be confirmed:<sup>45</sup> short, passing references to the landscape and weather occur in connection with numerous journeys which are important mainly for bringing the characters from one milieu to another:

Das Verdeck des vor dem Portal haltenden Wagens war zurückgeschlagen, und alsbald hatten die Baronin und Melusine im Fond, die beiden Herren aber auf dem Rücksitz Platz genommen. So ging es eine schon in Kätzchen stehende Weidenallee hinunter, die beinahe geradlinig auf Gransee

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<sup>45</sup>Cf. ch. 1, note 2.

zuführte. Das Wetter war wunderschön; von der Kälte, die noch am Vormittag geherrscht hatte, zeigte sich nichts mehr; der Himmel war gleichmässig grau, nur hier und da eine blaue Stelle. Der Rauch stand in der stillen Luft, die Spatzen quiriliierten auf den Telegraphendrähten, und aus dem Saatengrün stiegen die Lerchen auf. "Wie schön", sagte Baron Berchtesgaden, "und dabei spricht man immer von der Dürftigkeit und Prosa dieser Gegenden".<sup>46</sup>

Although the natural description appears to be only an interlude in the depiction of social events, one also notices the readiness of the characters to discuss the quality or dominant mood of the landscapes with which they come in contact. Here the Barbys leave Stechlin for Berlin, and the old Count is particularly affected by the setting. Landscapes are discussed elsewhere, for example in chapter thirteen, where Woldemar is prevailed on to describe the Stechlin region; again, contrary to popular opinion, this remote part of north-eastern Ruppín does not share the usual melancholy barren aspect of the Brandenburg landscape.<sup>47</sup> On the one hand, therefore, landscape mood has become an object of social discourse; on the other, however, deeper importance gradually attaches to Stechlin and its surroundings, as will become more evident later.

Something of the beauty of Stechlin emerges directly

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<sup>46</sup> Werke, VIII, 355. Emphasis mine.

<sup>47</sup> Werke, VIII, 120.



from the narrative: during the journey of Woldemar, Rex and Czako in chapter six; and the main character, the genial old major Dubslaw von Stechlin, likes to withdraw from the world occasionally, to reflect on his life in the secluded surroundings of his estate.<sup>48</sup>

Dubslaw von Stechlin--"der Typus eines Märkischen von Adel, aber von der mildereren Observanz, eines jener erquicklichen Originale, bei denen sich selbst die Schwächen in Vorzüge verwandeln"--is endowed with an individualistic sense of humour and a taste for paradox.<sup>49</sup> He embodies a deep-grained awareness of the ironical side of life which results in a playful, ambivalent way of looking at things, and the reader quickly perceives that this spirit passes into the "Erzählhaltung" of the narrator himself.

Nature is not immune from Stechlin's sense of jest. Before his castle at Stechlin stand two aloe bushes, one healthy and the other ailing. It is the latter which is the Junker's favorite on account of a foreign plant which has settled in its tub and every year blossoms forth, giving the appearance of aloe blossom. It is a source of endless delight to Stechlin when uninitiated visitors are deceived by this

<sup>48</sup> Werke, VIII, 209.

<sup>49</sup> Werke, VIII, 7.

example of "Schein und Sein" confusion in nature.<sup>50</sup>

It is, however, another object of nature on the Stechlin estate which provides the most striking example of subtle jesting at nature's expense. This is the Stechlin lake which is described elaborately in the opening paragraph of the novel. The description begins realistically, with the same attention to external detail and inner mood which characterises Fontane's other landscape description. Then, with the qualifying adverb "doch" the narrator introduces, with no appreciable change of tone, some further information about the lake which appears to move swiftly from the sphere of topography to that of fantasy:

Zwischen flachen, nur an einer einzigen Stelle steil und kaiartig ansteigenden Ufern liegt er da, rundum von altern Buchen eingefasst, deren Zweige, von ihrer eigenen Schwere nach unten gezogen, den See mit ihrer Spitze berühren. Hie und da wächst ein wenig von Schilf und Binsen auf, aber kein Kahn zieht seine Furchen, kein Vogel singt, und nur selten, dass ein Habicht drüber hinfliegt und seinen Schatten auf die Spiegelfläche wirft. Alles still hier. Und doch, von Zeit zu Zeit wird es an eben dieser Stelle lebendig. Das ist, wenn es weit draussen in der Welt, sei's auf Island, sei's auf Java, zu rollen und zu grollen beginnt oder gar der Aschenregen der hawaiischen Vulkane bis weit auf die Südsee hinausgetrieben wird. Dann regt sich's auch hier, und ein Wasserstrahl springt auf und sinkt wieder in die Tiefe. Das wissen alle, die den Stechlin umwohnen, und wenn sie

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<sup>50</sup>Werke, VIII, 7.

davon sprechen, so setzen sie wohl auch hinzu: "Das mit dem Wasserstrahl, das ist nur das Kleine, das beinah Alltägliche; wenn's aber draussen was Grosses gibt, wie vor hundert Jahren in Lissabon, dann brodelts hier nicht bloss und sprudelt und strudelt, dann steigt statt des Wasserstrahls ein roter Hahn auf und kräht laut in die Lande hinein".<sup>51</sup>

The realisation that the narrator is merely quoting popular belief after all, provides some reassurance to the reader,--and yet he cannot fully discard the lingering feeling that this lake is more than a simple feature of the secluded Ruppın landscape. At least one character in the story expresses an awe verging on dread towards the lake, which thus intrudes its influence in the mundane sphere of the characters. During a winter walk by the lake, Stechlin jestingly offers to break the ice to let out the rooster, to the alarm of Melusine Barby:

"Um Gottes willen, nein. Ich bin sehr für solche Geschichten und bin glücklich, dass die Familie Stechlin diesen See hat. Aber ich bin zugleich auch abergläubisch und mag kein Eingreifen ins Elementare. Die Natur hat jetzt den See überdeckt; da werde ich mich also hüten, irgend was ändern zu wollen. Ich würde glaube, eine Hand führe heraus und packte mich".<sup>52</sup>

In what sense can it be said that Fontane is "playing" with the presentation of nature? If one considers the function

<sup>51</sup>Werke, VIII, 5.

<sup>52</sup>Werke, VIII, 247.

of the lake this will be found on two distinct levels of the narrative. The introductory description shows that it has a being and a character of its own, which lies not only in the outside form but also in an unseen "unheimlich" quality, which is sensed particularly by one of the characters. This attribution of a "Dämonie" to the natural world is, as we saw earlier in this study, not wholly foreign to Fontane, if in his case it is rarely so explicit as with Romantic writers. The study by Renate Schäfer shows by reference to Der Stechlin and earlier fragments of Fontane that the lake is an example of "das Elementarische", namely water, by which is meant a kind of neutral force independent of the usual humanist poles of good and evil.<sup>53</sup> For Melusine, whose name is symbolic by its association with water-nymphs, the threat embodied in the lake is that of being reclaimed by a kindred element: her fear of the Stechlin comes at a moment of subconscious recognition of her own lack of cultivated human feeling. Here, of course, the natural symbol is being used to indicate psychological truths about a character, but in the process a traditional attribute of the natural world, its deeper, self-willed aspect (which undoubtedly is the aspect which inspires the nature veneration among pagan people) is

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<sup>53</sup>R. Schäfer, op. cit.

preserved, albeit in a much modified way.

But the symbolic importance of the Stechlin is also carried over onto a second level of the narrative, namely that concerned with socio-political ideas. When Melusine first hears of the lake she assumes that it is like any other:

"Ein See. Das besagt nicht viel. Seen, wenn es nicht grade der Vierwaldstätter ist, werden immer erst interessant durch ihre Fische, durch Sterlet oder Felchen. Ich will nicht weiter aufzählen. Aber was hat der Stechlin? Ich vermute, Steckerlinge".

"Nein, Gräfin, die hat er nun gerade nicht. Er hat genau das, was Sie geneigt sind am wenigsten zu vermuten. Er hat Weltbeziehungen, vornehme, geheimnisvolle Beziehungen, und nur alles Gewöhnliche, wie beispielsweise Steckerlinge, hat er nicht. . . ."54

Later, in a discussion with Pastor Lorenzen, she hints at the significance of these "Beziehungen":

"Alles Alte, soweit es Anspruch darauf hat, sollen wir lieben, aber für das Neue sollen wir recht eigentlich leben. Und vor allem sollen wir, wie der Stechlin uns lehrt, den grossen Zusammenhang der Dinge nie vergessen. Sich abschliessen heisst sich einmauern, und sich einmauern ist Tod".55

The Stechlin lake, which despite its customary serenity reacts violently during spectacular happenings of nature on the other side of the world, embodies a lesson, salutary for contemporary Prussian high society, namely to take

<sup>54</sup> Werke, VIII, 124.

<sup>55</sup> Werke, VIII, 251.

account of the world's progress beyond the frontiers of county or state, not to resist new forces, such as the growth of democracy, by self-entrenchment in a rigid conservatism.

The several references show the central importance of the Stechlin symbol in the whole novel. Yet this use of a symbol from nature to represent a social idea, or ideal, is different from Fontane's usual type of symbolism. That aspect of the symbol, here the lake, which is representative of another object or truth is not an inherent feature of the symbol itself, but rests upon fantasy, or myth. Nor is it some imagined power which nevertheless has reality to a certain character in the moment of his beholding the phenomenon concerned (as is the case with Melusine and her fear of "das Elementare"). Fontane seems to be inspired by the same taste for jest as his creation Dubslov von Stechlin, offering less a piece of nature-symbolism than a parody of such. He is content to let the pleasing, if improbable, legendary associations of the Stechlin stand and would probably not wish to undeceive those prepared to believe in it, while the truth behind the symbol is, of course, wholly serious,

It is of interest that in Fontane's last novel he places at the centre of his narrative an object from nature which, besides having a reality and substance of its own, even blending with the landscape of rural Prussia in which so many of his works have their roots, also embodies a major truth

about contemporary society. Here, at least, Fontane has sought to combine his interest in nature with the presentation of a central idea, a general observation about society which is the real object of study in his later novels.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

Our findings may be evaluated in respect to the history of literature and the writer Fontane.

Fontane's novels fall within a period which is broadly termed "realistic". The term does little more, however, than state the widest objective of literature, namely to reproduce external reality: the means by which this is achieved depend on the taste and inventive power of the individual writer. Contemporary poetics reflect wide diversity when it comes to determining ways and means. The attempts by Arno Holz and the Naturalists to provide a doctrinaire literary programme comparable to that of the first Romantics proved impracticable and esoteric, and in practice it is not uncommon to find Romantic elements in the works of professed Naturalists.

Theodor Fontane preferred to follow his own lights, while paying lip-service to the theories of Naturalism. This does not mean, however, that he stands completely apart from the literary movements of his age. Until his sixtieth year his fame rested on the authorship of some of the best German ballads of the period, which were inspired directly by Fontane's experience of the Scottish borders. His other works prior to his career as a novelist were mainly topographical.



Though vastly different as genres, these early enterprises have in common a taste for the unknown, the urge to brighten familiar daily life whether through small tales of human destiny or the exploration of new landscapes, all of which is the reverse of Naturalism in spirit. The movement which lies closest to Fontane's art is probably that of "Poetic Realism", Otto Ludwig's concept of an artistically modified presentation of reality which should bridge the gap between the unlimited "Mannigfaltigkeit" of Naturalism and the insubstantial "Einheit" of the Idealists. The most faithful practitioner of Ludwig's theory was undoubtedly Theodor Storm and with him the movement effectively comes to an end. Elements of Poetic Realism persist, however, in Fontane, even as late as Effi Briest. (The motif of the Chinaman, whose legend so affects Effi, seems to be in this tradition.) Fontane also shows his kinship with the standpoint of Poetic Realism in his objection that Naturalism makes literature indistinguishable from "Polizeibericht".<sup>1</sup>

The fact remains, however, that Fontane travelled a great distance from his early literary activities to the realistic novel of his maturity. We cannot here enter into the speculation concerning his sudden conversion; but it is

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<sup>1</sup>Bruno Markwardt, Geschichte der deutschen Poetik, (5 vols.; Berlin, 1958-67), IV, 378.

relevant to consider how thorough the conversion is. As late as 1895 Fontane planned a novel, "Die Likedeeler", which, in his own words, would attempt a reconciliation "zwischen meinem ältesten und romantischsten Balladenstil und meiner modernsten und realistischsten Romanschreiberei".<sup>2</sup> From this we see that Fontane was by no means convinced that he had found his definitive artistic form. This realisation alone should prompt some caution if one approaches Fontane's novels with preconceptions of form, such as "Zeitroman" or "Gesellschaftsroman", derived from other exponents of the various types of novel. The uncertainty of contemporary poetics, together with Fontane's own individualistic approach, account both for variety of types of novel (historical, criminal, "balladesque", social, etc.) within his total output, and also for a tendency for narrative elements to become mixed in individual works. This latter feature applies to the way he presents nature in his novels.

The judgement of P. Demetz that Fontane is "kein Dichter der Landschaft" may be true in many respects.<sup>3</sup> But this study has tried to show that the presentation of landscapes is an important, and by no means unsuccessful, part of Fontane's art. In the early Novellen, Grete Minde and Ellernklipp, the

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<sup>2</sup>Letter to Hans Hertz of 16 March, 1895, GW, 2nd series, XI, 342.

<sup>3</sup>Ch. 1, note 3.

world of nature plays an intricate part throughout. The natural background is presented with attention to atmosphere, or "Stimmung", encompassing a sense of the peace and serenity of the landscape, which suggests a first-hand acquaintance by the author himself, and also a sense of the wilder and more sinister moods inherent in nature. Here, of course, the influence of Poetic Realism is strongest, and the Fontane of the ballads is still evident. In these works man and nature exist in an intimate contact one should not expect in the novels of contemporary society, which are also inappropriate for showing the kind of awful fatalism behind sinister events found in the earlier type of work. Yet unmistakable echoes persist throughout the social novels. The feeling for landscape as a dominant force in human affairs is evident in Schach and very strong in Cécile. In Irrungen Wirrungen nature has lost its sinister aspect, but its beauty imparts a lyrical element to the work which is deeply rooted in the central theme, in contrast to the role accorded nature in other of the social novels. In Effi Briest, what is essentially a clash of human values in society takes place predominantly against two contrasting landscapes, and Fontane's feeling for both, sea and countryside, frequently makes itself felt: the narrative is occasionally coloured with lyrical description, and in the depiction of the Kessin environment some of the sinister mood of the early Novellen is recaptured. The landscape

still retains a certain independent and "unheimlich" quality in Der Stechlin.

On the other hand, the "Verfremdung" detected by Tau and others in Fontane's relationship to nature is undeniable. We are perhaps now in a position to see the relevance of this condition to the assessment of Fontane's true artistic strength. Fontane clearly perceived both his strength and his weakness as a writer and set them out in a letter to Storm as early as 1854. After describing his life-long interest in history and politics, he wrote:

Meine Neigung und--wenn es erlaubt ist, so zu sprechen--meine Force ist die Schilderung. Am Innerlichen mag es gelegentlich fehlen, das Ausserliche hab' ich in der Gewalt. Nur so wie ich die Geschichte als Basis habe, gebiet' ich über Kräfte, die mir sonst fremd sind, wie jener, dem auf heimatlicher Erde die Seele wieder stark wurde.--Das Lyrische ist sicherlich meine schwächste Seite, besonders dann, wenn ich aus mir selber und nicht aus einer von mir geschaffenen Person heraus, dies und das zu sagen versuche.<sup>4</sup>

If we substitute for history the acquaintance with contemporary society, this summarises well Fontane's position as a writer of social novels. He disclaims the inner understanding required of the lyrical writer. (In respect to landscape presentation the passage accords with two features we have noted: Fontane's inability to recapture the mood of a landscape

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<sup>4</sup>Letter to Storm of 14 February, 1854, GW, 2nd series, X, 107.

not known to him personally, as in Graf Petöfy or Quitt, and his tendency to rely on the expressed reactions of characters to sharpen his nature presentation.) Instead, Fontane's strength lies in his power to observe and translate into art concrete human figures and motivating forces in the society around him: his is preeminently a "Menschendichter".<sup>5</sup>

Even in the early Novellen the urge to depict psychological states ever tends to take command in the presentation of nature, thereby impairing somewhat the atmosphere of remoteness and the lyrical character. In the social novels, nature and motifs from nature are used predominantly to highlight the inner states of characters (L'Adultera), even where the action takes place away from the centres of social life (Petöfy). With Fontane the presentation of nature is rarely far removed from the presentation of men or society. As a result the former often suffers in ways we have seen: the excessive use of symbols as a means of linking the two spheres; while some symbols successfully recapture the sense of nature's deeper and awe-inspiring character, others are used mechanically, to the extent of becoming banal, while in the later works the alienation between writer and nature often approaches the stage where the latter is parodied; the character of a landscape

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<sup>5</sup>Cf. ch. 2, note 24.

sometimes becomes an object for social discourse; where the natural world is seen entirely in connection with the emotive responses and spiritual yearnings of the characters (e.g. Stine), it becomes tainted with the morbid and unhealthy.

Yet despite these limitations, of which he himself was aware, Fontane persists in introducing the world of nature into his novels, even his most urbane works. Even in the *Gesellschaftsromane*, it is significant that, as G. Kricker shows, the major turning-points in the plot occur regularly during the recurrent excursions in the open, the picnics and boat-trips:

. . .Diese Landpartien sind stets betonte Höhe-Wendepunkte im Verlaufe der Handlung. . . Hier unter freiem Himmel fallen die Schranken, die zu Hause unter den Augen der Umgebung alles umfassen, hier spricht und handelt jeder nach seinem Herzen und Willen, hier erfüllt sich darum das Verhängnis.<sup>6</sup>

Fontane, the writer of the Wanderungen durch die Mark Brandenburg, has an abiding attraction to and love of the open country, outside the usual haunts of society. This feeling is rooted specifically in the Prussian landscape which, in the novels, complements the other setting with which he is familiar, urban Berlin. His novels are as unthinkable without the one as without the other: in this respect Irrungen Wirungen is

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<sup>6</sup>G. Kricker, Theodor Fontane: Von seiner Art und epischer Technik (Berlin, 1912), p. 62.

perhaps the most "Fontanesque" of his works, since the two spheres are perfectly balanced against each other.

Fontane is conscious, moreover, of the attractions of nature as representative of an idyllic and less complex way of life, which is heightened by his occasional weariness with the social world. The urge, deeply ingrained in the emotional being of many of his characters, particularly the heroines, to escape to "das Freie" or "das Offene", probably corresponds to a part of himself. But the other part of Fontane's makeup, which predominates, is the practical and socially inclined, which is aware of the impracticability and even the dubious morality of this form of escape. However, Fontane is certainly aware of a tension here, which accounts for the recurrence in various forms of the Natur-Gesellschaft conflict in his novels, and also for the ambivalent way in which he treats it: ironically in Cécile, sympathetically in Irrungen Wirrungen, dispassionately in Stine, and with the greatest ambiguity of all in Effi Briest.

How much importance we should attach to this tension depends on the view we adopt of Fontane as a man and an artist. According to the traditional picture we may consider him as an inwardly composed man of society with an attraction for nature, as long as this does not go beyond reasonable limits. (Extraversion might be linked with his limited lyrical ability.)

Recent studies, however,<sup>7</sup> appear to tend more towards the view of the artist inwardly divorced from his age, compelled to serve through his art associal reality which he personally condemns.<sup>8</sup> In this case Fontane's ambivalent attitude towards the confrontation of society and nature would have deeper personal significance than is generally assumed.

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<sup>7</sup>E.g., Claude David, "Theodor Fontane ou la crise du réalisme", Critique, CXXVII (1957), 1011 ff.

<sup>8</sup>"Unsere dichterische Produktion. . .entspricht unserer Natur, aber nicht notwendig unserem Geschmack. . . ." Quoted in G. Lukács, op. cit., p. 262.



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