

## ANOTHER 'SIAM EPISODE' IN A FONTANE NOVEL

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Recently, in Manusya's 5.1 issue of 2002, I published an essay entitled "A Hidden Glimpse at Old Thailand? The 'Siam Episode' in Fontane's Novel *Unwiederbringlich*." Meanwhile, in the course of my continued studies of that author's narrative oeuvre, I hit upon yet another such episode which may, who knows, prove to be even more revealing -- but likewise perhaps, even more enigmatic -- than the former. It occurs in Fontane's last novel, *Der Stechlin*, which as a book appeared only posthumously, in 1899 ("Stechlin," by the way, is the name of a lake in the Brandenburg March in erstwhile Prussia that plays an important if symbolic role in this novel). Hardly any editor or commentator, at least as far as I can see, deigns, or dares, to elucidate said episode, or to submit any explanation thereof.

What we are dealing with are roughly three pages -- or may be five, if we include the context -- of *Der Stechlin*'s Chapt. 20, which forms part of the narrative complex titled "Wahl in Rheinsberg-Wutz" ("Election in Rheinsberg-Wutz" [the latter being the respective place names of that electoral district]). The scene is a restaurant where the conservatives, i.e., the Junkers, or members of the landed aristocracy, have gathered, first, for an opulent meal, then -- some of them, at any rate -- for coffee, liqueurs, and

cigars. Even though the vote went to the social democratic candidate, they bear this outcome lightly and are of good cheer, indulging in small talk and all kinds of gossip. One of their favorite themes is the story of "die schöne Lilli" (*beautiful Lilli*), the daughter of a neighboring nobleman who had eloped with her youngest brother's private tutor, and fled to England; however, when both had run out of money, she had, dejected and full of compunction, returned to her parental home. And now, so rumor has it, a cousin of hers is, in all likelihood, going to marry her nonetheless. But has she not lost her virginity under the circumstances? Ay, there is the rub. Blood would of course atone for the private tutor's misdeed, as one of the Junkers observes, pointing to the possibility of a duel; yet that is out of the question because the culprit, who would not be qualified to give satisfaction anyway, has remained in England, or even went to the United States, as the same Junker muses. Hence, what can be done?

It is at this juncture that Fontane's second 'Siam Episode' emerges from the party's idle chatter. "Direkter Thormeyer" (not a member of the nobility but the learned and highly esteemed principal of the *Gymnasium*) begins by flatly and categorically stating that certain means of appropriate atonement do indeed exist, other than dueling, which he adds, are not so primitive. There is, Thormeyer declares and explains, a way of purification, of reconstitution, of restoration to innocence and purity (*Reinheitswiederherstellung*): that is to say, a way of regaining a girl's lost virginity. To all intents and purposes, he assures his listeners, "blood atones" (*Blut sühnt*), and Fontane further emphasizes this

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lapidary statement by expressly italicizing it). Still, Thormeyer continues, it does not have to be the blood of the wrongdoer, as is the case according to the archaic law of blood revenge (*das sogenannte Blut racheprinzip*); no, blood in general and all by itself is capable of atoning. Which holds especially true, he exclaims enthusiastically, for the peoples in the East, the Orientals: according to their more advanced opinions and beliefs, "blood restores innocence as such" (*Blut [stellt] die Unschuld als solche wieder her*). And Thormeyer goes on, equally enthused, by praising this view and experience -- a "dogma," indeed a "fact," he persists -- as belonging to the finest and subtlest and most profound ones that obtain. Only the other day, he says, he read a story which not merely confirmed all this, but strongly corroborated it, and in a near "grandiose" manner to boot (*gropartig*; again in emphatic italics.) And that selfsame story stemmed, to top it off, "from Siam": "Und noch dazu aus Siam."

So Thormeyer starts out, stressing from the outset that there once was a King of Siam (for the Siamese, too, boast kings, he impresses upon his audience). "There once was a King of Siam,"+ he repeats, and this king had a daughter." -- Sounds like straight out of a fairy tale," interposes one of the Junkers. "It is one, gentlemen," Thormeyer readily agrees; then, he finally embarks on his "story" (*Geschichte*). The king's daughter was a real princess, he reports, and a prince from an adjacent country (but of a lower station, just as the private tutor in Lilli's case) kidnapped and abducted her, incorporating her, for all her desperate resistance, into his harem. Now the King of Siam was not a man to put up

with such doings: he waged a holy war on the princely abductor, defeated him, and led the princess home again in a triumphal procession. The Siamese people were as though drunk with victory and good fortune; the royal daughter herself, however, remained gloomy and melancholic, for she was a very delicate and sensitive lady, and she had suffered. All that she henceforth was concerned about was the thought of possible atonement, the thought of how to relieve her from that unholiness, that having been 'touched on a sore spot,' as it were. "Does not work. Touched is touched," the Junkers object. But Thormeyer has a solution.

The priesthood, he slowly and carefully expounds, was consulted, and they congregated in a "synod" of sorts, as he jokes, and pondered the question of atonement or, which was the same, the restoration of virginity. And they concluded, or found perhaps in age-old tomes, that she had to be bathed in blood. Thus, for this purpose, she was brought to the hall of a temple where there stood two mighty tubs, one of red porphyry and one of white marble, and between them, on a kind of staircase, there stood, upright, the princess herself. Then, three white buffaloes were led to the hall, and the high priest, with one clean cut each time, severed their heads and let their blood flow into the porphyric tub. With that, the bath was prepared, and the princess, having been undressed by Siamese maidens, sat down in the buffaloes' blood, and the high priest, seizing a holy vessel, scooped the blood from the tub and poured it onto her body....

I skip the various reactions and interjections of Thormeyer's audience--some were shocked at his story, indeed



nearly shuddered at it, while others thoroughly concurred with him -- but shall proceed instead to bring this remarkable 'Siam Episode' to an end. And it is, doubtless, a happy ending in every respect. For directly from the porphyric tub with its blood, the princess stepped into the marble one, which contained all the fragrant perfumes of Arabia (*alle Wohlgerüche Arabiens*), whereupon all the priests with all their ladles came closer afresh. Whole cascades were poured onto the noble convalescent; one could virtually see her melancholy fall away from her as everything which the predatory prince had deprived her of started thriving again, both within and around her. At last, the maidservants wrapped her up in snow-white garments and conducted her to a sumptuous couch; there, they fanned her with peacock's whisks until she quietly lowered her head and fell asleep. "And no stain was left" (*Und ist nichts zurückgeblieben*), Thormeyer now triumphs for his part, adding laconically that, later on, the purified princess became the wife of the King of Annam. To be sure, though, as the learned narrator admits, that king is said to have been very enlightened since France, and for quite some time already, had ruled over his lands; but still.... "Let's hope Lilli's cousin will also show consideration." -- "He will, he will" (all the more so because she is not only pretty but very rich as well). Thus the Junkers' final comments, which neatly round out the entire story.

Is this Fontanean 'Siam Episode' authentic, that is to say, is it based on historical evidence, on facts of cultural anthropology? (Significantly and surprisingly enough, Director Thormeyer implicitly claims that it must have happened not too long ago: probably

during the 19th century, in view of the French occupation and colonization of Indochina.) Or is this exotic tale just a mere figment of Fontane's prolific imagination and rampant storytelling, his "Fabulierlust" or, to use a famous expression of Goethe's, his "Lust zu fabulieren"-- not unlike, in fact, the yarn widow Hansen spins in the novel *Unwiederbringlich* about her daughter Brigitte's wondrous Siamese adventures, as may be remembered? Of course, I am not at all in a position to decide and answer such questions, and it will therefore be the task of knowledgeable Thai Germanists to do so, and to solve this intricate problem. So much the more, it should be noted, since *Der Stechlin*, from all I can ascertain, is not available in English translation, nor in any translation whatsoever, for that matter. Yet how could it be otherwise? This marvelous novel, a veritable gem of German literature to which only Thomas Mann's work is comparable, reveals itself as so dyed-in-the-wool a Prussian (in the positive sense) narration and overall phenomenon, indeed as so exceedingly and altogether *märkisch*, as to thwart, I am afraid, even the best and most conscientious and experienced translators' attempts at rendering it into a foreign tongue. (Which is due to a high degree, by the way, to Fontane's brilliant dialogues--his narrative forte anyhow--with their masterful richness in all characteristic layers of the language, extending from cultivated and erudite speech to the colloquial as well as to the local dialects, especially the so-called *Plattdeutsch* in the countryside.)++



Suffice it to say, then, by iterating in conclusion that the great German balladist and, above all, novelist Theodor Fontane (1819-1898) betrayed a most uncommon, near singular affinity for -- or, in any case, interest in -- Siam or old Thailand and her people's customs. This can once more be gleaned from a letter Fontane wrote to Georg Friedlaender on 20 August 1889, and in which he frankly confided to that lifelong friend of his some of the impressions he had gathered at the Richard Wagner Festival in Bayreuth, the small, remote town in Upper Frankonia. Namely, what fascinated him most--he had in time escaped from the "Festspielhaus," the huge theater building constructed in such bad taste; as a matter of fact, he had pushed toward the exit even before the *Parsifal* overture was over--I say, what fascinated him most, furnishing him with a "real treat" (Hochgenu), turned out to be nothing else but the "list of [foreign] visitors" (Fremdenliste). Dutifully and with gratification, Fontane enumerated the places and /or countries whence those music lovers from abroad had flocked together so as to worship the "master's" operas. There were none from New York or Boston, he curtly conceded; but, lo and behold:

Siam, Shanhai [sic], Bombay, Colorado, Nebraska, Minnesota, *das waren die Namen, die wirkten*.

Indeed, these were the names that; according to Fontane, had an effect and counted. Old Thailand, in a word, unmistakably occupied the center of his attention again, and hence was allotted predominance.+++

+ In my aforementioned essay, as may be recalled, I pointed out that in his novel *Unwiederbringlich* Fontane has his widow Hansen speak of an "emperor" (*Kaiser*) of Siam. Obviously, as we now come to realize, he was fully aware of the fact that old Thailand was a kingdom, not an empire; hence, did he commit that blatant error -- or, rather, make that conscious and cunning change--in order additionally, and however subtly, to underscore the widow's general untrustworthiness?

++ It should perhaps be expressly accentuated that, contrary to the 'Siam Episode' in *Unwiederbringlich*, the one in *Der Stechlin* has no bearing on the overarching structure of the work; it is, from start to finish, an isolated, self-contained piece of narration.

+++ There are, to all intents and purposes, two exceptions to the secondary literature on *Der Stechlin*, as I found out, if somewhat belatedly: to wit, E. F. George, "The Symbol of the lake and Related Themes in Fontane's *Der Stechlin*," *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 9 (1973): 150; Eda Sagarra, *Theodor Fontane: Der Stechlin* (Munich: Fink, 1986) 76. However, neither of these contributions strikes me as satisfactory or convincing. George tries to establish a thematic and structural connection with a very short episode in the novel's 27th chapter, which tells the story of a British cosmetician who restores--face-lifting *avant la lettre*, as it were--the facial beauty of elderly ladies; Sagarra goes even further yet by surmising a symbolic meaning in Thormeyer's report (labeled a "strange anecdote"): namely, the notion of an "atonement" for the injustices and iniquities "of the old world [?] by dint



of a bloody revolution.” Which is, not of course, only far-fetched but entirely arbitrary in the context of Fontane’s *Der Stechlin*, where as George’s suggestion proves to be at least debatable although it, too, is contrived in a way.”