

A Hidden Glimpse at Old Thailand? The "Siam Episode" in Fontane's Novel *Unwiederbringlich*

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Abstract

Hardly ever do images of Thai or Thailand occur in German literature. Granted, there exists an early if seemingly isolated forerunner from the 17th century: namely, Heinrich Anshelm von Zigler und Kliphausen's voluminous Baroque novel in titled *Die asiatische Banise* ("The Asian Banise" [which is the name of the heroine]).¹ I adduced it, and briefly discussed its opening scene, in my talk "What is a Good Dramatic Text? A German's Answer to a Thai's Question" that I gave in Bangkok almost a decade ago, and which was subsequently published, in a Thai translation by Chetana Nagavajara, in Silpakorn University's *Journal of the Faculty of Arts* and, in its English original, in my book *Versuche zur europäischen Literatur* of 1994.² As for the three cen-

turies following the *Banise*, however, I had been unaware of any treatments of Thai topics in German letters; and the quite recent, though very important and meritorious, exception to the rule, Hella Kothmann's collection of various Thai texts in German rendition, her *Das siamesische Lächeln* ("The Siamese Smile"),³ appeared only after I had penned and delivered my lecture—in fact, simultaneously, as it were, with my aforesaid book.

Alas, such a paucity of evidence is by no means restricted to the realm of belles lettres, nor of literary endeavors at large, either. The pertinent handbooks bear embarrassing witness to this. Neither in Frenzels's *Stoffe der Weltliteratur* or Schmitt's *Stoff—und Motivgeschichte der deutschen Literatur*, nor in the Daemmrichs' jointly authored *Themes and Motifs in Western Literature and Wiederholte Spiegelungen: Themen und Motive in der Literatur*,⁴ can the slightest, the most fleeting mention of Thailand (or of Siam, for that matter) be

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¹ Cf. Heinrich Anshelm von Zigler und Kliphausen, *Die asiatische Banise* [ect.]. Vollständiger Text nach der Ausgabe von 1707 unter Berücksichtigung des Erstdrucks von 1689. Mit einem Nachwort von Wolfgang Pfeiffer-Belli (München: Winkler, 1965).

² Cf. *Warasan Aksonsat Mahavithayalai Silpakorn* 15/2 (1993); Reinhold Grimm, *Versuche zur europäischen Literatur* (Bern: Lang, 1994) 367-84.

³ *Das siamesische Lächeln: Literatur und Revolution in Thailand*. Ed. Hella Kothmann (Köln: Neuer ISP Verlag, 1994).

⁴ Cf. Elisabeth Frenzel, *Stoffe der Weltliteratur: Ein Lexikon dichtungsgeschichtlicher Längsschnitte* (Stuttgart: Kröner, 1963); Franz Anselm Schmitt, *Stoff- und Motivgeschichte der deutschen Literatur: Eine Bibliographie* (Berlin/ New York: De Gruyter, 1976); Horst S. and Ingrid Daemmrich, *Themes and Motifs in Western Literature: A Handbook* (Tübingen: Francke, 1987); dies., *Wiederholte Spiegelungen: Themen und Motive in der Literatur* (Bern/ München: Francke, 1978).

spotted, much less an entire entry thereof; in point of fact, Arnold's monumental and highly ambitious *Kritisches Lexikon zur fremdsprachigen Gegenwartsliteratur* ("Critical Lexicon of Contemporary Foreign Literature"), while featuring, among other Asian literatures, those of Korea, Indonesia, and even Afghanistan in sizable essays, does not contain a respective one on Thai letters.⁵ Or should we, hopefully, rather put it: not yet?

Be that as it may, I did, all the same, in the meantime discover an additional image of Thailand and Thai in German literature, and a most interesting one to boot. It was composed by the great, indeed magnificent, novelist and balladeer Theodor Fontane (1819-1898) and stems from his 1891 novel *Unwiederbringlich*, which is set in the Northern German provinces of Schleswig-Holstein during the late 1850s and early 1860s—then still part of Denmark—and in the Danish capital Copenhagen. (The title of its English translation, by the way, runs *Beyond Recall*; what it literally means, though, is "irretrievable" or "irreparable.") The protagonist of Fontane's powerful narrative, which has been hailed as "one of the outstanding novels of the nineteenth century,"⁶ is a married German count and lord-in-waiting at the Danish court named Helmuth Holk, and that which

Fontane unfolds with unsurpassed mastery is Holk's fate and gradual succumbing to the allurements of two women: Brigitte Hansen, wife of a captain, and Ebba von Rosenberg, a royal maid of honor. And it is precisely in this context—between Brigitte and Ebba, so to speak—that the passages which I have labeled as the "Siam Episode" are situated, proving both to conceal and reveal the development of the plot.

In other words, the "Siam Episode" is weighty enough, and thus can certainly not be ignored or neglected. However, what do we notice to our utter astonishment? None of the foremost critics and scholars who have dealt with *Unwiederbringlich* pays any attention to said episode! Even Hans-Heinrich Reuter, in his authoritative two-volume monograph so lapidarily entitled *Fontane*, does not mention it at all; neither Siam nor Thailand, let alone Bangkok, is listed in his elaborate index of geographical names.⁷ Similar findings apply to other, and otherwise quite insightful, studies of Fontane's works and, specifically, of the novel in question. Hubert Ohl, for instance, devotes several compact pages to an interpretation of *Unwiederbringlich* and rightly emphasizes the "manifold perspectival relations" ([die] vielfältigen perspektivischen Bezüge) pervading it;⁸ yet once again, neither the "Siam Epi-

⁵ Cf. *Kritisches Lexikon zur fremdsprachigen Gegenwartsliteratur*. Ed. Heinz Ludwig Arnold (München: edition text + kritik, 1983ff.) IX.

⁶ Thus Douglas Parmée in his introduction to the English edition, which came out in London in 1964; here quoted from Reuter (see n.7 below) II: 882f.

⁷ Hans-Heinrich Reuter, *Fontane*. 2 vols. (München: Nymphenburger Verlagshandlung, 1968).

⁸ Cf. Hubert Ohl, *Bild und Wirklichkeit: Studien zur Romankunst Raabes und Fontanes* (Heidelberg: Stiehm, 1968) 175-80; here p. 180.

sode" nor, indeed, the character of Brigitte, who occupies its very center, are touched upon. Likewise, Ingrid Mittenzwei, who offers a much longer and far more detailed and penetrating analysis of Fontane's novel, contents herself with referring, in the most general of terms, to "the somewhat fabulous adventures of the Hansen family" (*die einigermaßen märchenhaften Abenteuer der Kapitänsfamilie Hansen*),⁹ without ever mentioning Siam or Bangkok.

But how about Peter Demetz, who, on the one hand, has provided the subtlest and most succinct investigation of *Unwiederbringlich* and, on the other, heaped it with lavish praise, extolling it to the skies as Fontane's absolute novelistic masterpiece?¹⁰ Justly, Demetz maintains¹¹ that this work had been vastly underrated in Germany for many years; only Swiss poets and critics such as, from the outset, Conrad Ferdinand Meyer and, later on, Max Rychner—one could add a couple of Britishers—have been able, Demetz goes on, truly to gauge and appreciate the Fontane an achievement. And having stated that

⁹ Cf. Ingrid Mittenzwei, *Die Sprache als Thema: Untersuchungen zu Fontanes Gesellschaftsromanen* (Bad Homburg v.d.H. [etc.]: Gehlen, 119-33); here p. 125.

¹⁰ Others have meanwhile chimed in, at least to a certain degree; cf. *Espec. Reuter II*: 882 (where *Unwiederbringlich* is, however, ranked as one of Fontane's "Meisterromane," or masterly novels).

¹¹ For these and the following observations, see Peter Demetz, *Formen des Realismus: Theodor Fontane. Kritische Untersuchungen* (München: Hanser, 1966) 164-77.

much with regard to the novel's reception, the Czech-American scholar embarks on a veritable eulogy. *Unwiederbringlich*, he exclaims, is and will remain "the most flawless work of art of Fontane's" (*das makelloseste Kunstwerk Fontanes*), chiseled and honed

*without any residue and sentimentality; cool, calm, controlled; a book made wholly of ivory; the sole German novel of that era that doesn't have to shy away from vying even with Turgenev or more impressively still [according to Demetz], with Trollope and William Dean Howells.*¹²

Frankly, I feel this boundless encomium is a little bit exaggerated and, perhaps, prejudiced—although I, too, admire *Unwiederbringlich* and rank it among the finest creations of its author. By contrast, to be sure, Demetz's observations concerning the role and function of Brigitte and her tightly knit if, as it were, subterranean relationship to her 'rival' Ebba are definitely to the point. He clearly recognizes Brigitte's importance for Count Holk's increasing confusion and sensual entanglement. With Brigitte, admittedly, everything stays within limits, amounting to a mere albeit daring flirtation and a mere albeit dangerous playing with fire; with Ebba, however, who is so closely tied to her nonetheless, everything becomes seriousness and a sensuous as well as mental conflagration of sorts, duly mirrored in the actual blaze ravaging exactly that part

¹² My translation; compare *ibid.* 166.

of the castle where she and Holk had just made love. In short, by passing from Brigitte to Ebba, Holk comes to proceed from the possibility to the reality of adultery. It should be noted, though, that Brigitte, despite this decisive change, is present nearly all the time, albeit ever more in the background. And yet, and for all Demetz's descriptions and discussion of her,¹³ he stubbornly keeps silent about the "Siam Episode."

What, then, is this episode that constitutes both a half overt, half secret link between the major figures of the novel and, moreover, allows a hidden glimpse at old Thailand, the ancient Siam of the 19th century as reflected in the mind of a coeval German writer? What does this piece of narration, a kind of inserted short story, consist of and convey? What is its structural function within the parameters sketched out by Demetz?

I shall try to be brief.¹⁴ The core of Fontane's "Siam Episode," "which Widow Hansen, the mother of Brigitte, tells her lodger Holk early on, might be summarized as follows. Brigitte's husband, a captain also of the name of Hansen, like his mother-in-law, is a so-called "Chinafahrer," that is to say, a skipper sailing back and forth in the seas of the Far East off China and Indochina, mainly between Singapore and Shanghai. As had been the case before, his

wife was accompanying him on one of his voyages—the reason for this as well as a host of details are immaterial for our purpose—and it happened that, when leaving China, Captain Hansen was so lucky as to secure a return cargo to Bangkok. That's a big city in Siam, Widow Hansen enthuses, proudly declaring that she, too, had once visited it with her late husband, likewise a "Chinafahrer." She further points out that the Siamese (*die Siamschen*) boast an emperor, and that Hansen's ship was moored in the river right in front of the imperial palace. After a day or two, she continues, there came an imperial minister and went aboard the ship, inviting Hansen and his wife to a grandiose court dinner. The emperor had presumably seen Brigitte. And she was seated next to him and spoke English with him, and the emperor kept looking at her all this while. And when they had risen from the table, the emperor was again very gracious and kind and kept his eyes riveted upon her, and when the Hansens were about to take their leave, he said to the captain it would mean a lot to him if "Mrs. Captain" (*die Frau Kapitänin*) could come to his palace for a second time on the following day, thus enabling his loyal subjects, and his wives—of whom he had a good many—in particular, to view the beautiful "German [*sic*] lady"¹⁵ face to face once more. At first, Hansen got scared at these incessant honors, which might have signaled treason as well, for, all around the palace, heads were propped up, just as Danes prop up pineapples; yet Brigitte, who had overheard the conversation, bowed to the emperor and assured him with the

¹³ Regarding Brigitte's appearance and sensuality, see also *ibid.* 168f.

¹⁴ For the German text on which the following plot summary is based, see Theodor Fontane, *Sämtliche Werke*. Ed. Walter Keitel (München: Hanser, 1962ff.) II: 643–45, 669.

¹⁵ English in the original.

proper mien, as self-confident as distinguished, that she was willing to appear at the assigned hour.

Here, the eager listener interrupts Widow Hansen's tale by murmuring "Risky, very risky" (*Gewagt, sehr gewagt*), but she goes on unperturbed, reporting that Brigitte did in fact turn up and was led to an elevated seat that had been built expressly for her near the palace's portal, which cast its pleasant shadow upon her; and on this "throne," after the emperor had bedecked her with a pearl necklace, she sat holding a fan of peacock feathers. (The necklace is said to have been absolutely marvelous.) And now all the high society of Bangkok and thereafter the entire people marched in file before her and bowed to her, and the emperor's wives also, and when the last of them had passed by, Brigitte rose to her feet and strode up to the emperor in order to lay down the peacock fan and the string of pearls because she thought she had been bedecked by him exclusively for the ceremony. As a matter of fact, he accepted both items but handed her the necklace again, indicating that she should wear it in eternal commemoration. Immediately afterwards, led by the ministers, and while the household troops were forming a guard of honor, Brigitte arrived at the gangplank of the ship where Hansen had stayed and witnessed the whole event. However, she henceforth declined to accompany him on any further voyages since, as she argued, it couldn't but strike her as odd to have to live among sailors after such an imperial distinction, and perhaps be forced to sleep in a harbor tavern where all one hears is "Negromusic," and everything reeks of gin. And Hansen, de-

spite some qualms that Brigitte's experience might have gone to her head, readily agreed with her.

Holk is doubtful whether he ought to believe this fantastic story or shrug it off as a bold and airy product of imagination and, at the same time, as playing fast and loose with him and his gullibility. Still, could it not be true, he muses, after all? In an attempt at ironic self-justification, he therefore asks where the famous "white elephants" had been. "They probably were in their stables," Widow Hansen retorts, laughing waggishly. But at the very least, Holk insists, she must now show him that wondrous string of pearls. Precisely this, however, is impossible, as it turns out. And why? Because, the widow explains, the necklace had suddenly gone missing when her daughter boarded the ship; obviously, she adds, Brigitte had lost it or, due to her excitement, simply forgotten it in the palace. Yet why did she not inquire after it and search for it? Because, her mother continues explaining, Brigitte has something peculiar about her; hence, when Hansen pressed her, demanding appropriate action, she merely replied, "that would be so vulgar and against decency and court etiquette." Whereupon Holk, who slowly begins to see which way the wind is blowing, wryly falls in with both mother and daughter and pretends to realize that the latter's attitude was "correct." And "such feelings," he concludes tongue in check, "must be respected."

The story of the Siamese court festivity celebrating Brigitte, and/or—but above all—that of the lost string of pearls, is referred to in the subsequent text of

Unwiederbringlich no fewer than five times, which clearly underscores their narrative weight and significance. That which proves to be most revealing is the first of these instances. Holk, then still under the spell of Brigitte's statuesque beauty, tells her what he would have done had he been the Emperor of Siam. The count would have arranged things quite differently around that "chair of state" (*Thronsessel*) in front of the imperial palace. Instead of seating Brigitte—something that never suits, Holk informs her—he would have placed her beside the throne, standing erect, with only her arm leaning against the white ivory backrest. And such a position, Holk declares flatteringly as well as triumphantly, would have brought to light, in the most literal sense of the word, which of the two could claim to be superior to the other: the ivory or the arm of beautiful Mrs. Hansen (by which he had been deeply and sensuously affected from the outset).

The remaining references to the initial tale are less explicit yet amply significant all the same. What they chiefly concern is the trustworthiness of Widow Hansen. Already her disappointing conclusion regarding the whereabouts of the pearl necklace gave, as we saw, rise to doubts even in the otherwise so gullible Count Holk, and they keep on increasing as the narration progresses. (Somewhat "fabulous" [*märchenhaft*]: thus Holt's summary judgment even at this early stage.) Later on, and after the count's aforementioned 'reworking' of the—for him—highlight of the original episode, he engages in a conversation with a friend and colleague of his, Baron

Pentz, who is intimately familiar with all the gossip circulating in Copenhagen. As to the two Hansen women, the befuddled count understandably wants to find out what is really the matter with them. For example, there exists, he observes, a "wonderful story" (*wundervolle Geschichte*) about the Emperor of Siam, replete with "fabulous homages and presents" and, indeed, a gorgeous string of pearls. "Now is that the truth or a lie?" Perhaps, Holk muses, it is just a token of morbid ambition, just "megalomania" (*Größenwahn*). Everything, he submits, may be but the outgrowth of a hallucinatory fit, a "figment of heated imagination" (*Ausgeburts einer erhitzten Phantasie*). On the other hand, Holk freely confesses that he has come to feel a "leiser Märchengrusel," a slight fairy-tale shudder of sorts, especially when remembering what Pentz divulged in respect to the Hansens previously: to wit, their involvement with the "security agency" (*Sicherheitsbehörde*). Much to his indignation, the count must learn that Brigitte is likely to have had an affair with a police assessor, and her mother, who knows, with the chief of police himself. As a result—and, naturally, in consequence of his ever-increasing infatuation for Ebba von Rosenberg—Holk's "Hansenfrage," the question(s) surrounding the Hansen women, can be said to have been solved at long last; if, in the beginning, anything mysterious or enigmatic did obtain, it is, and will be, no longer under discussion. The whole business, in sum, has become abundantly clear, the Emperor of Siam revealing himself as more and more uncertain, the security officer, on the contrary, as more and more certain. Characteristically, the narrator in-

dulges here in a mild if triple pun: "Der Kaiser von Siam war immer *unsicherer*, der 'Sicherheitsbeamte' dagegen immer *sicherer* geworden [...]." ¹⁶

So much, then, for the content that Fontane's "Siam Episode" consists of. But what, we also asked, does this narrative substance convey in terms of structure, or indeed, as we must add, within the subtle web of the novel in its entirety? Drawing on Demetz's interpretation of *Unwiederbringlich*, I already said that Holk's sensual—and, in the end, plain sexual—ensnarement is marked by a gradual progression from his attraction to Brigitte to his attraction to Ebba, to which he ultimately succumbs. As Countess Christine, Holk's wife, bitterly comments, if only implicitly: The latter supersedes and replaces the former; in point of fact, it seems to her that they continuously "take turns with each other" (sich *untereinander ablösen*). However, and even apart from Christine's exaggeration, this step-by-step progression is not yet sufficient. What we have to consider, and carefully weigh, is the structural development, or overall form, of Fontane's novel as a whole. For, without fail, its basic plotline encompasses far more than Holk's dual relationship to Brigitte and Ebba. *Unwiederbringlich* first shows, and telling illustrates, the growing estrangement of the count from his wife, and hers from him, while both are still living, apparently peacefully, at "Schloß Holkenäs," the castle by the sea in Schleswig-Holstein. Soon, though, and

as suddenly as unexpectedly, Count Holk receives an invitation—actually, it is an order—to betake himself to Copenhagen and to serve in his capacity as lord-in-waiting to Princess Mary Ellinor of Denmark. Then and there, his double 'love story,' in part abortive, so to speak, and in part fully consummated, starts unfolding and is related at length and in numerous details. Yet the rapture of love Holk enjoys with Ebba von Rosenberg, an experience lasting merely one hour before the devastating fire breaks out, constitutes but the climax of the novel; almost instantaneously, it is followed by a profound, indeed total and radical, anticlimax. Namely, Holk's ecstasy and the high hopes he cherished after his fiery encounter with Ebba—whom, to top it off, he succeeded in rescuing—are mercilessly and blatantly crushed by her and, within minutes, changed into abysmal disillusionment and despair. He confidently fancied Ebba to be as much in love with him as he was with her; hence, he briefly returned to Holkenäs, pleaded with Christine for separation, and was granted a divorce. Back in Copenhagen, he intends to propose to Ebba von Rosenberg, and speedily to marry her. However, the capricious maid of honor, or lady-in-waiting (who is likewise in service to the princess, incidentally) refuses him for good in an exemplary manner—he really gets the mitten, as they say—and Holk leaves her and the court and the capital in utter dismay. Unable to return to his home, he goes abroad, restlessly traveling through various European countries such as France, Italy, and Switzerland until, at last, he settles in England. It is from London, two years or so later, that the count manages to enter

¹⁶ My emphases.

into relations with Christine again, and finally to reconcile with his wife. In fact, they are solemnly married once more, but in vain; as becomes evident at once, neither their marital bliss nor even their mutual trust and understanding can be restored. All this proves "Unwiederbringlich": irretrievable, irreparable. After a few months of quiet suffering and helpless anguish, Christine, in desperation, commits suicide.

I have labeled Ebba's mind and behavior as 'capricious,' and with reason, for the whole affair with Holk—if indeed it can be called one, pitifully short-lived as it is—was prodded by her caprices, her whims, her vagaries, and, in particular, by her indomitable playfulness. Life and service at court, she has experienced and knows, are trite and boring, and she therefore, capriciously as well as cruelly, played her game with poor, naive, and utterly unsuspecting Holk. Hence, when she brutally rejects and even taunts him, his reaction is as violent as it is unambiguous. So everything, he rages, was nothing but an irresponsible "game," nothing but a willful, lousy "farce" (*also alles nur Spiel, alles nur Farce*). And since it doubtless was a game and nothing else, as he by now has perforce convinced himself, he reiterates when quitting Ebba with a sarcastic bow, "then you have played it perfectly well" (*so haben Sie gut gespielt*). Still, the dubious maid of honor is, to be sure, not the only one to wallow in erotic play with Holk; the other one is, as might be expected, Brigitte, the equally dubious wife of the "Chinafahrer." She, too, concedes that not only were the fantastic events in Bangkok merely a "bagatelle" (*Spielerei*) but the same holds true, by

implication, for her flirtation with Count Holk as well, all of which Holk for his part begins to surmise when, in his conversation with Pentz, he bluntly voices, however hesitantly, his "assumption" of the Hansens' "most crafty histrionics" ([seine] *Annahme raffiniertester Komödianterei*). In brief, sheer playfulness, in varying manner and degree, reigns supreme and forms the common denominator of Holk's Copenhagen flirtations or most serious 'liaison' and their respective outcome. Unbeknownst to him for quite a while, in Brigitte's case, and till the dire ending, in Ebba's, both seductresses play the selfsame erotic game with him.

Their manifest pairing, though, is meant by Fontane to indicate not merely a gradation and intensification, as Demetz rightly affirms. The function of this couple of women is undoubtedly larger and more complex within the parameters of the novel, for doesn't the "Siam Episode," which so prominently features Brigitte, betray a manifest structural affinity to the protracted 'episode' involving, no less prominently, Ebba von Rosenberg, along with Holk? Aren't both narrative strands, intertwined as they are for at least some time, similarly composed of a grand and promising, indeed, in Ebba's case, overwhelming, climax and a most sobering anticlimax? As for her, we have to ponder the massive flop that results from the prompt and scarcely explicable disappearance of the pearl necklace after all that pseudo-Shakespearean pomp and circumstance which preceded. Thus, I venture to say that the "Siam Episode," through its very structure, anticipates and, in a way, announces what will be-

fall Count Holk in the course of the main story. And if the Czech-American scholar and critic is right once more—as I believe he is: namely, in assuming that the ‘security amour’ Brigitte has been carrying on must in fact be viewed as carnal, hence adulterous—then Fontane herewith introduced a second if simpler motif that presages and parallels the momentous first one he established in order to accentuate the doing of Count Holk. But, unfortunately, Demetz fails to draw this conclusion which so readily suggests itself.

The “Siam Episode” is not the only such motif that hints at some ensuing occurrences in *Unwiederbringlich*. As a matter of fact, Fontane, here as elsewhere in his novelistic oeuvre, is very fond of narrative-structural devices of this kind. Given his predilection for quotations and allusion, and cryptoquotations and allusions in especial, it ought not to come as a great surprise that, in addition to the fabulous “Siam Episode,” he also made use of intertextualities for similar, or comparable, purposes. Two pertinent examples from chapters XXIX and XXXII of *Unwiederbringlich* will suffice. The first case in point occurs after Holk, on his hasty return to his home, has told his wife that he is determined to seek a divorce, to which she, though deeply hurt, has consented. And now, while a heavy snow squall sets in, and Countess Christine and her close friend Julie von Dobschütz, barely visible anymore, leave the castle, Holk stays behind, watching the two. “No one,” the chapter ends, “accompanied them” (*Niemand begleitetesie*). The intertextual connection as well as Fontane’s intentions are clear. Doubt-

less, that which this curt and laconic sentence echoes is nothing less than the concluding words, an equally laconic phrase, of Goethe’s sensational 1774 bestseller *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (“The Sufferings [or Sorrows] of Young Werther”). Those near proverbial words, referring to the burial of Werther, who took his life and therefore is denied a church funeral under the then existing law, read as follows: “No clergyman escorted him” (*Kein Geistlicher hat ihn begleitet*). That Fontane’s deliberate echoing of the Goethean sentence and what it implies distinctly foreshadows Christine’s own destiny and tragic fate must be self-evident, the only difference being that she, in a more enlightened age, is of course granted an official funeral ceremony.¹⁷

The second intertextual device from *Unwiederbringlich* that I wish to adduce, and which proves even more direct and eloquent, also emerges from the ending of the respective chapter. It doesn’t, admittedly, constitute this chapter’s last sentence, although it might well have served as such. Occurring during the festive meal that seals Christine and Holk’s remarriage, it clearly reveals itself as yet another ominous laconism. Namely, what is the wording of the toast Holk’s brother-in-law proposes to the doubly newlyweds? He

¹⁷ For the Goethean text, see *Goethes Werke*. Ed. Enrich Trunz (Hamburg: Wegner, 1948ff.) VI:124; Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *the Sufferings of Young Werther and Elective Affinities*. Ed. Victor Lange. Forwards by Thomas Mann (New York: Continuum, 1990) 115.

exclaims, bowing to them: "To the luck of Holkenäs" (Auf das Glück von Holkenäs). Thus, rather than addressing the couple by name, he uses, fairly impersonally, the name of their castle. And what this formulation evokes, again quite deliberately on the part of the author, is a ballad by the Swabian poet Ludwig Uhland ((1787-1862) who was so popular in 19th-century Germany that every educated man or woman was familiar with his verse, indeed knew many lines by heart. The poem I have in mind is no exception. Already its title, "Das Glück von Edenhall," unmistakably echoes the aforequoted toast (Edenhall, by the way, is a castle in Scotland). This "Luck of Edenhall"—note the exact rhythmic correspondence of "Glück von Holkenäs" with "Glück von Edenhall"—refers to a precious crystal goblet not only symbolizing but actually embodying the good fortune of the ancient noble house that has so happily owned and occupied the castle for centuries. However, its youngest scion, out of wantonness and hubris, challenges fate, and the goblet breaks into bits. Death and destruction are the inevitable and instant result, just as the relations between Christine and Holk, who seemingly were so luckily reunited, begin once more to cool off almost instantly, and which ultimately, after only a few months, lead to the countless' desperate suicide.¹⁸

¹⁸ For Uhland's "Endenhall" ballad, cf. e.g. *Gedichte von Ludwig Uhland*. Eilfte Auflage. Mit dem Bildnisse des Verfassers [Eleventh edition. With the portrait of the author.] (Stuttgart and Tübingen: Cotta, 1837) 427ff.

Still, there appears, to all intents and purposes, yet another, much earlier and far more extensive, quote from an Uhland ballad in Fontane's *Unwiederbringlich*. In point of fact, the author here, in the very first chapter of his novel, even mentions the name of the balladeer explicitly, and not just once but at least twice. The title of the poem in question, cited or alluded to repeatedly, is "Das Schloß am Meer(e)," and it recurs as late as chapter XXXI, that is, immediately preceding that intertextually portentous toast proposed by Holk's brother-in-law. At the outset, true, he who quotes the Uhlandian title is not the authorial narrator but the character Holk in his stead; moreover, Holk joyfully recites the idyllic opening stanza of Uhland's ballad, and verbatim to boot. "Have you seen the castle," its literal English rendition might read, "the towering castle by the sea? Golden and rosy, the clouds are wafting across it." Or in the German original:

Hast du das Schloß gesehen,
Das hohe Schloß am Meer?
Golden und rosig wehen
Die Wolken drüber her.¹⁹

This is, except for a tiny difference of punctuation,²⁰ a most faithful quote indeed. Yet Holk isn't really lucky when reciting it to his wife so expectantly. Quite to the contrary: Christine, much more knowledgeable in letters than her husband, instructs him, half mockingly,

¹⁹ Ibid. 251.

²⁰ Fontane, at least in my edition, writes "gesehen?" with a question mark instead of a comma; compare Fontane, *Sämtliche Werke* II: 569.

that the lines he quoted are by Ludwig Uhland, and that furthermore, he has obviously been blithely unaware not only of the identity of the poet but likewise, and above all, of the sea and lamentable progress of his verse. So as to substantiate her contention, Christine now quotes for her part. She chooses the fifth strophe, centered as it is in a "threnody" and in "tears":

Die Winde, Die Wogen alle
Lagen in tiefer Ruh,
Einem *Klagelied* aus der Halle
Hört' ich mit *Thränen* zu.²¹

The winds and waves, they all
Rested in deep tranquility,
To a lament from the hall
I was listening with tears.

If one is happy, Christine admonishes Holk, he shouldn't want to become even happier. But her husband is not deterred from his plans, neither by the additional Uhland stanza nor by his wife's forebodings. However, they do come true, as we know, and far more haplessly than Christine could have foreseen.

In conclusion, we have to look, one last time, at Fontane's "Siam Episode" again. Whereas its narrative function, i.e., the structural aspect of this inserted story, can, both in terms of intensifying gradation and of prefigurative parallelisms or broad anticipatory hints, exhaustively and convincingly be demonstrated, as can its relationship and even similarity to the typically Fontane an-

intertextualities we have examined, there still remains an intricate and far-reaching problem that needs must arise, but which hasn't been taken up yet, much less been solved. To wit: why did Theodor Fontane select, or hit on, Siam—or old Thailand according to my title—as the site and origin of his major subplot? What motivated this most unusual, this eccentric, this truly outlandish choice? I for one have no definitive answer whatsoever; all I am able to come up with is guesswork. Thus, was Fontane attracted and fascinated by the luxuriant exoticism informing Brigitte's (alleged) Siamese experience? Did he believe such exotic traits would stress the implausibility of her wondrous 'adventure' from the very beginning, as well as her and her mother's deep-seated shrewdness and untrustworthiness? Or did the seasoned storyteller merely delight in spinning a yarn? After all, the rulers of Siam/Thailand have been kings, rather than emperors, up to this day, at least as far as I know. And would such a court festivity, such an excessive homage paid to a captain's wife, however beautiful, have at all been possible even during the reign of King Rama IV (Mongkut)? It is true he signed a trade agreement with the British Embassy under Sir John Bowring in 1855, and the events of *Unwiederbringlich*, as will be recalled, take place in the late 1850s and early 1860s; so the ground may in fact have been prepared by then for an extravagancy of that kind. On the other hand—namely, as to the concrete honors and distinctions bestowed on Brigitte—were such objects as a fan of peacock feathers, let alone a costly pearl necklace, fraught with an emblematic significance in ancient Siamese culture,

²¹ As n. 19 above; my emphases. Needless to say, the aforementioned edition has the modern spelling "Tränen."

a significance that might perhaps have a covert bearing upon the characters and occurrences of Fontane's novel? To be quite frank, and to iterate and at once expand my previous admission: I do not know. Hence, it will be the task of modern Thai scholarship (of present-day German and comparative criticism in Thailand, that is) to continue attentively to study Fontane's "Siam Episode," this unique phenomenon in his novelistic oeuvre as, I suspect, in 19th- and 20th-century German literature in general, and safely and finally bring home its full-out meaning, or further allusive qualities, if indeed it can boast of any.