A Tale of Two Countries.

A comparison of Fontane's *Vor dem Sturm* with Keneally's *A Family Madness*, focusing on the meaning of space in the process of constituting identity

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When Fontane published his first novel *Vor dem Sturm* in 1878, it still bore the complementary subtitle *Ein Zeit- und Sittenbild aus dem Winter 1812/13*. Fontane would not have needed to add this specification, though: From the first lines onwards we feel that this will not be a novel of action, nor one of dramatic complication. What Fontane does instead is to give a neat depiction of time and morals of the early 19th century: Starting from his favourite setting, the Uckermark, the novel opens up a wide view on this late feudal and early civil society which finds itself under pressure by the Napoleonic Wars and bound in alliances opposing to its very own national feelings.

The similarities with Keneallys 23rd novel *A Family Madness*, published more than 100 years later in 1985 and set in contemporary Australia, may not lie at open hand.

Keneally's society is a modern one, not even rural, but urban: located in a suburb to Sydney. Apparently, there is no external war threatening, yet its existential and, partially, adventurous aspects so carefully exploited by Fontane as metaphors of life are transposed here into the sphere of sport: Rugby is the game in which tensions break out, fights are fought, comradeship is experienced as "the essential".

In spite of the apparent peace and idyllic harmony of the protagonist's life set by his surroundings, the novel leaves no doubt about the fact that drama, even melodrama will evolve in this novel. The introduction already lays the pattern: there is a man desperate to save a child from hands undue to preserve it, trying to stay within the borders of legality but obviously already inescapably tangled in matters beyond law and ratio. The novel tells the circumstances leading to this situation in retrospective; only at the end, the opening situation is taken up again and led forward to a cataclysmic ending.

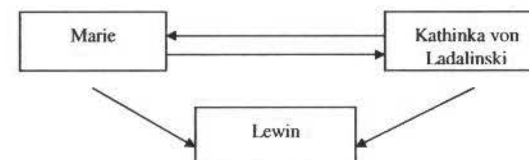
There is a second dimension of the narrative, though: another retrospective, leading us further into the past. Interwoven with the contemporary storyline is the family history of the Kabbels, former Kabbelskis, whose youngest offshoot, Danielle, becomes the protagonist's lover in the novels set present and thus propels the catastrophe. Her family is Belorussian, and the experiences and circumstances of flight and emigration during World War II are revealed in Rudi Kabbelski's father's journal, sent to the son by an absent aunt.

Dissimilar as the authors and their novels may appear at first sight, their particular comparability looms through the differences when we abstract the structure from the stories. Both authors obviously approve of the importance of *history* in the process of constituting identity – of the individual as well as of a nation. Therefore, both authors employ specific concepts of *space* which convey complex bodies of meaning. While these might be detectable only in the context of subjective and highly individual disposition, they are nonetheless crucial elements constituting a specific image of the individual's relation to the world. Thus, they convey a message the respective author has deliberately underlayed his narrative construction. In both novels, these concepts of space are closely connected with specific characters and vice versa: There is no mere metaphoric, but a rather concrete relation between the individual and the spacial concept it embodies. In the centre of both novels we find the "essential triangle" in the character constellation (see next page).

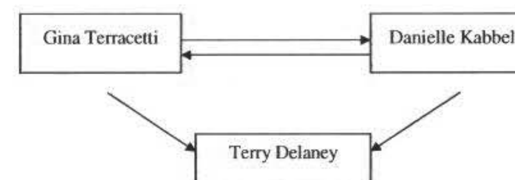
Obviously, there is in both cases a male protagonist positioned between two females, both of whom represent specific concepts and are of specific importance for the process of the protagonist's development. (We could, of course, extend the sketch with more figures representing specific topics, concepts or ideas, who occur – significantly enough – in both novels in almost identical constellation: there is the old-fashioned dogmatic conservative – Konrektor Othegraven in *Vor dem Sturm*, Father Rushton in *A Family Madness*, and their respective counterparts, in both cases a clergyman: Pastor Seidentopf and Father Doig. In both novels, we also find a

prominent and problematic father figure as well as the hot-tempered male friend challenging the protagonist's moral system. For special reasons, though, this analysis will focus on the two women and look at the conflicts they evoke – and in how far space in this context is employed as a medium of meaning or as even more.)

There are



in Fontane's *Vor dem Sturm*, and



in Keneally's *A Family Madness*.

In Fontane's novel, the young Lewin von Vitzwitz, son and heir to an explicitly ancient family venue, is neatly bound into familiar loyalties and structures. In spite of his father's and aunt's more or less secret wishes concerning his marital future, he pursues his admiration for the beautiful Polish aristocrat Kathinka von Ladalinski, sister of Lewin's bosom friend Tubal von Ladalinski. Kathinka obviously enjoys the young man's affection but does nothing to satisfy or confirm him. Instead, she seems to play a cruel game that is yet part of her peculiar, somehow exotic fascination: She encourages him when he withdraws but spurns him in moments of confession.

Her counterpart is doublecast: back in Hohen-Vietz, the Vitzewitze's home and castle, we find *two* young women patiently waiting for the hero to come home. One is his sister Renate, who is Fontane's acknowledged favourite female figure, the other is Marie, an orphan of mysterious origin. So delicate are her looks, so bright and fair is her nature that she is repeatedly compared to a fairy queen: "'Sie ist wie ein Märchen. Wenn morgen eine goldene Kutsche bei Kniehases vorgefahren käme, um sie aus dem Schulzenhause mit zwei schleppetragenden Pagen abzuholen, ich würde mich nicht wundern'", and yet there is a certain mystery woven around her: „'Und doch ängstigt sie mich. Aber je mehr ich mich um sie sorge, desto mehr liebe ich sie'"

(*Vor dem Sturm*, 28) – the connection of love and pain, the complexity of emotional affection that Lewin will have to go through is anticipated here in his sister's words and projected onto the very figure that will eventually resurrect Lewin from his pain.

Both girls, Renate and Marie, are deeply rooted in Hohen-Vietz and filled with love and loyalty for all that is connected to it. They are, of course, restricted to this limited space by role and duty but both seem successful in transforming fate into pleasure. They constitute a specific impression of rest and peaceful homeliness, as illustrated by the family scene evolving around the Christmas tree: "Zwischen Marie und Lewin, aber keinesfalls als eine Scheidewand, stand der Weihnachtsbaum, den Jeetze von der Halle her hereingetragen hatte. Das Plündern, das Sache Lewins war, nahm eben seinen Anfang. Jede goldene Nuß, die er pflückte, warf er in hohem Bogen über die Spitze des Baumes fort, an dessen entgegengesetzter Seite Marie mit glücklicher Handbewegung danach haschte. Im Werfen und Fangen jedes gleich geschickt" (*Vor dem Sturm*, 48). – A strong sense of *belonging*, an even idyllic feeling of "Geborgenheit" is evoked by this image, and as we follow the story further, the deeper meaning of this scene carries out its whole effect.

This well-ordered, peaceful social system is extended by figures that convey a specific image of *ancientness*. Particularly, there is the strange and curious dwarf, "Hoppenmarieken", for whom Lewin bears a curious and explicitly "poetic" affection: "Ihr Alter sei unbestimmbar, sie sei ein geheimnisvolles Überbleibsel der alten wendischen Welt, ein Bodenprodukt dieser Gegenden, wie die Krüppelkiefern, deren einige noch auf dem Höhenrücken ständen" (*Vor dem Sturm*, 68). The setting itself conveys the same ancientness, particularly the Hohen-Vietzer castle. Its history is revealed in a whole chapter, tracing it back into the days of the Askanians and following its changeable and dramatic fate through the ages. In this we recognize a Fontane-specific phenomenon: He deliberately fixes his narration on the castle which thus becomes a manifestation of human fate: of aspiration, of desires and births and duels and deaths. As the land itself, the castle is not a mere folio or background for history passing by. Instead, history does not appear as an abstract power, and space not as a mere setting: they are insolubly connected to each other and to man himself. Fontane expresses this conviction through the following conversation between Lewin and Tubal: "...'Ich hätte dieser Öde jeden historischen Moment abgesprochen.' – 'Sehr mit Unrecht. Es liegen hier Schätze auf Schritt und Tritt. [...] Den [Kriegsrat Wohlbrück] hab ich mehr als einmal sagen hören: ‚Es fehlt uns nicht an Geschehenem, kaum an Geschichte, aber es fehlt uns der Sinn für beides'" (*Vor dem Sturm*, 208). – History, we see, emanates in space and manifests itself in the individual's and society's fate.

This complex, anthropocentric concept of a strong interrelation between history and space determines Fontane's aesthetic composition. Recurrently, he integrates folk-tales, ballads, rhymery and prophecies that spring from an ancient culture deeply rooted in the common soil. Thus he draws a conceptual line from the Hohen-Vietz' past into present and, even, future. The murder of Lewin's forefather Anselm von Vitzewitz, committed by his own brother Matthias, initiated – as the narrator broadly explains – a period of decline and distress for the family, and the peoples' desire for reconciliation is handed down over generations in a partly prophetic, partly fairy-tale like rhymery: "Und eine Prinzessin kommt ins Haus / Da löscht ein Feuer den Blutfleck aus / der auseinander getane Stamm / Wird wieder eins, wächst wieder zusamm' / Und wieder von seinem alten Sitz / Blickt in den Morgen Haus Vitzwitz" (*Vor dem Sturm*, 25). Before reconciliation and salvation are due for the Vitzewitzes, though, Lewin has to go through a period of irritation and suffer himself, tormented by his unanswered desire for the exotic Kathinka, who is in fact alien to his soil and soul.

In contrast to Lewin, Keneally's protagonist Terry Delaney is already married and obviously more established than the young nobleman, who still spends his time "studying" in Berlin (a pastime which conveys much more the impression of leisure than that of duty). Terry is on the verge of becoming a professional rugby player; during the week he is engaged in the security business. The plot opens with his company closing down, which is why he and his companion enter "Uncle Security" instead: a family business run by Rudi Kabbel, the immigrant of Belorussian origin.

The Kabbel family carries its foreignness like a trademark; it determines their self-understanding as well as their relation to the environment. Rudi sets his pride in the family's origin and very specifically outlines a private national identity that is most distinctly divided from the Australian surrounding: "'My *real* name is Radislaw'", so Rudi opens the conversation and adds: "'But Australians can't handle that'" (*A Family Madness*, 18; it. H.W.). The Australian Version of his name is nothing more than a pragmatic makeshift to cope with the demands of the day, it does not, in Rudi's view, get at the heart of his identity. This is originally and deeply Belorussian, an image which is constituted in the novel by both by the detailed and most impressive report of his father's journal and by Rudi's own memoirs of his youth in WW II. They form a kind of hermetic system from which Rudi's children: Warwick, Scott and Danielle emerge only to be continuously drawn back into the circle.

In contrast to this, Terry Delaney's national and personal identity appears less prominent and less intense than the Kabbels' or even than Lewin's, if we look back to Fontane's early work. Common and pleasant as the widespread image of "Australia" itself, he seems to be the perfect representative of the popular "mate type" – both his problems and his passions within the limits of 'normal' modern marital life. Yet just as Fontane does, Keneally very early indicates by a neat detail that there is more to his story than merely an individual's adulterous entanglements: "*Ti mon seul desir* was the banner he wanted his manhood to sail under" (*A Family Madness*, 78). This sentence in old French is (as the narrator carefully explains) taken from a medieval sketch that once impressed Delaney so much that he made it the motto of his life and love. This is significant not only as a moral and romantic commitment but also as an element of ancientness that on a structural level indicates the true character of Delaney's conflict.

In the beginning of the novel, his marriage with Gina Terracetti appears as a true and loving one. Especially with regard to her Italian origin, Gina's implications concerning Terry's self-understanding and identity are obvious: In her father, he senses "an *honest* and *ancient connection with the earth*, something he had passed on to his larger-boned daughter", and in her looks, Delaney sees "all of history, from the Romans onwards" (*A Family Madness*, 21; it. H.W.). Her name, *TERRA*cetti emphasizes this earthily rootedness that is conveyed here as a deeply human need: self-assurance, a halt given by the strong emotional sense of belonging somewhere. Recurrently Gina is connected with this specific image of ancientness: Her last effort to reconquer her husband's affection in what he later recalls as her 'seduction venue' may be only one of the most prominent examples. "There were *fishermen's huts* ahead, below the cliffs of Barrenjoey headland, on this backside of Palm Beach. Delaney suspected there weren't many fishermen left in the area and that the shacks were probably leased by trendies from the eastern suburbs. Whatever the case, past the first one Gina led him right and up a track fringed with tall boulders, by banksias and vines, acacias and melaleucas, and other *arrantly Australian* vegetation. '*Ancient*,' said Gina. '*Ancient Country*'" (*A Family Madness*, 224; it. H.W.).

Danielle Kabbel, on the other hand, neither possesses nor offers any of the earthy and ancient rootedness Gina embodies. Delaney strongly perceives their alienness by the fact that his dedication to sport is completely beyond their conception: "[T]he Kabbel family seemed to exist outside the hemisphere of sport. It was, Delaney thought, the strange Belorussian seriousness of the father" (*A Family Madness*, 110). The family's profession as security wards is, of course, both a deliberate metaphor and an ironic punch: The external security they put up by means of violence and brutality (therein following the ancient principles of reciprocal retaliation) anti-correlates with the complete lack of inner security they offer. Consistently, Delaney experiences the complete diffusion of his formerly stable social relations when drawn under their spell: their homelessness stretches on to him as an impact of social and emotional deconstruction.

This spell is confirmed by an act of sexual commitment which in itself conveys the very special character of the members of the Kabbel family: "Danielle said, 'Oh', made a little squeak with her lips and put her hand to his jaw. 'Can I be your lover?' It was a strange thing for him to say. [...] Danielle Kabbel's hand closed on the flesh of his cheek. 'You can be my lover,' she said. 'Certainly you can be my lover.'" (*A Family Madness*, 156).

While Delaneys hot passion made us expect a dramatic or at least highly romantic scene, the description of this encounter is deliberately kept in almost a matter-of-fact style. Danielle Kabbel's emotional condition seems to be set beyond natural or even conventional matters – and in this again she immediately represents her family. As much as their cold-bloodedness and later brutality shocks Delaney, he is not able to withdraw himself from Danielle, even though he strongly feels the strangeness predominating their relation. Again, space is employed to convey the image of this

alienness: The sexual encounters occur in particularly odd locations: in the Kabbel's discomforting house (where Warwick keeps explosives in the garden), in a hotel for "short-time residency", and the appearance as well as the emotional reaction these locations cause very clearly indicates this relation's negative character: "Delaney hated the place as Danielle did. But Danielle seemed to consider it her fault they'd been forced to it. She would apologise to him as they trembled under the blankets waiting for the radiator to take effect" (*A Family Madness*, 185). Hate, guilt, shame and coldness accumulate to a poignant image anticipating the couple's end.

In some sense of course, the narrator puts his own interpretation in Danielles mind and words here. As she and her family lack the down-to-earth-rootedness of the Terracettis, the Kabbels' impact on Delaney's life can be no other than disruptive. Losing Gina, Delaney looses himself in this confusing and destructive passion: All that had hitherto meant halt and self-assertion – rugby, family, work, friends – vanishes in the context of his desire. The Kabbel's "Unbehaustheit" stretches on to Delaney by dissolving him from his original belongings.

We have seen that both novels explore the young men's passion for women alien to their natural constitution but who therefore appear all the more attractive. Deliberately, sexual and emotional attraction is transformed in metaphors of space and vice versa: the alien and the familiar, emigration and rootedness are the poles between which the protagonists move, both torn between adverse forces. Consistently, passion and sex as the immediate physical experience of the individual conflict are metaphorically transformed into spatial terms: The wars that are connected to the respective women's 'spatial contexts' evoke images of wounding of physical violation. Kathinka, the object of Lewin's unhappy passion, belongs to a family banned from its home country for political reasons during the Napoleonic Wars; Danielles interconnection with WW II has already been explained. Thus both authors convey the wrongness of these disruptive relations in which sex is not an inspiring, vital force but an element of self- and other's destruction. Yet since the intentions of the two novels differ from one another, the motif of physical injury is as well explored in different variations. In "Vor dem Sturm", we find Lewin breaking down with a nervous fever at the news of Kathinka's half-romantic, half fatal flight with her compatriot Graf Bninski. The location of this breakdown is meaningful in itself: After receiving the news of Kathinka's flight, Lewin leaves Berlin without any special destination, strolling out into the villages and into the emptiness surrounding the city. His confusion is expressed in a total loss of orientation: "Wohin geh' ich nur? Ich weiß es nicht. Oder ob ich umkehre? Nein. [...] Ich werde wohl irgendwo hinkommen" (*Vor dem Sturm*, 517). Fontane supports his message by again integrating folk elements, rhymeries, traditions, and images: the most impressive is the highlit window of the village priest's house. The cosiness and safeness of this image contrasts firmly with Lewin's haltlessness and immediately antecedes his breakdown – outside the village community, somewhere – nowhere – in the darkness near a road the destination of which he does not know.

He is found and rescued, though, and slowly recovers under the good care at Hohen-Vietz. Here, he eventually recognizes his true emotional destiny: to love and marry Marie, who is as much rooted in Hohen-Vietz as he himself and thus will support, and not threaten his identity.

Keneally does not offer such a reconciling solution. Since Delaney refuses the one and only chance to turn back into the "natural order" – the social community he had lived in so well before getting to know the Kabbels – but submits to the destructive seduction of alien affection instead, the end of this story can only be fatal. Alienness and violence inextricably connected with Danielle through her family history bear their own fruits in both a metaphorical and a concrete sense: The affairs of "Uncle Security" that seemed so well-controlled and safe at first escalate into a brutal reprisal war: "As Delaney rolled on his side and vomited on to Stevo's pavement graffiti, he could hear the evil breathless screams of someone savagely hurt rising behind him. It happened that Stevo had sent a blast of acidic paint fair into Scott Kabbel's eyes" (*A Family Madness*, 114). In consequence of this incident, Warwick places a bomb at his fiend's garden door, and Delaneys conception of the world is fundamentally shattered – "Delaney yelled at him [Warwick; H.W.]. His fury though was partly aimed at himself, for losing his way in a foreign tribe who booby-trapped front gates" (*A Family Madness*, 168]

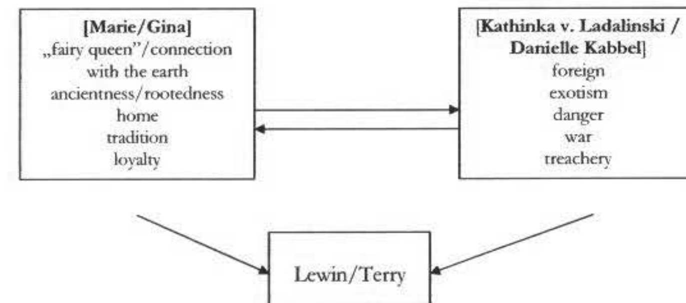
Again, Delaney is confronted brutally with the enormous moral gap between his own and the Kabbels' understanding, and yet he cannot draw back anymore. His affair has become manifest in the child Danielle has conceived from him – once having crossed the borders, Delaney is now forever bound. At the end of Keneally's story, we find ourselves back in the opening situation. Delaney is watching the house, expecting legal forces to support his rights as father. The Kabbel's brutal self-assassination is no surprise, then: The beginning of the novel already indicates it, and the successive revelation of their family history and character leaves no other opportunity. Again, the location of this showdown is remarkable: It occurs at the Kabbels' house, their refuge and dominion. Among the suburban pleasance of common Australian life, this house remains alien and non-integrated: the explosives stored in the garden, the irritatingly intimate sketch of Danielle and her brother in front 'the apocalyptic wave' on the wall are only two of several elements that mark this house's strangeness.

Keneally's effort to reunite with the mother of his child and separate her from the family he does not – and will never – understand therefore appears almost ignorant and must remain fruitless. Danielle does not exist alone: She is inseparably connected with her family and their history and bears these both in herself. Neither mentally nor physically would a dissolution even be conceivable.

The message thus conveyed quite strikingly resembles that of Fontane's novel: History, manifesting itself in space (as war, culture, tradition) and spatial terms (belonging and rootedness or loss and homelessness) is inextricably planted into the

individual. Striving for a life in individual as well as social self-fulfilment and harmony, Fontane and Keneally claim the acknowledgement of one's "roots", the same "Sinn für Geschichte" that Lewin postulates before he really understands its meaning might have kept Delaney from losing himself in an alienating, self-threatening passion.

Looking again at the "essential triangle" of the two novels' composition, we may now add the particularities characterising the protagonist's quests and the role of the women as emanations of history in space.



More than 100 years apart from one another, Fontane and Keneally have quite similar means to explore man's relation to the world. Both emphasize the role of history in the process of self-definition; both employ the medium of space to express their concepts, and for both, it is more than a mere medium: It is part of, if not even the core of identity itself. Man is defined as a historic being, yet history is not an abstract something deliberately pushing man around but the equilibrium we grow out of and live in. Only in acknowledging our "rootedness" will we be able to integrate ourselves harmonically into a complex world: reassured, we may develop and continue organically what is planted in us as a historically founded identity, expressing and manifesting itself in our experience of space.

Quotations from:

Theodor Fontane: *Vor dem Sturm. Ein Zeit- und Sittenbild aus dem Winter 1812/1813*. Frankfurt am Main 1882.

Thomas Keneally: *A Family Madness*. London 1985.