

Gottfried August Bürger's "The Song of the Good Man"
as a Source of Inspiration
in both Theodor Fontane's "John Maynard" and "The Tay Bridge"
by Norman Barry

Gottfried August Bürger's ballad, "The Song of the Good Man," was often referred to by Fontane himself: "Just like the toll man on the bridge in Bürger's ballad, so I, too, have finally found my 'good man'."* The notion of the "good man" is the message underlying Fontane's "John Maynard". Although composed over a century before Fontane was inspired to tackle the British-American literary tradition of the legend of "John Maynard", the essence of Bürger's ballad shines forth in Fontane's own creation.

"John Maynard" is a ballad paying homage to a brave man who was willing to forfeit his own life to save the lives of others. "The Song of the Good Man" is about a man who was also willing to risk his life repeatedly, without thought of personal gain, to save the lives of one endangered family. The uniqueness of this man can be appreciated by the fact that "from thousands" of onlookers (stanza 13, line 4), not one person could find enough compassion in his heart to step forward and help. The song of praise in Bürger's ballad finds a remarkably strong parallel in the opening lines of "John Maynard" and the epilogue. In addition to the church bells peeling out their benediction at the end of Fontane's ballad, we have an "organ resounding" in Bürger's for yet further emphasis. Just as "the song of the good man *wafts on high*" (Bürger /tr. Barry), "All bells are ringing; their sounds *rising to heaven* from churches and chapels" (Fontane /tr. Huberman).

The signal question at the beginning of "John Maynard", asking *who he is* ("Who is John Maynard?"), is also repeated several times in Bürger's ballad ("*Who is the good man?*" – stanza 11 / "*Who is, who is this man so bold?*" – stanza 17). The fact that he was a poor farmer, yet rich enough in spirit to demand that his reward be given to the bridge keeper's family, who had lost everything (stanza 19), illustrates his noble character – indeed that he was even of "greater worth" (stanza 11) than the "noble count," who put up the reward.

Fontane's affinity for a ballad dealing with bridges ("The Tay Bridge" comes readily to mind) may also, in part, stem from Bürger's own ballad. Here, too, it is a toll man's family that is threatened. The train conductor's father in "The Tay Bridge" was also a man who collected tolls. Bürger's graphic description of the bridge's gradual collapse may well have inspired Fontane to one day write his own ballad, the actual destruction of the Tay Bridge in Scotland being the ultimate catalyst.

In both "John Maynard" and "The Tay Bridge," man is confronted with the brute force of the elements. In Bürger's ballad, his bridge seems as strong as a fortress, yet it is swept away. The frail Tay Bridge, which collapsed in 1879, seems puny by comparison. In "John Maynard", passengers face the deadly dichotomy of fire and water – the excruciating decision either to roast alive or simply drown. That it is possible for the "good man", the "man of noble character," to willingly come to the aid of his fellows when the chances of success are so slim, and to do so for no monetary reward, is a basic assumption underlying sainthood. The saintliness of John Maynard and a simple farmer, both mere mortals when facing the unleashed forces of Nature, yet steadfast and unrelenting in their desire to help, is placed in a framework of immortal praise by both poets.

The central and unifying importance of the "song" in Bürger's ballad cannot be underestimated. In the ballad, the "song of the good man" sets the tone of the ballad from

beginning to end. The reader sees how the “song” is not dependent upon the anonymous narrator for its own identity, and – following the ambivalence of the first stanza – breaks away from the narrator who would sing it, achieves its own being and leaves the anonymous narrator to beg for it finally to begin (stanza 9)! The “song of the good man” takes on a life of its own (the narrator pleads with it to tell him *who* the good man is! – stanza 17) until in the final stanza it achieves immortality (a song of eternal praise) in representing the ideal, the heart and soul, of “the good man”. Bürger’s “song”, in a most Biblical sense, is indeed the Word (with its own music, form and rhythm) made Flesh. The “song” itself becomes the driving force behind the act of creation of the “good man”. As a footnote, it should be observed that John Steinbeck also made masterful use of this technique in his moving and poetic novella, *The Pearl*, (e.g., the “Song of the Family”, the “Song of Evil”, and the “Song of the Pearl”).

*Cf. HFA (Hanser Fontane Ausgabe) *Werke, Schriften und Briefe*, ed. Walter Keitel and Helmuth Nürnberger, Munich: Hanser 1962 – 1997, vol. 6, p. 956 (footnote 286).