

THEODOR FONTANE'S
"DIE BRÜCK' AM TAY" AND "JOHN MAYNARD":
TWO BALLADS WITH SIMILAR INTENT
BY
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Two of Theodor Fontane's later ballads call into question the notion of technological progress. A comparison of the way Fontane presents two 19th century disasters, one the collapse of the new bridge over the Firth of Tay together with the loss of a passenger train and all passengers on board is documented on December 28th, 1879; the other, an adaptation of an account of a conflagration on a Lake Erie steamer with a literary basis of questionable historical veracity, was published in 1886.¹ The intent of this comparison is not to delve into the difficult question as to whether there *might* be some remnant of an historical core to the legend of John Maynard. Instead, I shall simply assume that Fontane had very little idea as to what the U.S. literary background of "John Maynard" consisted of, and – in fact – probably could not have cared less. Fontane's "The Tay Bridge" and "John Maynard" are works exemplifying great poetic spontaneity and imagination. They shall stand on their own, the actual event in each case becoming a symptom of a society too cock sure of itself. The question of the interplay of motifs in the two ballads is the task at hand.

Although it is clear that "The Tay Bridge" refers to an historical event, Fontane goes far beyond one day in December 1879. The ballad draws on Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, folklore and superstition to call into question our easy faith in industrial progress. Also, the Christmas season serves as a deceptively comforting backdrop for describing the tragic fate of a family. Particular emphasis should be placed on the sudden inspiration and lightning composition of the ballad. The disaster occurred on December 28th, 1879. (Interestingly, Fontane had attended a performance of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* only eight days earlier.²) On the following day, Fontane read a report of the disaster in the *Vossische Zeitung*. His ballad was already in print by January 10, 1880 in *Die Gegenwart*. The newspaper article Fontane read mentioned neither witches nor the bridge keeper nor Johnny, the engineer. In other words, Fontane gave his imagination free rein. Johnny and his parents are Fontane's creation to intensify the human element, just as the Shakespearean witches were employed to lend a sense of ultimate doom and futility to man's technological creativity.

The poet strategically places the ballad on Christmas Eve, although the tragedy took place on December 28th. The coziness of a Christmas setting – even a Christmas tree has been provided! – stands in sharp contrast to the gale gaining momentum outside the little tollhouse, where the bridge keeper and his wife anxiously await the arrival of their son Johnny, who just so happens to be the driver of the train, which will soon pass over the bridge. Suddenly, the father spots a light coming over the bridge. He immediately attempts to allay his wife’s sense of foreboding by pointing out that Johnny will soon be home, safe and sound. Next there follows a passage, whose strategic ambiguity is most unsettling. The father says that the Christ Child will be in their home *twice* on that day. In German homes, this could simply be taken to mean that the joy of Christmas will be twofold. Yet the additional reference to the coming of both the Christ Child and their son Johnny in lines 32- 33, creates an uncanny intimation that all is not well on the train from Edinburgh. Dramatic irony becomes overpowering during the dialogue because the reader already knows that the witches are up to mischief and that a catastrophe has been planned. Also, one wonders whether the father’s reassuring statements and his Christmas exuberance can be fully accepted, because, he, the bridge keeper – of all people! – is in a position to size up the danger.

The witches at the beginning and end of the ballad are the witches in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, who met close to Forres in Scotland (in other words, the ballad is set in their favorite haunt) to lead Macbeth to his doom by means of equivocation. A foretaste of equivocation is the contradictory statement in lines 4-5, to the effect that two of the witches say they will fight the fire, although it is quite clear that they are planning the destruction of the bridge, and with it, the train passing over it. Extinguishing a fire on the remnants of the bridge will obviously save neither lives nor property. The diabolical pronouncement in *Macbeth* that Macbeth will be King – without explaining that by killing the “good” King Duncan, he will forfeit his immortal soul – is also an example of the witches’ duplicity. Speaking in “half-truths” (equivocating, yet not exactly “lying”) was – in the year 1607, when *Macbeth* was probably composed – a major issue because the Catholic Gunpowder Plot of 1605 to blow up Parliament and King James I of England (who was also King James VI of Scotland) had just been foiled. The so-called duplicity of the Catholic Church resulted in decades upon decades of repression against Catholics in England, Scotland and Ireland. Apart from Macbeth’s many sins, regicide stands out as the greatest abomination.

The witches' masters, particularly the second and third Apparitions in *Macbeth*, deserve special mention. Their misleading pronouncements falsely reassure Macbeth that his kingship is unshakeable and that he is unassailable:

Second Apparition: "Be bloody, bold, and resolute: laugh to scorn / The power of man, for none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth." Act IV, Scene 1, ll. 79-81

Third Apparition: "Be lion-mettled, proud, and take no care / Who chafes, who frets, or where conspirers are: / Macbeth shall never vanquish'd be, until / Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill / Shall come against him." Act IV, Scene 1, ll. 90-94

Little does Macbeth realize that the Apparitions are speaking in half-truths. Macduff, who ultimately does Macbeth in, was not "born of woman". He was "untimely ripped from his mother's womb", i.e., his mother had had a cesarean section. That the trees of Great Birnam Wood might be used as camouflage by the English and Scottish armies and thus actually "move" against Macbeth, was also an event he (or anyone else) could hardly imagine.

Similarly, in "The Tay Bridge" Johnny disregards his own qualms when crossing the bridge during the storm because, after all, how can a storm be more powerful than man's technological prowess (ll. 36-41)? As a result, Johnny, like Macbeth, becomes the victim of his own overvaulting optimism and – it may be added – presumption.. What was the promised "half-truth" of the witches in "The Tay Bridge"? Could it have been that man, like Macbeth, was unassailable, and that man's "kingship", his mastery over nature, could not be challenged?

Here the reader finds an issue of contemporary importance: Is man, by harnessing nature, not destroying his own world and – in the final instance – himself? His "kingship" must be passed on to a far different sort of man: one who is willing to accept the limitations of technological progress; one who through his own humanity can freely sacrifice himself for others, one by the name of John Maynard (cf. "John Maynard", last stanza: "He wears the crown").

The three witches in *Macbeth* were called the "Weird Sisters" because, like the Fates, they were thought to possess the power to weave the threads of the future. Interestingly, Fontane's

journalistic activity finds expression in the conclusion of the ballad, when the witches decide to meet yet a third time to take inventory of their evil-doings: the number of casualties (a “body count”) and the “agony” (*Qual*) suffered³. This morbid “curiosity” (or uncertainty?) might suggest that the Weird Sisters themselves have no idea as to the true extent of their doings. Instead of regret or pangs of conscience, there is only a sobering one-line recapitulation of the moment the bridge collapsed (l. 67) and then the refrain pronouncing the futility of all man’s works.

If “The Tay Bridge ” is a ballad in which the forces of evil work against human progress to show us our own insignificance, what can be said about “John Maynard”?

Perhaps the equivocating refrain of the witches in *Macbeth* may give a faint hint: “Fair is foul, and foul is fair: Hover through the fog and filthy air.” [Act I, Scene 1]. Placed in Fontane’s 19th century background, that which is “fair” (technological progress) is “foul” (flawed), and that which is “foul” (our own limitations) is “fair” (our ability to overcome those limitations in a supreme act of heroism). The “fog and filthy air” may now be transposed to “John Maynard”, whose hero during the conflagration is shrouded in sheets of smoke, the witches’ “filthy air”.

Where is the source of evil in “John Maynard”? Was it, as in the anonymous 1845 version, the negligence of “a bundle of tow” being left near the boilers? No, Fontane brackets out the cause of the blaze. The reader is confronted with the inexplicable, which must be accepted as a deadly fact. The question of lifeboats as a means of rescue is not even asked in Theodor Fontane’s “John Maynard”. Whereas Johnny in “The Tay Bridge ” cannot believe that he and the passengers are doomed to die, the ballad “John Maynard” clearly confronts both passengers and crew with their impending deaths. And John Maynard *knows* what is at stake. “The Tay Bridge ” basically has no hero, but only victims. “John Maynard” has no victims, but only a hero incarnate. He becomes Christ-like in his martyrdom. The reader is allowed to imagine John Maynard’s agony (a witches’ inventory as in “The Tay Bridge” would be senseless) and to stand in awe that he could hold out till the very last minute. The witches belatedly take an almost scientific interest in the degree of pain the train victims endured. “John Maynard” is (as we shall see) an indirect description of the agony of one man, an intimation of how much pain the “good” man can stand if he would save his fellows. “His is the crown” – the “crown of life” which – by divine paradox– he receives through death. His moving funeral, an epilogue freely invented by Fontane, (to pay tribute to the magnitude of

the sacrifice), rounds off the ballad, and has unfortunately been taken at face value by many Germans that, in Buffalo, New York, there *must* be a grave with a glorious tombstone dedicated to “The Heroic Helmsman of Lake Erie”.

The fire apparently rained down by heaven (l. 55) in “The Tay Bridge” is reminiscent of the destruction wrought by God in *Genesis* 19:24: “*Then the Lord rained upon Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven.*” The inhabitants of these Biblical cities were punished for their evil ways just as the destruction of the bridge would then be punishment for man worshipping a false God: his own technology. If God’s hand is the ultimate cause of the destruction of the greatest architectural wonder of 19th-century man, then Fontane’s witches are mere tools that serve to do His bidding. In “John Maynard” fire *and* smoke combined threaten the destruction of the steamer and the lives of all on board. Who intervenes to propitiate an angry God? Who offers his life for the salvation of those on board? Who, in a supreme act of heroism, becomes a Christian martyr in the truest sense? These are the questions that tell us who John Maynard is. “He wears the crown”(cf. *Revelation*, 2:10): “*...be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.*” Maynard is not a Macbeth, whose soul is tainted, but a hero of humanity blessed with eternal life. He is also not a Johnny, who is not even aware that his life and the lives of his passengers are in imminent danger. The religious undertone of the “Lake Erie” ballad is one of supreme sacrifice (the crucifixion on a *burning* cross for his fellow-man) with the promise of the Christ-like apotheosis of a man named John Maynard.

Fontane successfully draws the reader’s attention away from John Maynard’s suffering. A bullhorn is used for communication, and Maynard, himself, is shrouded in smoke. In other words, both passengers and crew are cut off from the man who is about to save them. Also, the question of how much time remains to reach Buffalo (and salvation) is repeated, at first indifferently before the fire breaks out (30 minutes remaining), then with increasing urgency as the fire spreads (20 minutes, 15 minutes, 10 minutes remaining). The effect is to intensify the suspense and effectively clip lurid details about Maynard’s condition (which, by the way, are to be found in earlier American versions). Fontane does not waste one word in describing how Maynard died or in providing graphic detail of his agony. This is left to the reader’s imagination.

When considering the actual data that Fontane makes use of in his two ballads, the reader is in for a surprise. Although Fontane had actually visited the area around the Firth of Tay in 1858, there is no description of the Scottish landscape. Similarly, Fontane does not even mention the distance of the train from the “saving shore”: one full mile in either direction, too far away for there to be any survivors. The train’s passengers remain anonymous and unsuspecting, in sharp contrast to those on the *Swallow*, whose anxious questions take on increasing urgency. “The Tay Bridge” is not the historical ballad one would expect. It is garbed in the supernatural; its message is a warning; its characters are fictional. Similarly, “John Maynard” becomes a study of superhuman heroism; the *Swallow*’s flight is a race against death; the historical core becoming irrelevant while the legend of John Maynard, his inheritance of the “crown”, takes on the attributes of Christian martyrdom. The question of why he died, also reflects a warning. The “saving shore” may be too far away if we rely too much upon the benefits of technology – without considering the real possibility of disaster. Both ballads use “history” (whether actual or assumed) as a stepping stone from which the poet’s imagination takes flight.

The Lake Erie *Swallow* of “John Maynard” never existed, yet Fontane’s ballad conveys more tragedy and greater heroism than any deadpan newspaper report of a shipwreck. Johnny’s whole fictional life is unfolded – from his bothersome childhood duties as a ferryman (ll. 42-49) to his proud rise in station to a locomotive engineer – his life a paragon of the inevitability of technological progress. The collapse of *his* bridge, the conflagration of a steamer (the loss of the *Titanic*, the meltdown of Chernobyl...) – all a single motif with a sobering message – cannot make Johnny, or any a disciple of progress, waver, but can lead to his pathetic end. John Maynard’s ultimate sacrifice, on the other hand, deserves the epilogue Fontane provides. Maynard, like Banquo, *knew* that “the Devil cannot speak true”.

ANNOTATIONS

¹Cf. George Salomon’s article in *Fontane Blätter* (Potsdam, Germany: Heft 2, 1965). Although Salomon goes at great length to establish a historical antecedent, he nonetheless admits:

“There is no evidence of a contemporary or earlier event which could have served as a direct source upon which he [Fontane] modeled his ballad. The extensive literature dealing with the history of Lake Erie and the Great Lakes of North America provides no hint of a helmsman named Maynard or of a ship whose name is the *Swallow*.”

Among the many, oft times dramatic or bloodcurdling steamer disasters on the Great Lakes during the 19th century, there is not a single one which resembles the course of events in “John Maynard”.

Likewise, literature dealing with Buffalo and the surrounding region is equally disappointing. Nowhere is an incident recorded which bears any similarity with the emergency landing of the *Swallow* on the “Buffalo shoreline”; and not a word is to be found about a public announcement of the death of a heroic sailor as described in such heart-rending terms by Fontane. Stated succinctly, the *Swallow* is a literary ghost ship, and Maynard’s act of rescue is – in the form which Fontane relates it – a legend” (- p. 26, my translation).

²Philipp Frank, *Theodor Fontane und die Technik* (Würzburg, Germany: Verlag Königshausen & Neumann GmbH., 2005), p. 49 (and footnote 107).

³For the sake of rhyme, *Qual* was translated in the ballad as “pain” (l. 65). *Qual*, however, may be likened to “excruciating pain”. The notion of statistical research into the amount of agony each passenger endured catapults the “inventory” into the realm of the supernatural.

Appendix:

“THE TAY BRIDGE ”

BY THEODOR FONTANE

(December 28th, 1879)*

When shall we three meet again?

Macbeth

“When shall we three our forces unite?”

“At the seventh hour, at the bridge tonight.”

“At the center pier, let’s meet.”

“I’ll make the flames retreat.”

5 “Me, too, my dear.”

“From the north, I shall hail.”

“And I, from the south.”

“And I, from the sea shall sail.”

“Aye, we’ll be dancing in a ring,

10 And make the bridge fall down as we sing.”

“By the pricking of my thumbs,
At the seventh hour the train this way comes –
Shall it be dashed into the Tay?”

“Aye, ‘tis so – and now away!”

15 “Aye, must be – without delay!”

*“Sand, sand,
All that is built by the hand of man!”*

*

To the north, the tollhouse stands —
Each window a view to the south commands;

20 The husband and wife, with an anxious eye,
Look out to the south and of misgivings sigh,
Keeping a lookout and praying for a light,
Which o’er the water advances bright,
Proclaiming, “In spite of night and driving rain,
25 I come, I, the Edinburgh train.”

And now the bridge keeper: “I see a light
On the opposite shore. That’s her, all right!”
Mother, be done with such wild fear —
Our Johnny wants his Christmas tree and soon will be here.

30 On the tree some candles there yet be;
Set them all aglow for the Christ Child to see.
He will be with us *twice* on this sacred day,
And in eleven minutes he is due to come this way.”

Past the southern tower, there came the train,
35 Huffing and puffing against the pelting rain,
And Johnny, the engineer, shouted out, “The bridge ahead!
But so what? – What have we to dread?
A solid boiler, and two-fold steam,
In such a struggle they win, it would seem.

40 And as the elements rush and rend and run,
Who but us shall o'ercome?

This bridge is our pride and joy;
I smile, thinking back, when I was a boy:
The wear and tear, my nerves worn thin,
45 With the wretched ferry barge way back then.
How many a Christmas Eve so dear,
I had to spend in the ferry house right near.
And saw our windows shining bright,
And counted the hours, but could not go home that night."

50 To the north, the tollhouse stands —
Each window a view to the south commands;
The husband and wife, with an anxious eye,
Look out to the south and of misgivings sigh,
For with greater violence the winds did lash,
55 And now, as if fire from the heavens did crash,
A-glow in glory and wedded to hell,
O'er the waters below.....And again darkness fell.

"When shall we three meet by and by?"

"At midnight, where the mountain ridge we spy."

60 "On the high moor, where the alder trunk does lie."

"I'll be there."

"Me, too, I by evil spirits swear."

"The victims' number I shall ascertain."

"And I, their names".

65 "And I, their pain."

"Let's do!

— Like splinters the girders broke in two."

*"Sand, sand,
All that is built by the hand of man!"*

Translated by Norman Barry (2007)

- “December 28th, 1879” refers to the actual date of the disaster, not the setting of the ballad, nor the day when Fontane composed it, nor the day of publication.