Theodor Fontane is generally considered Germany’s most important novelist between Goethe and Thomas Mann, indeed its most important realist author; and his last published novel, *The Stechlin* (*Der Stechlin*, 1897), as among his most important texts. The work displays many of the qualities that distinguish Fontane’s realism and make it so different from the works of the so-called poetic realists, including Keller, and more akin to its nineteenth-century European counterparts in France and England, often considered the gold standard of realism per se. But it also displays many qualities that seem to push beyond this standard and to anticipate the poetics of a postrealist, even modernist period. My concern is with both these aspects, especially the transition from the one to the other, and with respect to a set of questions similar to those posed about *Green Henry*. How does magic constitute an intrinsic element of its realist and then almost postrealist world? In its temporalities, causalities, and relation to objects and the nonhuman world? Or more
particularly, how does “magic reading” function both for characters in its world and for readers of its text? What role does futurity and its divination play? And what kind of forces must be active in that textual world—such as those we identified with Stimmung in Keller—to make such reading, such magic, happen?

Premonitions I

The distinctive, more European mode of realism usually associated with Fontane’s work is based on both temporal and spatial coordinates that closely link the literary world to a particular extraliterary historical moment and setting, or Umwelt, that help define its “real.” History and setting both act as shaping forces determining the literary world and its subjects, the one imposing a kind of contingent occasionality and direction, the other a surrounding affective environment that impinges more or less directly on characters’ lives. The idea of history also lends the narrative itself a teleological force in both its forward-looking sequence and backward-looking retrospection, in ways that extend beyond the singular case of the protagonist’s individual biography or development. And the Umwelt becomes increasingly socially, even politically defined, with matters of class, region, and nation coming to the foreground—and thus becoming active forces—and with a marginalizing of two of the factors that played such a crucial role in Keller’s text in supporting its magical dimension: namely, the downplay of psychology as grounded in a kind of otherness or unconscious as opposed to one shaped by social forces from the Umwelt; and the downplay of the natural world, which becomes more and more consigned to the outskirts, as both setting and force.

All of this is evident in Fontane’s first novel, Before the Storm (Vor dem Sturm, 1878), which has its referential basis in both a major historical event—and so draws on extraliterary historical sources for its plot—and its setting, which draws heavily from material from Fontane’s earlier nonfictional work, Wanderings through the March of Brandenburg (Wanderungen durch die Mark Brandenburg, 1862–89). The novel depicts the fortunes of the
family Vitzewitz during the retreat of Napoleon’s troops from Russia through Prussia in the winter of 1812–13, with special attention to the romantic entanglements of the young adult children, Lewin and Renate, with their Polish cousins, Kathinka and Tubal, but including a wide array of secondary characters, historical intrusions, and geographical specificities. These features have helped mark the work as what some consider “the greatest historical novel in German literature,” and as such one of its most representative realist works, quite different from the so-called Sonderweg of the German Bildungsroman and its “poetic” realism. But while it is this, it is also the novel of Fontane’s that is most conspicuously invested in what we might call the supernatural, by which I mean precisely those conditions that ground and promote, even require, magic reading, including omens, prophecies, and divinations—and already in the deliberately ominous, premonitory title of the work. And while some critics see this as something of a flaw in the novel, an early literary tic in tension with its realist poetics, I will argue that it is in fact intrinsic to Fontane’s realism, something that never disappears but only becomes more refined, even dominant in his subsequent works leading up to The Stechlin—as Peter Demetz notes, Fontane is consistently the most omen-invested of the German realists, early and late, and this deserves to be read as part of, rather than apart from, his literary realist poetics. And so I would like to introduce an initial consideration of Before the Storm as representative of Fontane’s realism and magic thinking, and their relation, as a background starting point for understanding both what persists and what changes on both these fronts in The Stechlin.

The function of omens, prophecies, signs, and their divinatory readings in Before the Storm can be divided into two levels, although as we shall see it is at their point of interplay that they are most interesting (which is to say that, as in Green Henry and despite the turn to third-person narration, the division is largely illegitimate in this regard): the evocation of omens that are more or less available only to the reader and both structure and require his divinatory reading of the novel, set against a future known to be set or fixed; and those available to and experienced by the characters
in the textual world, for whom the future is not known to be fixed. The novel features the former first, in the form of both those immediately and explicitly recognizable as such, such as the narrator’s account of the apparition of old Matthias Vitzewitz, of the split beech-tree before the manor, or of the Vitzewitz family prophecy, all presented to the reader prior to being presented to the characters themselves for interpretation; and those that are only subsequently (which is to say, retrospectively) recognized as such, for instance, the line “And she can walk on stars” or the unfolding motif of fire, and that are never fully presented or recognized as omens by the characters themselves. This opening presentation of portentous signs is symptomatic of Fontane’s sense that, in his narratives, the beginning must always be “pregnant with the future,” establishing a temporal dimension and a signifying system supplemental to but also permeating its sequential historical present world, suggesting itself as the ground of historical consequence—although, again, a ground not immediately accessible to those “in history.”

Even though the narratorial level comes first and in many ways remains primary for our reading experience, it is really only by considering the divinatory reading of the characters in the work that we learn how to experience this added dimension and system ourselves. The means for introducing such omens and the occasions for their appearance to characters are, as we’ll see, many and varied. But perhaps the most characteristic for Fontane, with the most integral relation to realism, is the one featured first and then sustained throughout, in the form of the omen as anecdote, such as the story Lewin tells—with much self-conscious commentary—to Renate early on about the mysteriously red-glowing window at the palace in Berlin, about which “people say it means war” (“An easy prophecy,” replies Renate) and to which, “to bestow upon it profounder significance, to make it appear as signs and wonders” (eine tiefere Bedeutung zu geben, so etwas wie Zeichen und Wunder), Lewin then immediately adds a second anecdote he theatrically titles “Charles XI and the Appearance in the Throne-Room at Stockholm,” thus inaugurating a chain or series of like anecdotes that will manifest itself intermittently throughout the text.
That these omens are presented to the characters in the form of anecdotes (and the same could be said of the story presented to us of the split beech-tree or of the family prophecy, which are formally identical) is itself of “profound significance” for considering the relations of magic reading and realism. As Paul Fleming has argued—drawing on the work of Joel Fineman, Stephen Greenblatt, Peter Fenves, and Hans Blumenberg—the anecdote might well be the prose form best suited for capturing prosaic reality, engaging a cognitive mode “at the nexus of literature and experience, literature and the real.” As the narration of a singular, detached historical event that is “of little effect but great significance,” the anecdote is a literary form that, in the words of Fineman, “uniquely refers to the real”—whether or not true or verifiable—and so produces the effect of the real, while at the same time it provokes interpretation of the more-than-real, the hidden significance beyond itself that the anecdote might entail for the present or future. It introduces an opening into the teleological fabric of the grand historical récit (and in a historical novel such as Before the Storm, this would be in both the narrative and history itself), a moment that seems to embody a different, independent logic or significatory structure, both “within and yet without the framing context of successivity,” and so posing questions of “the historiographic integration of event to context”—of this “real” to the ordinary prosaic real. It is precisely this quality of hidden, indeterminate context and connection that Lewin foregrounds as essential to his own anecdotal narratives, and not because it is inconvenient or insignificant, but rather the opposite. As Renate says, not seeing how events are connecting excites the imagination to more mysterious interpretive moves, “like knights on a chessboard” (but a chessboard unseen).

In the case of particularly ominous anecdotes such as those narrated by Lewin, the question of interpretation—of the relation of the anecdote to the context in which it is uttered—is, as it were, doubly determined: by the need to ask, what does this mean in the present context? and what does it bode for the future? (with the immediate context already a future one in relation to the past time of the anecdote itself). The first relation is, of course, never a direct or causal one—the two historical moments are neither sequentially
nor consequentially connected—but rather based upon a certain analogical mode of connection. It is a matter of resemblance, of like to like, of a similitude read into and then out of the anecdote; and insofar as these tales seem to suggest a certain supernatural force behind or beside or attendant upon the anecdoted world, they also establish that force as one that operates via similitude. The second relation is an extension of this: again as Fleming says, there is almost always a “predictive, futural, almost prophetic character to the evidence presented” by anecdotes in that, for all their singularity, they seem to participate in an ongoing chain of similitude: what makes them significant is this quality of futurity, a quality independent of, even if embedded and only manifest in, ordinary historical sequentiality. Both relations are captured in the characteristic way Lewin supplements his first portentous anecdote with another one, albeit drawn from a completely unrelated historical moment (further underscored by how, within each anecdote, the ominous event occurs multiple, and usually three, times). While no causal relation is proposed either between the two anecdotes or between both and the present context (as Renate says, “I do not see how these events are connected” [Ich vermisse die Beziehungen]), the sense of similarity as a connecting force, acting in but beyond historical causation by establishing repeating patterns across time, suggests itself to the characters as a determinative (if noncausal) force for their own future. And this leads the characters in the course of the novel to connect these anecdotes up with subsequent, future omens or events as well—even as it also leads us as readers to connect them to repeated patterned images of the narrator’s taking place over the characters’ heads, as it were, reinforcing a similar sense of ominous, determinative forces operating behind the simple causation of the plot.

Two additional points. First, for all the sense of determination, fate, or necessity that emanates out of such anecdotal readings, they actually “prove nothing,” as Fleming notes. One can infer, but there is no necessity to anecdotal evidence, even when what is inferred is necessity (which is to say, fate). This is a form of withheld acknowledgment that is regularly represented by Fontane’s characters in the novel, and it is an essential part of his
realism—but also, we’ve seen, an essential aspect of all magic reading: its foundation is both there and not there, both forceful and without substance; indeed, it is just this spectral quality of its hidden world that persists even when the text’s many specters are open to dismissal.\(^\text{15}\) Whether or not a particular character assents to the ominous quality of the given anecdote is often at issue in the text, and it is one of the critical tests of character in the novel—and by no means are those who dismiss or disavow the ominous, nor those who embrace only a closed predetermination or fixed necessity, the ones most in touch with the “real”: quite the contrary (more anon). But in all cases, the anecdote presents characters with a world of signs (at once real and supernatural) rather than simply realia; and it presents that world of signs as fundamentally unreliable, open, and ambivalent: as spectral.

Second, and a bit more difficult to formulate, anecdotes have a way of both thingifying their subject matter—presented as something of a foreign body in the main body of the text, a piece of dug-up, materialized language that becomes an autonomous object for the characters’ and readers’ contemplation—and emptying it out at the same time, turning it into a sign of something else, some meaning beyond itself. Narrative enters, as it were, into the text’s world of considered objects, with all its particularity and singularity, even as it turns itself, qua object, into allegory.\(^\text{16}\) Indeed, in this, anecdotes resemble the role and reading of archaeological objects in the novel, such as Wotan’s wagon, which the characters Seidentopf and Turgany place on a table between them and read and interpret variously for its significance and place in Ur-Germanic history—and by implication for the present and incipient history of Germany as well.\(^\text{17}\) Just so do anecdotes become things, and things as signs, in the narrated world.

Besides such anecdotes—and there are many throughout the text, all of which become objects of interpretation, and their interpretation itself a subject for interpretation, and all inviting readings of their connection to the immediately contiguous moment as well as to more remote but similar series of other portentous anecdotes or events\(^\text{18}\)—besides anecdotes, there are numerous other sites for the practice of such divinatory readings: we might say that anecdotes
train characters in the novel in a certain mode of reading experience that they then extend into other areas. Many of these sites, like anecdotes, take place at a juncture of the literary (or aesthetic) and the real: the names of things and places that seem to forebode future events for the characters, at times accompanied by one of Fontane’s favorite lines, “nomen et omen”; similarly portraits, chanced upon snatches of poetry or song, and on several occasions dreams. All are approached as signs or Zeichen of something beyond themselves, beyond their ordinary intention, something at once intensely personal and infused with future significance, but also with uncertain significance: whether the portrait of the mother of Kathinka, whose startling resemblance to Kathinka herself suggests a similar betrayal in her (Kathinka’s) future of her beloved (Lewin); or a chance verse from Herder that is immediately read for its possible portentous significance for Lewin’s situation. As with anecdotes—and archaeological objects—these instances stage the very process of reading in the text, and in so doing underscore its magical, divinatory qualities.

This mode of reading extends beyond that of anecdotes, or of aesthetic, lingual, and archaeological objects, to encompass all manner of events and things in both the social and the natural worlds. So, for instance, it regularly appears in the context of such social rituals as playing forfeits, “casting lead,” or gambling—all games that, as E. B. Tylor reminds us, carry the vestiges of magical thinking and divination into the modern world. The first (playing forfeits) is explicitly described in such a way as to foreground these qualities and to draw out the similarity to anecdotes: Turgany says, “The profoundest mysteries of nature are revealed in the playing of forfeits. . . . To choose something of indeterminate value without lapsing into the trivial: that is the art.” As with anecdotes, the emphasis is on the seemingly insignificant—what stands outside ordinary modes of valuation—as the bearer of another, more profound, and mysterious significance for those there and then. And in addition to the focus on the ostensibly trivial is the further suggestion of the importance of the element of chance or coincidence that again—like anecdotes or snatches of poetry—opens up a space in the teleological fabric of cause and effect for some other
meaning, some other contingency, to enter the textual world. For this reason, characters in Fontane’s world learn to attend to the apparently immaterial, nonhumanly intentional, chance moments of their experience as of special significance, and reality, for their future. And this extends beyond such controlled, to some extent artificial or ritualized settings to encompass the whole human and natural Umwelt: whether it be the appearance of reapers in a field, northern lights in the sky, crows in a tree, or the chance name of an inn or street, the wide world becomes charged for the characters with signs, and signs with the futurity that makes them signs—and with uncertainty.23

This way of reading and experiencing the world extends into the most quotidian and conventionally realist encounters in the novel. So, for instance, in a relatively trivial moment “of little effect but great significance,” Lewin happens to catch a glimpse at a ball of Kathinka dancing with another man, the Polish Count Bninski, soon to emerge as his rival. Watching them, “he seemed to himself insipid, prosaic, boring”:

Catching sight of him, old Countess Reale again raised her lorgnette to her eyes and, after briefly inspecting him, lowered it again with an expression that seemed designed to set the seal on the verdict he had just passed on himself. Fräulein von Bischofswerder’s two plaits were hanging even lower and looking even more despondent. It all seemed to him a sign.

Both the disapproving stare of Reale and the drooping plaits of Bischofswerder have other immediate causes (given earlier), having little to nothing to do with Lewin and nothing at all to do with Lewin’s relation to Kathinka or with each other. But Lewin reads their momentary contiguity in terms of their perceived similarity to his own situation, and discovers connections that together become a sign or Zeichen whose meaning and relation are apparent to,
and meant for, him alone—and whose binding chain seems charged with future force. In this way, chance similarities in the text beyond any character’s intention become omens of a kind of necessity, a fate that seems destined whether or not anyone in any way acts to promote or parry it.

It helps, of course, that in the event the omen proves accurate: that Lewin—regularly identified as one of the more superstitious characters in the novel—turns out to be right, and that in this and other ways the narrator confirms his reading; both contribute to their concord with the presented realist world and to the principles governing the reading of that world. To some extent this also belies the assumption that such omens are only a function of subjective, psychological projection; rather, character prophecies succeed or fail in the novel according to their congruence with the narrator’s ominous imagery system and not necessarily according to their individual psychological acuity. The same point is also made in a more negative manner, by the representation of characters whose reading of the world excludes such magic. At one point, Marie—the fairy child of the novel and Lewin’s eventual wife—condemns a rather pedestrian author by saying, “He is no poet because he knows only the real world,” and something similar can be said about the most nonsuperstitious characters: they turn out to be unskilled readers. The two most prominent of these are Pastor Othegraven and the Herrnhuter Aunt Schorlemmer, both of whom, not incidently, share with the disparaged poet a strong Protestant ideology. Othegraven, on his way to propose to Marie, chances upon some unrelated bad news, and we’re told, “If he’d been one of those people influenced by signs or omens, he’d have turned back.” “But there was no superstition in him”; he goes on, and in the event his trip is indeed ill fated. Aunt Schorlemmer, who throughout vehemently denies a supernatural world but still enjoys making prophecies, is nonetheless singularly poor at it: as Renate tells her, “You see truly what ought to be (das Rechte), but not always what will be (das Richtige).” Interestingly, in both these cases it is not so much the strict this-worldliness of these characters that makes them less than optimal readers as it is their religious commitment to a doctrine of predestination—and so not a rejection of
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a fated future per se (no less than that implied in either teleological history or narrative), but rather, perhaps, a rejection of openness and ambivalence toward that future.

Besides Lewin, there are a host of other characters whose superstitious nature encourages their magic reading of the world, some consistently, such as Major-General von Bamme (“Rob me of the little superstition I have and I have nothing at all and collapse”) and others occasionally and, as it were, only retrospectively, such as Berndt von Vitzewitz—in both cases, largely accurately in their reading. Interestingly for Fontane as a “social” realist, there seem to be no clear distinctions in terms of social class as to who is most invested in such readings: aristocracy and servants, peasants and merchants, seem all equally to inhabit and participate in the same portentous world. There is, however, a distinction in terms of gender: in the novel, female characters—and especially those of undefined or marginal social status and of unusual proximity to the nonhuman natural world—seem the most immersed in the magical world, and to be not only the most magical readers but also the best readers. Of the three most important—Hoppenmarieken, Marie, and Renate—the first two are the most interesting to us. Hoppenmarieken, whose dwarfed and oddly distorted body puts her on the edge of the (non)human world, even as her social status is oddly outside human law and custom, is regularly referred to as a witch (and sometimes as a specter or clairvoyant): in a significant pairing, she is associated both with fortune-telling through cards and with a herbarium of potent plants and a menagerie of companion birds. For all her asocial status, she is also the unofficial, extra-ordinary connecting force and binding power of the local Umwelt, bringing the various houses and social groups into relation by delivering letters (which is to say, signs); this might be thought together with her “jackdaw’s nest” of collected (stolen) objects that contrast so noticeably with Seidentopf’s “systematic” display of archaeological objects, representing a different mode of connection, outside of normal (law and) order or semantics, but for that very reason charged with hidden significance. In any case, she is most important to us as the character who performs the magical feat at the center of the novel, “charming” the fire (et bespreken)
that threatens to engulf the Vitzewitz manor, making “two or three signs” and uttering “a couple of incomprehensible words” before jamming her crooked stick into a key opening in the building’s architecture and marvelously stopping the flames—flames, moreover, eidetically connected to Lewin’s much earlier prophecies (mentioned above). Her decisive intervention into the novel’s “real” and symbolic worlds seems to confirm the authority of (her) magic presence in Fontane’s novel: and again, not only in how she affects the actual fire in the text’s real, immediate setting, but also in how this functions as a reliable omen in the text’s symbolic fabric for the subsequent fate of family and nation (the house, as it were).

The fairy child or Feenkind Marie is the character most associated throughout with the realm of magic and, as with Hoppenmarie-ken, with that of nature as well. She is also perhaps the most prominent subject of prophecies by various others in the novel and, more significantly, the nodal point (the opening) for the governing portentous symbolic systems of the novel as a whole—and, as it turns out, the novel’s most perceptive reader. Like Hoppenmarie-ken, she is of uncertain social status, by birth associated with magic through her magician father; she is from the start described as “of the world of nature, not man” and—in a most Meretlein-like moment—is once discovered asleep in the corn, poppies in her hand, a little bird at her feet, all of which inspires the prophecy that “she will bring blessings to the house, like martins under the roof”—which turns out to be fulfilled. Most significant are the connections her figure makes between the realms of the supernatural, the natural, futural prophecy, and realized fate, which is to say, the novel’s governing principles (its nature magic). This is primarily secured through the motif of stars in the novel—long the site of divination, not only qua fate but qua deuten, a site often evoked in Fontane’s later novels as well. Marie’s magical, “other” background is signaled by her childhood dress decorated with little stars; the movement from the “humanly” intended joining of Lewin and Kathinka to the fated one of Lewin and Marie is marked by inserted descriptions of the appearance of actual stars, whether noticed by the characters or not; and so on. It is by reading these juxtaposed, unarticulated connections and resemblances
that the novel’s reader discovers and learns to anticipate the hidden reality governing the novel, and in such a way as to assent to its necessity and credibility; and that reality, that imagery system, for all its metatextual origin, is presented in the novel as “nature”: entering into the novel through such “chance” moments as the game of forfeits that first brings Lewin and Marie together, revealing “the profoundest mysteries of nature” (die tiefsten Geheimnisse der Natur), and culminating in the union about which the narrator declares, “What had come to pass was simply that which ought to have come to pass: the demand of nature, that which had been determined from the very beginning” (Denn es war nur gekommen, was kommen sollte; das Natürliche, das von Uranfang an Bestimmtte hatte sich vollzogen). As the figure most connected to the natural and the supernatural worlds—and so, too, least restricted to the merely human—Marie is thus also connected to the narrator’s metatextual world, most governed or affected by, but also open to, its portentous forces, and for this reason, she is also their best reader. We see this especially when she divines the otherwise unexpected reversals of fortune of Lewin and Tubal at the climax of the novel’s action, and does so because “deeply embedded in her nature was a belief in a balance and compensation, the sacred mystery . . . inscribed in her heart”—the sense of a poetic, natural governing order or principle beyond human intention or ordinary knowledge. And it is worth noting how this sense makes Marie not only the best reader of the future in the novel, but arguably also the best appreciator of art—for as we see, these are intimately related.

Marie, then, is the figure most responsible for bridging the gap between the magical, divinatory readings by characters in the text and that by readers of the text; she not only brings the metatextual into the textual but also, in the textual world itself, seems to have access—connections—to the governing principles of the novel itself, and thus, a reliable, even privileged intuition of its future actuality (its real), an intuition shared by the reader. This textual/metatextual connection or exchange is one crucial aspect of the micro-macro relations intrinsic to the reading of Fontane’s novelistic world. But there is another that is equally decisive for the intended
significance of his text, and grounded in a similar mode of divinatory reading. This is the never articulated but central micro-macro relation between the fate of the individual characters—which is to say, of the Vitzewitz family—and that of the broader historical world or moment in which they find themselves, namely, Prussia in the winter of 1812–13. So, for instance, the reader is required to divine the relation between the breakdown in Lewin and Kathinka’s relationship—or more broadly, between the Prussian house and the Polish (foreign) one—and the looming revolt of Prussia against the Napoleonic (foreign) forces. The relation is established by searching out similarities and resemblances even among supposed contrasts—for example, in the common push here toward a Prussian identity detached from foreign alliances, in the one case resisted, in the other pursued—and by reading apparently chance contiguities as in fact meaningful metonymies. To take a particular example from a passage mentioned earlier, the moment of Lewin’s catching sight of Kathinka and Bniński dancing at the ball, which he immediately connects with Reale’s disparaging stare and Bischofswerder’s drooping braids to constitute a “sign,” is itself immediately followed by the news “York has capitulated,” the opening action in Prussia’s break with its foreign allies. The reader extends Lewin’s own divinatory practice to link this news in its perceived similarity to the case of Lewin’s “capitulation,” and in such a way as to constitute it, too, as a sign—not only of the accuracy of Lewin’s reading that the break with Kathinka is inevitable (and the reader’s extra-literary, retrospective knowledge of the historical outcome provides this insightful force), but also of the possibility that, contrary to Lewin’s own present evaluation, the break could prove positive. This is not quite to say that the characters and their relations function as allegories for the political situation, nor that the historical narrative context determines the fate of the characters, although both of these are nebulously true. But it is to say that, very much as with anecdotes for the characters, the reader is asked to look at the microstory and its seeming embodiment of an independent logic and significatory structure and to pose questions as to the integration or connection of its events to the macrocontext—and to seek out the connection not in a causal or verifiable link but rather in one suggested by contiguity and similarity.
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Such, then, are some of the key features of the magic reading at stake in Fontane’s first novel, his historical novel: and while, as mentioned, some critics ascribe this to a residual romanticism later overcome, it is worth stressing the aspects of these features that seem proper to realism itself, indeed both producing and generated by its realist world. So, for example, one might wish to foreground as particularly realist the undeniable skepticism toward superstitious beliefs that is expressed by so many characters; but this needs to be balanced by the fact (noted at the outset) that such skepticism is almost always part of divinatory practices—and also by the fact (just noted) that such skepticism is not always expressed by the characters who best read the world. Or one might wish to emphasize the characters’ magical reading practices as (only) historically appropriate to the novel’s admittedly romantic historical moment; or conversely, as a mere cover or proxy language for, actually, a still futural (from the perspective of the story) psychological rendering of experiential insight. Both of course are true, and accord well with a conventional model of realism: but both leave a remainder, an excess that still belongs to the novel. After all, the magic reading practices of the historically romantic characters are reproduced by Fontane’s contemporary “realist” readers to generate or uncover its operating system; and the accuracy of characters’ reading of portents too often depends on nonpsychological factors such as chance, or impossible-to-realize coincidence with narratorial imagery systems, to be reducible to subjective projections alone.

We need, then, to accept a far more basic and integral relation between divinatory reading practices and realism, a relation evident in and inseparable from both its temporal and its spatial coordinates. In regard to time, the very retrospective dimension of realist narrative sets up another temporal dimension to that of ordinary historical experience, one in which the ending, even if not known, is known to be set: which leads to a pairing of each present or past event with its excess future meaning—a meaning beyond itself, deferred, still at a hidden distance. This meaning, we’ve seen, is sought in something like anecdotal fashion—utilizing actual anecdotes or converting ordinary objects or events into such independently signifying (but unverifiable) moments, moments that seem to provide a privileged opening to this other temporal dimension.
that exists and houses this other meaning. And although, strictly speaking, this other dimension and its meaning are not causal, they are still that through which the reader constitutes the sense of consequence and determination in the novel; indeed, contrary to conventional opinion, it is here, as it were, that necessity resides and not in the historical events themselves.39

As regards space, or rather our reading experience of the novel’s Umwelt, the case is similar. We learn to read objects and object-like things (paintings, quotations, stories, etc.) as signs signaling something about the human events, often communicating a prescient, authorial truth (communicated by an otherwise hidden author): we attribute excess meaning and power to things beyond themselves and beyond the intentions of the human characters; indeed, the more embedded in a world unaffected by human intention—the more “natural”—the more privileged the conduit for authorial communication.40 We learn, like Lewin at the ball, to build metonymical chains linking seemingly unrelated things and words to protagonists’ fates, to look for meaning in “signs” of contiguity and resemblance; we learn to see perceived coincidences and correspondences beyond characters’ human intentions as special sites for authorial/authoritative significance.41 We learn that everything communicates; everything connects.

And perhaps of greatest, most lasting significance for Fontane’s realism: in coming to occupy a world of signs at once futural and author-itative, the reader learns of the fallibility of signs; their polysemy and ambiguity, their openness to multiple, even contradictory behavior, and often enough, their dependence on the person and occasion of their reading, utterance, or understanding—their contingency. One might even propose that the most characteristic aspect of Fontane’s realism is the one most grounded in its conditions of magic, divinatory reading.

Premonitions II

Omens, the world that supports them—the world of the text as well as the text itself—and the divinatory reading practices of both
characters and ourselves that engage them all persist through Fontane’s fictions written between this first book and *The Stechlin*, his last, with an ever more seamless integration into the fabric of his realist poetics. From the immediately following historical tale of *Grete Minde* (1880) to the historical Berlin novel, *Schach von Wuthenow* (1883), to the great contemporary Berlin novels for which Fontane is chiefly celebrated—*L’Adultera* (1880), *Cécile* (1887), *Delusions, Confusions* (*Irrungen Wirrungen*, 1888), *Effi Briest* (1896), and (contemporary but not Berlin) *Irretrievable* (*Unwiederbringlich*, 1892)—portentous signs or *Zeichen* and their reading, whether accurate or not, remain firmly in place for both characters and readers. And this is true even as the narratives move into clearly more “realist” milieus of the present time and social *Umwelt*.

Some things stay the same, such as the tendency to open stories with premonitory signs, signaling the presence of, and opening access to, the narrative’s other temporal dimension and meaning; or the proclivity to bind such signs to the natural world and works of art—as in *Green Henry*, coupling the natural and metatextual—and to bind both to the reading practices of quasi-magical female characters. Perhaps the best example of the first is the ominous opening of *Irretrievable*, with its explicit discussion of premonitions: these are connected both to the natural world, in the form of the female protagonist’s anxious attitude toward her new home, a castle literally built on sand, and to a textual world, in the form of her equally anxious reading of an Uhland poem cited by her husband. And perhaps the best example of the second tendency more generally comes in *Cécile*. Here the novel’s initial setting in Thale, with its Witches’ Dance Floor, Devil’s Wall, Horse’s Hoofprint, and *Todentrode*, but also its flowers (especially its foxglove), birds, and animals (especially the Newfoundland who attaches himself to Cécile)—all become charged with magical meaning that communicates itself to Cécile via a kind of metonymic contagion, imbuing her with its witching force and presenting itself more or less uniquely to her as a sign system to be read. The engagement of the aesthetic world is made in similar fashion through the animal painter Rosa Hexel, who throughout the stay in Thale seems always nearby, and both parts of whose name have their significance
not in relation to Rosa herself but only in relation to Cécile, the witch (*Hexe*) associated with both the flower and the animal world. Moreover, the way that the Witches’ Dance Floor becomes contiguously linked to the all but demonic train to Berlin; the way that once Cécile returns to the city, the countryside flora reappear in the gardens among the streets and buildings, and the foxglove in the digitalis that she takes for her ailing heart (more anon); or the way that Rosa Hexel appears here, too—all this illustrates both the persistence of this coupled magical, natural, and aesthetic world and the extension of its realm into the decidedly modern *Umwelt*, whose technological and social forces themselves come to carry a similar attendant charge (of excess, allegorical significance). And of course, we see both these tendencies, and their persistence and extension, in Fontane’s best-known works—*Schach von Wuthenow*, *Delusions, Confusions*, and *Effi Briest*—as well.

While much remains in place, some things do develop, contributing to a more integrated realist poetics and to a more pervasively symbolic, even allegorical world—for the realist effect is achieved not by the elimination of its ominous qualities but by their all-permeating dispersal. We see this already in the example from *Cécile* of both Rosa and the natural world as displaced sites for magical presence, linked to the protagonist’s fate through the simultaneously realist and (sympathetically) magical qualities of contiguity and metonymy. But the dispersal can be seen more generally with respect to all the features most central to Fontane’s poetics: conversation, description, and characterization. With respect to the first, the distinction between ordinary conversational subjects and embedded anecdotes seems to weaken, such that the reader learns to attend to the most banal, seemingly insignificant utterances or accounts for their other, allegorical meaning—for what they suggest, via similitude, for the primary story and its future. With respect to description, here too we have a sense of broadening diffusion: rather than just such specific “signs” as northern lights, reapers in a field, or shining stars (although we have such things as well), we have extended descriptions of landscapes, domestic settings, or city-street scenes represented not (just) for their own sake but for the “other meaning” they metonymically convey about character.
and plot—something approaching the conditions of *Stimmung* that we explored in *Green Henry*. And as for characterization, there is arguably an increasing tendency to bring the realms of magic experience, ominous appearances, and divinatory readings further into the characters’ social sphere, whether in the somewhat insidious form of instrumentalized manipulation as in *L’Adultera* or *Effi Briest*, or in the more common form of a conventionalized, socially conditioned “superstition.”46 And with this comes an expanded emphasis on a decidedly social “something” (*Etwas*) as the source of active, hidden binding forces affecting characters’ fates, a role earlier more limited to the binding forces of both nature and metatextual art.47 This is not, however, to say that these latter forces disappear: they simply become more discreetly present—and often enough, the wrongness of social forces is exposed by their dissonance with still more authoritative natural ones, every bit as much as the wrongness of characters’ divinations appears in their contrast with the author’s portentous designs.48

All this could be illustrated, and qualified, through the analysis of numerous examples drawn from Fontane’s many novels, but for the purpose of setting up the discussion of *The Stechlin*, I would like just to concentrate on certain aspects of the last point—the continued, albeit muted presence of the natural nonhuman world in its underwriting of the magical one—and to illustrate these with just two examples. The first comes very near the beginning of *Irretrievable*, and it concerns a conversational exchange about (animal) homeopathy, one of the chief discourses in which the *Naturphilosophie* of the romantics—and by extension, the sympathetically magical world of the early modern—projected itself into the late nineteenth century.49 We’re told:

The whole story meant nothing more nor less than the final triumph of a new principle and, through the treatment of animals, the success of homeopathy could no longer be held in doubt. Until now, the old-school quacks had never tired of talking about the power of the imagination, what naturally was supposed to mean that the minute particules themselves didn’t heal: but thank God, a Schleswig cow was free of imagination, and if she got healthy, then she did so by the remedy and not by faith.
Die ganze Geschichte bedeute nicht mehr und nicht weniger als den endlichen Triumph eines neuen Prinzips, erst von der Viehpraxis her datiere der nicht mehr anzuzweifelnde Sieg der Homöopathie. Bis dahin seien die Quacksalber alten Stils nicht müde geworden, von der Macht der Einbildung zu sprechen, was natürlich heißen sollte, daß die Streukügelchen nicht als solchen heilten: eine schleswigsche Kuh aber sei, Gott sei Dank, frei von Einbildungen, und wenn sie gesund würde, so würde sie gesund durch das Mittel und nicht durch den Glauben.

The conversation continues, leading up to an anticipated future appearance of the doctor who practices this animal homeopathy—which, however, never happens, and the topic seems unexpectedly dropped. But this is not to say it proves insignificant. Quite the contrary, its apparently unmotivated, singular occurrence marks this matter as an opening in the diegetic fabric, one whose meaning seems to derive from and point to a different realm, and to require a different (nondiegetic) knight’s move of interpretation to integrate it into the narrative—to make the connection.

That connection is made by recognizing the metatextual relevance of homeopathy: how it functions as a link or portal connecting the metatextual to the textual, a shared principle joining the operating conditions governing the natural world and Fontane’s fiction. Characters argue about whether there is something mysterious, mystic, or wonderful about homeopathy (and that hermeneutic openness is part of both realism and magic), but they all agree to its two underlying principles, each of which has its counterpart in Fontane’s realism. The first is that of micro-macro relation: as one character puts it, “It’s simply a question of large or small quantities and whether one can do as much with a grain as with half a hundredweight.” As we saw in Before the Storm, this principle coincides with Fontane’s own representational tactics for portraying sociopolitical history through the “particules” of single characters and their small fates—in this case, Schleswig’s troubled German/Danish identity via the failed marriage of Christine and Holk—and moreover, those small fates through the often small, even trivial events that trigger them (omitting the “weightier” ones). These relations are neither directly causal nor simply symbolic, but rather operate in the same suggestive, hidden, and
ambiguous (dubious but real) space as that described for homeopathy. It is a space that, with respect to homeopathy, the novel explicitly identifies with Sympathie, because grounded in homeopathy’s second principle, “similia similibus”—the same principle that, we saw, grounds the micro-macro relations of Fontane’s poetics, not least in the case of his anecdotes. This principle of like to like, of sympathy and resemblance, transforms one thing into a sign of another, forging a connection of one to another—but always, as Holk says of homeopathy, in ways that keep the interpretation open, even as they necessitate the hermeneutic reading practices of divination to animate and reveal the operant world of binding links. Crucially for us, the novel itself connects both of these principles and their reading effects to those of storytelling in general and anecdotes in particular. But equally significant is that Fontane presents them (and their Sympathie) first and foremost as elements of the natural, nonhuman world, keeping the link between the work’s metatexual and natural forces, and in both cases to the partial exclusion of its merely human dimension.

Unlike the first, the second passage suggesting the continued presence of a world of natural magic is a far from marginal, incidental one. Indeed, it is one of the best-known moments in Delusions, Confusions, and it illustrates how this magic world of sympathetic connections that exists in part apart from the merely human world of the characters nonetheless engages or encompasses them. Lene and Botho have left Berlin and escaped into nature at Hankel’s Depot. Once there, in an open meadow, Lene composes a bouquet of flowers, and she and Botho take turns naming them—forget-me-nots, devil’s bit, everlastings, and so on—turning each one, via its name, into a sign, an omen for them and their affair, and as is typical of Fontane, it is Lene, the woman in this natural world, who proves the more authoritative, discerning reader. Botho then asks Lene to bind the bouquet with a strand of her hair, and Lene famously hesitates, “Because the saying is, ‘hair binds.’ And if I bind it round the bouquet, you’re bound with it” (Weil das Sprichwort sagt: ‘Haar bindet’. Und wenn ich es um den Strauß binde, so bist du mitgebunden). Although Botho would dismiss this as mere superstition, Lene insists, “even if it does seem like superstition,” that
the claim is still true (richtig)—and in the event, as Botho must belatedly acknowledge, it does prove true, the omen or spell to be real. He says, “There certainly are such riddling powers, such sympathies from heaven or hell, and now I’m bound and cannot get loose” (Ja es gibt solche rätselhaften Kräfte, solche Sympathien aus Himmel oder Hölle, und nun bin ich gebunden und kann nicht los). Although these sympathetic and “riddling” forces that attract and bind Lene and Botho are themselves in part socially conditioned and even produced, they also run notably counter to the dominant social order, and remain associated by Fontane with the natural order. Sometimes in his work they prove stronger, such as in L’Adultera, where the happy ending to the lovers’ affair (their “elective affinity”) is described as simply a case where “the law of nature triumphed once again” (Das Naturgesetzliche habe wieder mal gesiegt). But even when, as here, they prove weaker and less binding than the forces of the social “something” that seems to govern Botho and Lene’s world and fate, they nonetheless persist, and persist as the standard against which the wrongness or unnaturalness of that social world is gauged. And the more open or bound to that other world’s forces a character such as Botho or Lene proves to be—and so too the more disjointed from the merely social world—the more connected to both the narrator’s and the reader’s sympathies, and precisely because more connected to the novel’s governing sense of the real behind its (mere, its social) realism.

The Stechlin: “The Stechlin”

Such are some of the principal ways that the magical world and the divinatory readings it occasions persist in Fontane’s texts, even as they transition from the early historical novels with settings in the romantic or early modern period to the mature works set in contemporary, social, and often cosmopolitan contexts; where even as they transition to historical temporalities, social causalities, and an extraliterary, urban, and predominantly human Umwelt, all features that distinguish Fontane’s poetics from that of
the poetic realists and, in the eyes of many, make his works more truly realist—where even then the magical world persists as intrinsic, inseparable, and necessary to his realist art, instilling the sense of a necessity unfolding in time and of the intricate connections between character and world. And so the question we began with remains: how does this magical world and the kind of readings it supports both persist and change as Fontane’s realism itself persists and changes in his last, almost postrealist work, The Stechlin? That it does persist, and retains its futural force, can be glimpsed in such seemingly minor moments as when Melusine—the work’s most magical character and astute interpreter, the one most connected to the elemental natural world and to presentiments (Ahmungen) that are “positively prophetic” (schon geradezu was Prophetisches)—has an itching in her little finger that foretells a visitor, a premonitory experience later shared by the work’s other most connected, grounded, and reliable interpreter, Dubslav. And we see it, too, and more generally, in the residual superstition of other characters, such as Dubslav’s son, Woldemar, or Melusine’s father, Count Barby. Ferreting out the forces that allow for such experiences, however apparently circumscribed, is part of our task; but so too is describing the conditions that make them seem different—both more fragile, elusive, and pervasive—from those in Fontane’s earlier work.

The best place to begin is at the beginning, since, as we said earlier, an opening presentation of ominous signs is symptomatic of Fontane’s narratives early and late, an opening “pregnant with the future,” establishing a temporal dimension and signifying system supplemental to its sequential, historically embedded world. That proves as true here as it did in Before the Storm or Irretrievable. As in Before the Storm, the novel’s setting derives from Fontane’s nonfictional Wanderings; and as there and in quite a few others, it is initially provincial, in the country, a counterpoint to the Berlin setting to come. The text begins, famously and emphatically, with a description of “the Stechlin,” the lake whose ominous and supernatural character provides the background for the entire narrative, instantly binding the natural and the metatextual, the lake and the novel itself, in ways similar to what we saw in Keller and in other,
earlier Fontane works. As one of his artists says elsewhere, “Water is nature, and nature is landscape.”

The lake that is presented to us as the framing Umwelt and “the Stechlin” is first described as part of a “chain of lakes” (Seenkette), and this “chain” provides our first indication of the operant conditions for the lake’s portentous quality. The chain image works in two ways. First, and seemingly more minor, we learn that “the Stechlin” refers not just to the lake (and the novel), but to the adjoining wood, the adjoining village, the manor or Schloß on its edge, the family in it, its present and perhaps, too, its future inhabitant. Second, and seemingly more major, we learn that the lake itself, the first “Stechlin” in the intradiegetic series, seems to anchor a great chain of interconnected things and events—what Melusine, echoing a phrase from Hermann Lotze’s Mikrokosmos, will call “the great connectedness of things” (den großen Zusammenhang der Dinge)—that undergirds the natural and human world: a chain of “secret relations,” of “world relations.”

When far off in the outside world, perhaps on Iceland or in Java, a rumbling and thundering begins, or when the ash-rain of the Hawaiian volcanoes is driven far out over the southern seas . . . then it starts heaving here, too, and a waterspout erupts and then sinks down again into the deep.

Through the lake, the novel’s narrow, microcosmic setting is joined with the great, macrocosmic world to form a communicative network, binding every (great) there with this (small) here, by means of signs produced via contact and similitude. Although first presented as a purely natural system—and in this, clearly analogous to that of sympathetic homeopathy (more anon)—this network will in the course of the novel be extended, via further analogies and similarities, to encompass such social eruptions as revolution and such modern communicative technologies as the telegraph and telephone, linking together the (timeless) natural and (present-day)
human worlds in one great binding signifying chain. But even more crucially for us, this natural, signifying Umwelt is also extended right at the outset into the frankly fantastic and supernatural. We’re told, “But when something truly big happens . . . then instead of the waterspout a red rooster rises up and crows loudly across the land.” And with that we have our first truly magical opening in the fabric of the novel—and our first omen as well.

Two aspects of this ominous lake and the world that supports it need to be emphasized right at the outset. First, for all the suggestion of a world connected by hidden, subterranean sympathetic relations, the lake also clearly evokes a principle of antipathy as part of that world, and not only in its contrasting pairs of the great and small, the there and here. As many critics have noted, it joins the “still” and the earthshaking, the ever-abiding and abruptly changing, the humanly political and elementally natural, and the natural, political, and everyday (all signs of the real) with the frankly fantastic and symbolic or allegorical, forging chains of interconnecting similitudes and differences absorbed into and ramifying out of the one “Stechlin.” This inclusion of a principle of contrast or opposition is, of course, quite like the inclusion of antipathy among the forces sustaining the sympathetic cosmos in both the classical and early modern periods, and perhaps, too, like that of allopathy alongside homeopathy in Fontane’s natural-medical symbology. It is something we saw already, albeit in more modest proportions, in our reading of Stimmung in Green Henry, and that we see elsewhere in Fontane as well, not least as part of the polysemy that allows for competing, open interpretations of his ominous world. Here, however, the principle of antipathy so prominently featured in the lake’s opening description seems exceptionally (and formally) foregrounded, and thus to feature as well its always latent double nature: as a force that is at once part of the world of sympathy and capable of tearing it apart (echoing the world-shattering violence of its earthquakes and volcanoes).

Second, a changed, even collapsed temporal dimension seems to accompany the spatial expansion embodied by the lake, which has important consequences for its futural force. While connected to Java, Iceland, Hawaii, and Spain, the waterspout or crowing
rooster does not seem to appear before or after the distant event, but simultaneously with it. While this rather neatly corresponds with the principle of *actio in distans* underlying the sympathetic cosmos of both ancient divination and nineteenth-century *Stimmung* (the note struck here resonating there), and equally with the near simultaneity attached to the novel’s most modern technological communication systems that deliver their signs-for-reading all but instantaneously, regardless of the great distances covered—it still suggests that in one crucial sense the temporal futural dimension to the omen that is embedded in the natural *Umwelt* has changed, almost disappeared. That is, the eruptive sign of the lake does not in itself seem to point to any future: it is an omen only insofar as it might happen again (although in this its sign functions very much like what we saw at work in anecdotes).  

Such, then, is the portentous opening. The surprise, however, is that this initial emphasis on a world of intimate and far-ranging connections that appears to forbode a violent event on the order of an earthquake or volcano—an event, moreover, of world historical importance—turns out to be in such open tension with the novel that follows, in ways that seriously challenge both its traditional realist and divinatory structures. It proves to be a novel in which almost nothing is especially connected to anything, at least not in any conventionally motivated way, and in which nothing “eventful” happens at all, not even locally (or microcosmically). In particular, there is no real plot to be developed, no sense of action or character development, let alone conflict or violence, that might forge links in a chain that leads to something significant. And after its opening paragraphs, it proves a novel of rather restricted description as well—including of the natural world.

The absence of a plot is perhaps the most significant challenge to both the traditional realist and divinatory dimensions of the novel—unusual for Fontane, who usually had quite engaging plots, among the most memorable of German nineteenth-century novels. Fontane himself emphasized the absence of consequent action in this particular work; critics like to quote his description of *The Stechlin* as a five-hundred-page text in which two young people get married and an old man dies—otherwise, little to nothing
“happens.” And while a few events do generate some anticipatory, futural force—the question of whether the younger and rather staid Stechlin, Woldemar, will get married, and if so to whom, the unruly Melusine or her younger, rather reserved sister, Armgard (it’s Armgard); whether the elder Stechlin, Dubslav, will win the election he halfheartedly stands for (he doesn’t); and most important for us, whether the crowing rooster will make an appearance (it doesn’t)—none deeply energizes the novel, generates or resolves personal or political conflicts, or provides a story line or trajectory that binds together its various threads. This eliminates one of the major props of traditional realism, one of its major mechanisms for generating significance and binding together its world, what Walter Benjamin calls its “meaning of life” (*Sinn des Lebens*): the temporal structure that turns sequence into consequence, that creates beginnings, middles, and ends, and so imposes its teleological logic on the narrative design and its significatory system, in ways supposed to reflect the realist faith in historical successivity and directionality.

At the same time that it thus compromises or refigures the novel’s realist basis, so too its magical divinatory one, which in its own right requires the futural dimension of a plot, in fact in ways we’ve seen that underwrite the essential compatibility of realism and divinatory reading—where every realistically motivated event can thus also have its magical dimension. For whether we stress that omens, too, have a teleological temporal direction that moves from sign to fulfillment (or miss), with a middle ground, too, of suspenseful alternative outcomes, or conversely, that omens, like anecdotes, open up a portal, a gap in the teleological fabric of the grand historical récit, allowing another temporal dimension outside of ordinary experience to enter into the narrative world in its mere successivity—either way, both the omens and their reading would seem to require a sequentially unfolding plot every bit as much as traditional realist narrative.

While this development, this absence of a future, as it were, seems in keeping with the changed temporal status of the waterspout omen opening the novel, it also seems in tension with the fact that no other novel of Fontane proves so insistently preoccupied
with the question of reading the future. But then, the disappearance of traditional narrative teleology and the lack of faith in the future as knowable and determinative that this brings with it can make the question of the future all the more pressing, even if its reading becomes all the more difficult or even, in the absence of any concept of the future, impossible. In any case, this is a circumstance we will have to explore.

Besides the near absence of plot, there are also notable (even if more minor) diminutions in the roles played by character psychology, description, and even conversation in the novel, all mainstays of realist narrative and all with various implications for divinatory reading. Character psychology is of course central to much of realism, and not just in the Bildungsroman tradition; in fact, the representation of a protagonist’s psychic conflicts arguably comes more and more to replace the representation of external, action-based conflict. And as we’ve seen, this subjective focus also typically grounds many realist divinatory readings, in the form of either psychological projections or their situational, subject-centered interpretations. Fontane, however, despite his status as a realist, his increasing independence from “action,” and even his deserved reputation for creating memorable characters (Melusine and Dubslav among them) and character-centered narratives, does not really emphasize psychology, at least not in a traditional way, and this is all the more the case in The Stechlin. Even in earlier works he rarely invests characters with interior lives, and what psychology and psychic conflicts they do have are more the consequences of internalized, often self-contradictory social norms than of the intervention of “other” dark forces, following “other” principles. But in The Stechlin even these conflicts, these glimpsed interiorizations, are more or less absent; with the exception of a very few retrospective moments on the part of Dubslav (to be discussed below), there are almost no interior lives at stake in the novel at all and hardly even any single protagonist-focused representations. Indeed, as twice asserted in the text itself, characterization almost comes to border on caricature in this novel. And the result is a flattening of not only a traditional realist dimension, but also of a magical one: there are also few omens that appear to individual characters that
correlate with that individual’s interior state. However, as in the case of the near absence of plot, this is not to say that the magical dimension disappears; just to prepare for its being refurged without futurity or subjectivity.

The diminution in the role of description and conversation is a bit harder to formulate and perhaps more questionable an assertion, not least because, from another perspective, both gain in importance. But descriptions of personal appearances or the Umwelt for its own sake seem notably pared down, again diminishing a realist effect, and instead become more restrictively focused on key instances of landscape—though even here the description can be emphatically abbreviated, such as that of the view caught by the characters from atop Dubslav’s lookout tower (Aussichtsturm). And conversation, in which all of Fontane’s novels are so rich, and in some ways none more so than this one—conversation is almost never of a kind that addresses significant topics in the extraliterary world or even in the novel, and certainly not in any connected, continuous, logical, or particularly conflictual way; and along with the lack of conversations that are consequential in themselves (i.e., bearers of narrative significance), there seems also to be a severely restricted number of conversations that the “knight’s move” of interpretation opens up to a different, foreboding reading. Rather, the novel is almost completely taken up with conversations of the order of what Kierkegaard calls chatter, Geschwätz, and what the work itself calls Plauderei, small talk—not striving for, even resisting, both sustained, explicit logical connection and weighty (real, true) significance, and avoiding too the kind of personal relation that often yields the nonintended chance significance with futural force.

And yet it is precisely here, in a realm of small talk—a realm without event or action, without conflict or obvious connections, without deep psychological investment or rich subjective coloration, and without governed, significant direction forward, all obstacles for the readers of traditional realism—that the novel commits to recreating not only its realist world but also that more magical world that supports divination. That is to say—and it is almost obligatory to say—that the novel’s great theme and organizing
principle of interconnection that is adumbrated in and intercon-
nected with the opening representation of “the Stechlin,” is to be
language itself: conversation or *Gespräch*, but also, more broadly,
language or *Sprache*—as, of course, we saw that “the Stechlin”
was in the first place a word, and a word producing connections
even before it becomes the connecting lake.

The theme is presented in a twofold manner. On the one hand,*
*Sprache* is represented in its most trivial, quotidian, almost oppres-
sively ordinary form, as “small talk,” and in this respect continues
to stake its claim to a kind of realism, isolating and accentuating
a feature that had long been part of realism’s *Technik*, and in the
case of Fontane a large part. But on the other hand, language—and
language as “small talk”—is also engaged in its almost metaphysi-
cal form, in a way that deliberately and insistently looks beyond
its ordinary communicative function. And in this respect, in draw-
ing language itself into its represented world, the novel not only
anticipates a more modernist orientation, but also, we’ll see, en-
gages anew some of the most important operant conditions for
magic reading and experience we know from the early modern
and romantic periods.\textsuperscript{85} That is, language is approached as the
medium or, better, the “life-form” (*Lebensform*) that envelops or
encompasses the world of man and man’s relation to the world, in
ways that insist on the near inseparability of language and world,
or rather on language as inseparably in and of the world; as the
“life-form” producing within itself and on its own terms attractive
forces and conflicts, similarities and differences, sympathies and
antipathies.\textsuperscript{86} In this way, it takes up and refigures many of the
traditional elements of realist narrative, but as we’ll see, it does so
in a realm almost beyond—if still dependent on—semitic content
or even explicit representation.\textsuperscript{87}

In considering, then, how the novel refigures its world so as at
once and inseparably to support both its realist and its supplemen-
tal second-order magical dimensions, I would like in the following
more intense engagement with Fontane’s text to concentrate on
three primary and somewhat overlapping areas. First is the role
of language in the narrative world in general and how it is experi-
enced and thematized by the characters themselves, much as how
we considered how signs were experienced by the characters in
Before the Storm. Second is its role in shaping the realm of human interaction, and especially social interaction through seemingly casual conversation (Plauderei). And last is its role in shaping or producing that realm seemingly beyond language, and especially the connections between the human and the nonhuman natural world that, we’ve seen, are so crucial to the workings of both ancient magic and modern Stimmung—and to the premonitory dimension of Fontane’s own earlier works.

But before proceeding to these particulars, I’d like to raise two more general points. First, I want to note how the focus on conversation entails a different relation between language and mimesis from that more broadly associated with realism, and an apparently less problematic one. When addressing the description of a non-lingual, objective external world such as we had in the pictorial representation of landscape in Keller’s Green Henry, the inevitable conventionality of painting’s mimetic sign system causes, we saw, an unavoidable distance or mediation between the physical reality and the aesthetic copy; and this mediating gap would seem all the greater if, instead of the “natural” signs of painting, we focused on the arbitrary ones of language.88 When considering the depiction of conversation, however—or more broadly, reported speech or writing—the plausibility of verisimilar representation in language becomes much less dubious an enterprise.89 With regard to both subject matter and, equally important for us, its temporal unfolding, the veracity of the imitation—the presence of the model in the representation—would seem secure, and this would hold regardless of any extraliterary referential basis the conversation might be imagined to have.90 In this respect at least, the conversations in Fontane’s novel would seem almost by default to have as secure a claim to realism as the most accomplished paintings or descriptions in Keller’s. But just as Keller was concerned with paintings not only of the world but in the world, and so too not only with their realist but also with their magical properties, and not least through emphasizing their metonymic powers over their mimetic ones, so, we’ll see, is Fontane in regard to conversation: drawing language into the world, and depicting a world consisting largely of language, are as much a matter of exceeding a representational realm as achieving it, and not least by (again) stressing language’s metonymic properties
over its mimetic ones—or, in the terms to be deployed below, by stressing its connotative over its denotative powers.\textsuperscript{91}

Second, although in some ways the focus on language is thus very much in keeping with a realist poetics, in others, as mentioned, it seems also to adumbrate key aspects of modernism—and this impacts its magical properties as well. Certainly, and as Fontane critics have often noted, there is an incredible faith in language here as in all of Fontane’s earlier works: \textit{Sprache} seems at once personally adequate to Fontane’s characters, fully capable of communicating meaning between them—in keeping with which, all seem to speak or share in the same Fontanesque language and eloquence—and completely capable of representing the external world.\textsuperscript{92} In all this, language seems securely realist.\textsuperscript{93} On the other hand, the very self-conscious attention to their language shared by the novel’s characters occasions a kind of thickening, a loss of transparency to its representational medium that poses a challenge to any simple realism and approaches instead the modernist foregrounding of the representing medium itself—but in ways that also, curiously and yet characteristically, seem to undercut the very prominence they impose. That is, anticipating the “language crisis” (\textit{Sprachkrise}) that becomes full-blown by the end of the decade, language in the novel is also shown to be breaking down, no longer capable on its own—without the concerted effort of its speakers—of holding together either the human social world or, for that matter, the human and natural worlds.\textsuperscript{94} In this, the novel becomes almost post-realist and modernist, but at least one aspect of its response to this tattered, dissolving fabric of language also looks to the point where modernism itself becomes, as it were, pre-realist: where the weakening of the conventional understanding of language leads to an interest in its nonhuman, natural ground—and in this, to a far more basic “magical” ground as well.\textsuperscript{95}

“Everything Is a Sign” (\textit{Nomen et Omen})

I’d like to begin my discussion of the novel proper, or rather, of the role of language in the novel proper, by first considering a few
items that do not appear to be language, but rather, decisively, things. So, for example, in the more extended opening description of the Stechlin manor, there are two such things: “as the only ornament, a large, shiny glass sphere” in the courtyard and the somewhat sickly aloe plant nearby. The reflecting glass ball is placed prominently in the middle of the setting; is later connected to the nearby glass factory that produced it; finds its counterpart in the garden of Dubslav’s older (and narrower) sister, Adelheid, albeit without the underlying, self-reflecting foil; is briefly looked into as if a mirror (Spiegelbild) by Woldemar’s two traveling companions, Czako and Rex; and is casually mentioned by some other marginal characters as well (e.g., “Oh, when I see these glass-spheres”). The aloe, though sickly, is nonetheless Dubslav’s “favorite . . . and that came about because . . . a foreign seed” found its way into the aloe’s pot and now blooms entwined with it, easily and often mistaken for the aloe itself. In the case of neither the glass ball nor the aloe plant does the novel go beyond these concrete descriptions. Even so, just in what it does describe, it awakens an impulse to transform these things into symbols or, better, allegories: to imbue them with a supplemental significance beyond themselves, and one intimately connected with, or at least intimating via connection, the novel’s already suggested “world of relations.” The glass ball’s locally produced globe that nonetheless reflects the greater world around it, inviting too self-reflection; the aloe’s contrasting blend of the near and far, the native and exotic, the dying and the unexpectedly (or deceptively) thriving: without ever exceeding their simple realist dimension, and equally important, without ever being assigned a specific meaning, both come to assume an allegorical dimension as well, via the connections they suggest with the world of connections they inhabit. And what is true of these two things at the outset proves true of just about every thing in the novel. As Dubslav declares near the end, “Everything is a sign” (Ein Zeichen ist alles): the characters themselves inhabit a world in which every thing is, or can be, a sign of something else, something beyond itself; a world in which the world of things has become a world of language, a charged site for divinatory reading.
Although in the case of the world-reflecting globe and the near-and-far entwined aloe the novel declines to assign a singular significance, this kind of discretion is rarely exercised by the characters in the novel in their relation to its things. Almost any thing in the novel can incite in them an allegorical reading, and although certain characters prove particularly adept at this metamorphosis of their immediate, ordinary world into a charmed (and charming) speaking one—Dubslav, Czako, and Melusine chief among them—the impulse is more or less universal. So Czako, upon perusing his and Rex’s guest room in the Stechlin manor, immediately reads such incidentals as a Meissner figurine and Bible as having personal significance for each of them, respectively (prepared by an unspecified “prescient ability” [Ahnungsvermögen]), and says of the bed, “I’ll bet this little thing of a sofa has a story to tell.”

When shown the schoolmaster Krippenstapel’s beehives, he just as quickly coaxes them into an allegory of human government; when eating chicken wings at Adelheid’s cloister, he immediately transforms a comparison of them with the breasts of thrush enjoyed the day before at her brother’s place into one of the otherworldly (Jenseitiges) and this-worldly (Diesseitiges).

Similarly, Dubslav cannot stand the flowers on the table because of what they signify to him about social standing; he chooses his drink—Goldwasser as opposed to Lacrimae Christi—based not on its taste but on its symbolism; and judges bottles for their political significance, as “signs of our time” (Zeichen unserer Zeit). And Melusine, to give just one example, cannot try on hats with her sister Armgard without taking into consideration how the “language” of the hats’ flowers must determine their selection.

While these three might be the main instigators, such “readers” of the everyday world are endemic to the novel. Some of the signs so read have futural force, as when Adelheid reads the red stockings of the child Agnes as a portent of a coming socialist revolution, or when the Barby’s coachman, Mr. Robinson, reads the paintings on a teapot as signs of Woldemar’s looming choice between Melusine and Armgard; and to these signs we might add two central items of the Stechlin manor, the rococo clock on the landing of the central staircase, “with a Chronos (Zeitgeist) on top, bearing
a scythe,” and the museum of weathervanes Dubslav collects (also called weathercocks [*Wetterbahnen*], evoking the lake’s portent)—neither one explicitly “read,” and so like the globe and aloe, but both still harboring a distinctive, directive temporality as part of their quality as signs. But much like the lake itself, and unlike most such signs in earlier Fontane texts, the vast majority of these *Zeichen* seemingly lack futural force. On the other hand, while both Czako and Dubslav have a distinct tendency to turn “things” into allegories or signs of the political, a tendency shared enough by other characters that the weight of its signed world might seem political—and certainly if it is to be taken as a “political” novel, this is primarily based on how people read its signs, or rather, its things—it would still be mistaken for ourselves to read the significance of its sign world merely in political or even social terms. Far more important, I believe, is for us to focus on the more general procedure: the tendency to transform or metamorphose the thing world into language based on principles of sympathy and similarity, of associations with the human and what lies close to hand; where the thing world is assumed to bespeak the human world, and to enter into the human world in the form of language, of text; where the thing world is there to be read, at and for the moment, but, also more simply, there to be drawn into and joined with language. And in this respect, as the main instigators of these transformations, it is worth noting that, rather than being linked with the political, Czako is linked with poetry (*Dichtung*), Dubslav with both sympathy and metamorphosis, and Melusine, as with so many of Fontane’s other gifted female readers of the world as sign, with something elemental—at once natural and (almost) supernatural, and certainly, as her name implies, magical.

The same impulse toward allegorical reading that drives characters’ relations toward the things in their world also drives the narrator’s descriptions of the object world per se—although as in the case of the glass globe, the sick-but-blooming aloe, the clock, or the weathervanes, these tend not to be explicitly read by him, or, put differently, tend only to be offered as signs for the reader. As mentioned, such descriptions seem comparatively rare in the novel, but all the more significant for that, and not least for the combined
effect of implicit allegory and omitted commentary (which is to say, silence) they entail, an effect perhaps most evident in nature descriptions. So, for example, the description of the “so-called” but decidedly prosaic Poet’s Walk (Poetensteig) that leads to the “viewing tower, cobbled together out of all kinds of beams” (aus allerlei Gebälk zusammengezimmerte Aussichtsturm), whose color-tinted windows Dubslav has had removed and through which one now contemplates the lake and wood; or that of stuffy Adelheid’s salon with its low ceilings, oversized old-fashioned furniture—“nothing not inherited,” with chairs no longer trustworthily functional—and birdcage in the window, all of which clash and refuse to harmonize with the room’s few more modern things; or even better, the description of the cloister’s courtyard, dominated by a “high-rising, mighty gabled wall” that seems at every moment ready to collapse and bury everything beneath it, but is nevertheless topped by nesting storks, “whose keen predictive sense (Vorgefühl) always knew if something is going to hold or fall” (and here one juxtaposes Woldemar, who is among those viewing this and on a visit to [not] discuss his marriage plans with the aunt so devoted to upholding the house of Stechlin). Like the sunset vistas so favored by the aging Count Barby, all of these descriptions—and perhaps especially when they touch upon the natural world—seem charged with a gently insistent allegorical force, but one that does not necessarily rise to the level of language, or rather, requires no other language than that of things themselves to function as Zeichen. This is, as it were, the property of realist objects that we saw achieved late in Green Henry; it is also the counterpart to the novel’s characters’ urge to transform every thing into allegory, or into language—the counterpart in both its sameness and its difference. (We’ll have to return to the difference this difference makes: i.e., the significance conveyed through the muteness of the world beyond the novel’s communicative language, already implicit in the opening description of the lake in all its stillness.)

Something quite similar to what happens to things in the novel happens to names as well: they too get taken up into the novel’s language or Sprache and then transformed into signs for the characters—much as in the primary case of “Stechlin,” they even start as words
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before transforming into characters (characters who are then in turn transformed by them). Names, or rather proper names, hold a special place in the novel, as indeed they do in language in general. Although Fontane’s near contemporary, J. S. Mill, proposed that “a proper name is a word that answers the purpose of showing what thing it is that we are talking about, but not telling us anything about it,” this is far from the case in this work, which seems rather to draw on the more ancient understanding that “the personal name itself constitutes an omen, an oracle of identity . . . an attempt to control or predict through predication the future life of a child”—and Hans Blumenberg is certainly right to emphasize “name-magic” as one of the most significant “ominous” themes of The Stechlin, in keeping with Fontane’s signature phrase, “nomen et omen”—although again, it must be said, with a greatly diminished futural force to such omens. But far from the primarily denotative function described by Mill—a referential one much like that often ascribed to realism in general—names here seem instead to have overwhelmingly connotative force, to be grounded in the associations, relations, and connections they evoke, in what Gottlob Frege calls the sense or Sinn that characters, both those bearing the name and all others, need orient themselves to. And the characters do so explicitly, out loud, as it were: names are repeatedly taken up as the subject of interpretive readings, are—very much like things—transformed into language and then explored for what the novel calls “contiguous” meanings (Nebenbedeutungen): for the connotations and associations, similarities and sympathies, and paradoxes and antipathies that invisibly surround them and give them life. Indeed, we can even formulate this as a more general truth about the novel: even as, expanding on the insight of Roman Jakobson, we identified metonymy, not mimesis, as the realist principle behind Keller’s Green Henry, so, expanding on a claim by Roland Barthes, can we designate connotation, not denotation, as the principle at stake in The Stechlin. And quite simply, connotation requires divination: reading what is communicated by what is not there in what is.

Sometimes names seem precisely, “naturally,” to represent their person or thing, as in the case of one Baron von der Nonne,
“whom nature seemed to have formed while taking particular attention to his name.” At other times, they seem to stand in open conflict with their signified objects, such as in the case of “the green glass hut” (die grüne Glashütte), whose fairy-tale-like (märchenhaft) connotations are the opposite of the completely quotidian reality—and this would be evidence of the world and language beginning to fall apart, dissolving the connection on which both realism and magic depend in an inchoate Sprachkrise. And in still other instances, names are of the kind Blumenberg shrewdly describes as the most important, namely, “names heavy with meaning, but from which one can hardly make out what they mean,” a state provocatively suspended between the two others. Such is the case of Krippenstapel (“named Krippenstapel, which all by itself already will say something”) or even, as Blumenberg notes, of Armgard, where “even impoverished meaning is meaningful” (sogar Bedeutungsarmut bedeutsam [ist]). In such cases, the “name-magic” is particularly “ominous,” because while it invites reading of its significatory, shaping force, it also presents its ultimate indecipherability, its place beyond ordinary language or semiosis—and at the same time retains the possibility, as in the case of anecdotes, that there is nothing, or no necessity, there at all. (Which is to say, there is more at stake in “Armgard” than Blumenberg’s pun on Armut.)

But perhaps even more important than these instances are those cases where characters live in conscious relation to the connotations of their names, in both their sympathetic and antipathetic implications, producing the bonds of attraction and repulsion that give their names peculiar significatory energy and force, with all the openness and undecidability of a compressed anecdote. This is comically—and one-sidedly—the case with the composer Niels Wrschowitz, whose antipathy toward the connotations of his first name, and its contradictions with his last, drives him to great lengths to disavow it, and with it, with all sympathies with the Scandinavian world per se. It is similarly, though less one-sidedly, comical in the case of both Dubslav and Czako, who, too, are in conscious and continued relation to the undesirable, but also unavoidable, associations of their names. But it is most fully and
complexly the case with Melusine, whose name carries the most, and the most magical, connotations. Woldemar says, “Anyone named Melusine should know what names mean” (Wer Melusine heißt, sollte wissen, was Namen bedeuten), and Armgard adds, “Oh, you never think of anything but fairy tales and, because your name is Melusine, you think you have something like an obligation to do so”: she must actively engage, in her self-understanding, with the contingent meanings (Nebenbedeutungen) of her name as a determinate sign of magical character or identity. And even as in Before the Storm the potential absence of a supernatural world itself created a spectral space in the novel, so here the sense of secret connections to the natural world implicit in the name Melusine, even if “factually” absent, is reproduced in Melusine’s concerned connections to her name. And beyond even this, the magical connotations of her name are inextricably bound up with connections to the natural world, and these connections are themselves bound up with water, all of which connects her, and her name, with the ruling imagery system of the novel, grounded in the ominous, supernatural lake: at least for the reader, the connotative connections of her name connect her with the whole world of connection, and with the very principle of connotation itself.

It is not just things and names that are being treated as signs in this way: even the most everyday words are continuously being singled out, held up, and “read” for what they might mean as signs quite apart from the specific context within which they occur, and so, too, transformed into allegories of “another” significance beyond their immediate one. Characters incessantly talk about their talk, or rather, they incessantly read their talk for the other meaning hidden, and revealed, in ordinary language itself. The examples are almost too numerous to warrant selected examples, but word choice is constantly being parsed for what it connotes about class (“enter into matrimony” [vermählen] vs. “get married” [sich verheiraten]), generation (“novel” [Roman] vs. “tearjerker” [Schmöker], “timely” [zeitgemäß] vs. “opportune” [opportun]), profession, region, or the personal associations (Vorstellungen) one can or cannot link to it. As these examples attest, the associations themselves can suggest a breakdown of shared associations, a sense...
of division within or dissolution of the common fabric of language: but even then, the disassociations are eliciting associations, connections, and extended commentary from the characters. Over and over again, fine-tuned attention is paid to the connotative as opposed to the denotative dimension of words—which is to say that words are read both as apart from the manifest order or associations in which they present themselves and, instead, as very much part of another, hidden order of associations; as both independent and enmeshed—again, like omens and anecdotes.

With this downplay of denotation, and so too “content,” comes, as it were, a downplay of the language world of the text as, strictly speaking, mimetic or referential. Rather, with the focus on connotation comes a figuration of the world in more metonymical, relational terms, terms dependent on a different kind of likeness, that of relation itself—a transformation, I’d suggest, of the classical notion of a sympathetically linked cosmos into the abstract and ordinary of language itself: of world logos into lingual logos, material Umwelt into symbolic Umwelt. Characters are keenly focused on divining the Verbindungen, the Beziehungen, the connections and relations that a word (every word) sympathetically evokes—including the sympathies and antipathies that can inhabit a single word and grant it its polysemous character, such as when Melusine declares, “Nice is not a nice word,” or Adelheid, “There is always a difference between reckonings and reckonings,” or Wrschowitz insists that Dame and Madame are incomparable in meaning. Even as “things” assure that the characters inhabit a world readily transformed into allegory by entering into language, and even as names assure that characters inhabit a world of omens in which they themselves are transformed into and bound by language, so the foregrounded associative character of speech itself assures that the world those things and names and characters inhabit is itself of the same order and nature as that which has long supported such allegories and omens and connections (even in its dissolution): the supernumerary, supplemental world of “magical” correspondences that accompanies and interpenetrates the “realist” world of mere reference, content, and ordinary meaning.
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There is a related, albeit different thematization of language in the novel, one that is also part of the same reimagining of the traditional magical world of sympathetic relations in more abstract and everyday lingual terms. This is the aforementioned thematization of language as Gespräch, Plauderei, Klatsch, Causerie—as casual conversation, small talk, chatter: which is to say, the transformation of both language and sympathiea, and language as sympathiea, into a form or medium of social interaction and connection.\(^{125}\) We see this from the beginning to (almost) the end: in the dinner party at the Stechlin manor early on; the tea party at Adelheid’s cloister; the gatherings at the Barbys and the outing to the Egg Cottage; the after-party to Dubslav’s failed run for political office and that to Woldemar and Armgard’s wedding, and so on (and on). Such a foregrounding of the conversational mode is a hallmark of Fontane’s novels, but it functions rather differently here, due in large part to its subsumption to the overriding concern with the topic of “the great connectedness of things”—that is, with the theme of connection itself, in both its constitution and its threatened demise.\(^{126}\)

**Sympatheia as Sociability (Simmel)**

This shift in the realm of connectedness not only into language but also into the social relations experienced behind and through language is decisive for the form that the magical, sympathetic world assumes in the novel, and so too in Fontane’s late realism. It is a form of connectedness that was brilliantly theorized under the name of sociability or Geselligkeit by Fontane’s younger contemporary, the sociologist Georg Simmel, himself a pivotal figure in the move toward modernism.\(^{127}\) Other critics, most notably Willi Goetschel, have recognized some of the affinities of Simmel’s analysis to Fontane’s novel, although none with an eye toward the magical and sympathetic dimensions at stake for both writers.\(^{128}\) For this reason, I’d like to consider in some detail Simmel’s account of “sociability,” to contemplate how it maps onto our concern with
the magic dimension of Fontane’s novel, and especially in its relation to language.\textsuperscript{129} We will then need also to explore how the novel challenges, inflects, or exceeds Simmel’s model, and how that impacts the role of the sympathetic relations at play in the work.

Simmel bases his account of sociability on two guiding principles. First, that society, or \textit{Gesellschaft}, is to be defined as an active, reciprocal relationality, whose significance lies in its formation of a unity out of its individualized (but similar-ized) elements. It is an interaction or \textit{Wechselwirkung} of certain forces of both attraction and repulsion that draw men into “a being together” (\textit{ein Zusammensein}), a correlation of relations that work reciprocally.\textsuperscript{130} It is, that is, a participant realm without distinct subject/object positions but instead one of mutually determining, affecting, animating relations. Second, Simmel posits that a distinction can be made between the material forces of sociation or \textit{Vergesellschaftung} and their immaterial, well-nigh spectral “Form,” which transforms the mere juxtaposition of isolated individuals (\textit{das isolierte Nebeneinander der Individuen}) into a (momentary) “unity.”\textsuperscript{131} That is, it is a supplemental, attendant, invisible realm in which the real binding power and significance of the unity lie, a binding power and significance that Simmel designates as sociability or \textit{Geselligkeit}. Of course, sociability has always been a quality of the sympathetic world model; and in defining its nature in terms of these two principles—as an attendant immaterial realm and as a reciprocally unifying relationality of forces—Simmel reproduces in sociability key terms of classical \textit{sympatheia}.\textsuperscript{132} What is new or different is that here \textit{sympatheia} is, as it were, being defined \textit{only} in terms of sociability, of a purely human realm, and so is also, though this goes unsaid, about nonrelation, nonsympathy, nonunity.

In addition to this unspoken removal of connections to a broader ideal of natural life, there is a second removal, one that Simmel does speak of, this one based on the distinction between the material and immaterial forms of those forces on which sociability is based. A \textit{dissociation} occurs in which these forces are no longer fully connected to what Simmel calls “life,” no longer inseparable from or bound to their material objects and conditions. Instead, they come to interact freely among themselves and
for their own sake: they establish a dynamic of their own apart from or alongside that of their “entanglement” (Verflechtung) in material life, becoming “shadow-bodies” (Schattenkörper) in a “shadow-realm” (Schattenreich). This is the basis on which Simmel draws his analogy between the conditions of sociability and those of art and play. We’ve seen the intimate connection between the hidden worlds of sympathetic relations and art (qua metatextuality) before. But the addition of play, while in a certain sense nothing new, does seem introduced to underscore the new, more fragile or tenuous condition under which the sympathetic world is functioning—which is to say, to underscore the possibility of detachment or dissociation from the real world, of an unreality distanced from any actuality.

Simmel delineates three modes of relation that may obtain between this abstracted, spectral realm and “life.” First, sociability can become wholly disconnected from life; even as “art” (Kunst) can become “artifice” (Künstelei), and “play” (Spiel) “playing” (Spielerei), so too can sociability become the equivalent of what conversation might often seem to be in Fontane: mere chatter, Geschwätz. Second, this abstracted immaterial realm of forces can in turn come to shape the very stuff of life (Lebensstoff). Simmel doesn’t dwell much on this, but the way this “shadow-realm” can invisibly and forcefully impact and determine material life is of course decisive for an understanding of the sympathetic Umwelt—and often enough in Fontane, as “a social something” (ein Gesellschafts-Etwas) that seems both to function as such an immaterial binding order and to be strangely alienated from a more expansive, sympathetically conceived nature.

Third and most significant for us, Simmel also insists that for all the autonomy and immateriality ascribed to these spectral forces, they still retain an essential connection or link to their origin in the “realities of life,” which keeps them “always still laden with life” and imparts “their depth and power.” The dynamic of the one is underwritten by the other: “life” remains a determinate category or force, and it is the shaping and abiding power of life on or beneath the forms of the sociable (and the aesthetic, and the playful), and not the reverse, that proves decisive—or should.
It is this crucially and surprisingly realist—and also magical—connection and claim that lends the realm of sociability what Simmel calls *symbolic* significance, and which he several times mentions as going unrecognized from the perspective of a mere naturalism or rationalism. Rather, the realm of sociability is an inherently symbolic—or, as we’ve called it, allegorical—realm, and it is this that makes it realist, and keeps both the sociable and the realist intimately connected to the contagious forces of a sympathetically conceived “life.” (This might seem to be already hinting at vitalism, a proto-*Lebensphilosophie*, but not quite: life is still exclusively social life for Simmel, a major point of difference from Fontane.)

Simmel further defines sociability as a feeling, an affect, but not a personal one. Rather, he sees it as a shared, connecting, contagious experience, as a mutual or reciprocal determination (*gegenseitiges Sich-Bestimmen*) of attractive forces—which is to say (though he doesn’t), sociability is a mode of *Stimmung*, socially rather than psychologically conceived. In fact, Simmel insists that for the affect (or *Stimmung*) of sociability to emerge, the particularities and uniqueness of the individual must be momentarily dissolved or left behind; sociability is a relation or condition in which, for all its sense of heightened engagement, subject identity and autonomy are subsumed into the associate whole. For this to happen, there are two modes of *dissociation* that, Simmel says, must be enforced, two sets of bounds that need to restrict the realm of interactions. On the one hand, objective, external attributes such as wealth, social position, or erudition must be left out or behind—the very distinctions or realia on which one would imagine a social realism to depend. And on the other hand, so too must subjective, internal attributes such as mood or individual disposition—the very elements or factors on which a psychological realist identity would depend. But sociable man is neither socially real nor psychologically constituted, and “exists nowhere except in sociable relations.”

This momentary opening in the objective “historical” fabric of life is a feature sociability shares with anecdotes, which not surprisingly play a key role in Simmel’s account (more anon); the relinquishing of mere psychological subjectivity is a feature it shares with other manifestations of sympathetic engagement or participation—of the
kind of identificatory participation we have designated as key to magical experience, with its characteristic mix of complete self-engagement and negation.\textsuperscript{142}

The reason for the required suspension of both the socially, objectively real and the psychologically, subjectively real is equally important for understanding sociability as a variant manifestation of the sympathetic world (and so too of \textit{Stimmung}). Sociability calls for interaction, \textit{Wechselwirkung}, among \textit{Gleichen}, those who are “like” one another; it must constitute a realm of homogeneous similarities and resemblances out of the myriad heterogeneous elements of its material universe.\textsuperscript{143} Properly speaking, only what is—or better, can be made—“like” is part of its interactive, relational unity (that contiguity, even contact, is also requisite seems to go without saying: only elements or subjects in immediate contact with one another can participate in sociability). The gift of discovering, constituting, and maintaining that order of similarity—and Simmel stresses that it is never really quite manifest on its own: the world of multiplicity and difference is what is apparent, every bit as much as it was for the Neoplatonists—is one that Simmel calls “tact” (\textit{Takt} or \textit{Taktgefühl}).\textsuperscript{144} And tact is a mode of reading: not only in negative terms, in its divining the differences in both oneself and the others that are to be left unnoted, but also in positive ones, in its reading of resemblances, similarities, co-incidences, and impersonal connections. Again, the reciprocality of these similarities and of their reading is significant: while everything depends upon the interpretation of the momentary conjunctures of the social occasion in terms of a similarity to the self, that self is also in some sense moot, and the center and even source of the similarities must lie outside oneself, in the interactive whole. Indeed, an individual’s capacity for sociability might be measured by his or her ability to read and so realize this shared realm outside the self; and to bring as wide a field of different elements into active relation as possible and still have the sense of unity or concord prevail.

Simmel singles out three occasions within which sociability is especially likely to manifest itself: social games, coquetry, and conversation or \textit{Gespräch}. The first two are for the most part marginal to our concern with \textit{The Stechlin}.\textsuperscript{145} But for both Simmel and us,
the single most important location or occasion for sociability is
the third, conversation or *Gespräch*. It is the presence of its
immaterial “shadow-realm” that distinguishes sociable conversation
from mere empty chatter or *Geschwätz*, as which, from a purely
naturalist perspective that does not recognize this unspoken di-
mension, it must appear. The actual matter of the conversation, its
semantic content, serves only as the material vessel for the mani-
festation of this other, symbolic order: the subject matter does not
have significance in itself but only derives its true or real meaning
“from the fascinating play of relations that [it] create[s] among the
participants”—a play or realm or experience of what Simmel also
calls binding or *Bindung*. And as he stresses, it is in order that
the symbolic significance of this attendant, parasitic, and unspoken
play of relationality dominate that the significance of the “matter”
of conversation must be, or become, secondary, relatively *insignif-
ificant*, even apparently trivial—in a word, small talk (*Plauderei*) as
the purest form of language that embodies the connecting forces of
sociability and so produces its sympathetic realm.

Simmel specifies two formal elements of conversation that facili-
tate the play of sociability. Both touch upon issues of temporality
in determining how small talk comes to embody this “other” play
of forces. First, he notes how the animating flow or movement of
the conversation must be maintained without in any way becom-
ing goal-directed or purpose-driven. Rather, its connecting thread
must display the qualities of *Zufälligkeit* and *die ganze Austausch-
barkeit*, of chance and complete exchangeability. With respect to
the former, this means that it needs to remain outside the teleologi-
cal fabric of sequence as consequence—an attribute of conversa-
tion in the ordinary real—and embedded instead in the seemingly
aleatory serial logic of chanceful, “happy” correspondences and
connections, open to the knight’s move of mildly magical connec-
tions or associations. With respect to the latter, what Simmel calls
“exchangeability,” this means that the logic or force (the *logos*) con-
necting the individual elements of the unfolding series must be both
grounded in perceived or discovered resemblances or similarities—
in a perceived likeness between them, or even in the language in
which they are couched, that allows one to be easily exchanged for
or linked to another—and sufficiently part of the common shared context, external to but encompassing each individual participant, that the thread can be taken up, ex-changed, and extended along a relay of participant speakers, exercising alike the knight’s move of reading out of each present moment the omen of one’s own similar, upcoming addition, spreading contagiously outward and onward at once.

It is this latter point that Simmel especially foregrounds when he defines sociable conversation as the purest and most sublimated form of “a relation that wants to be nothing but relation” (*einer Relation, die sozusagen nichts als Relation sein will*)—perhaps the clearest expression of how sociability is indeed a modern variant or relation of classical *sympatheia*. And it plays a key role again in the second of the formal elements he discusses, namely, the special place of the anecdote in such conversation—an element we’ve already had occasion to note as of special significance to the magic reading of Fontane’s novels. For Simmel, anecdotes are important first because of their temporal quality: they are short, self-contained, without immediate temporal connection to the present moment, and without needful extension, all of which makes them ideally suited to maintaining the mobile pace of conversation in its nonteleological unfolding. But they are equally important for the kind of extension they do invite. On the one hand, the anecdote is a form in which the context of the individuality of the teller completely disappears, vanishing into “the shared consciousness of the circle,” a dissolving of subjectivity (and psychology) through participation we’ve noted before as characteristic of magical being. But on the other hand, the anecdote is a form, an opening, in which all can participate equally (*gleichmässig*), can read, interpret, or simply receive and make connections to his or her own Umwelt, unencumbered by the teller’s original context—and so of course not only receive but also supplement or relate with another similar one, so as to continue to forge and relay the contiguous chains founding the realm of similitude on which sociability is based.

Simmel ends his discussion by returning to its original theme, namely, the necessary relation between the realm of sociability and “life,” its ties with the reality of life out of which it weaves its own
The Chain of Things

fabric (die Fäden, die sie mit der Lebenswirklichkeit verbinden und aus denen sie ihr . . . Gewebe spinnt). And he adduces several different historical examples to illustrate what happens when this “life-form” of pure connectivity and relationality loses its connection and relation to the sphere of life itself—and so, too, by implication, underscores the importance of preserving this broader, more encompassing mode of relationality at the heart of sociability. As he emphatically phrases it, “All sociability is only a symbol of life . . . but it is even so a symbol of life.” The examples he offers for the potential dangers of lost connection are historically remote, the knightly brotherhoods of the German Middle Ages and the courtly society of the French ancien régime. But clearly the aristocracy of his own Prussian present provides the more proximate impetus for his analysis as a whole. It is just this example that Fontane’s novel addresses as part of its exploration of the “great connectedness of things” as resituated within language, and especially language as the site for sociability—and to which we now return.

Stimmung (Space)

Like Simmel in his essay, Fontane in The Stechlin is engaged with sociability as a modern manifestation of the magical “shadow-realm” of sympathetic relations and with language in the form of conversation as the primary vehicle for its realization. Even as things such as the glass globe, the aloe plant, or the clock dissolve or are taken up into lingual allegories, so does language itself dissolve into symbolical “sociability”; even as names and words in general transform from denotation into connotation, from referential meaning into associational linkages, from identity into similarity, so too do talk and its participants pass over into the unspoken, immaterial realm of connective Geselligkeit. And like Simmel, Fontane too—and even more insistently—is concerned with the complex relations that obtain between the realm of sociability and “life,” in all its objective material reality; with both the necessary exclusions or dispersions of the latter for the realization of the former, and the desired connections or obtrusions without
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which “small talk” becomes mere “chatter.” Finally, like Simmel, Fontane too is interested in the formal means by which the magic of sociability is achieved and momentarily maintained, particularly in the realm of language.

However, there are two distinct ways in which Fontane’s engagement with sociability—and more specifically, with sociability through language—is fundamentally different from Simmel’s, and both have consequences for the sympathetic relations (the connectedness of things) at stake in the novel. First, although sociability is undoubtedly at the center of the unifying relationality behind and within conversation in The Stechlin, it is not actually a term or vocabulary that Fontane employs to characterize or explore this spectral play of forces. Rather, the governing model for thinking about sociability—and especially in and through language—is one mentioned as only implicit in Simmel, but that we know as central to the magical realm in Keller, namely, Stimmung. As we will see, Stimmung is a term that occurs almost obsessively in multiple, linked forms throughout the novel, especially in the context of conversation: as Stimmung, Verstimmung, Mißstimmung, Zustimmung, Übereinstimmung, Bestimmung, Umstimmung, and even as Stimme(n) and Abstimmung(smaschine), as well as in numerous verbal and adjectival variants—all in various ways part of the Verbindlichkeit, the sense of obligation, of binding ties, of the novel’s social world and its imagery of binding threads (Fäden), “tying on” (anknüpfen), and so on.154 As in Keller, Stimmung is thus also here hardly restricted to an interiorized subjective realm, but instead (and again) exists in the interaction between the participant subject and the external world, although as in Simmel and in contrast to Keller, the external relational sphere seems itself by and large restricted to the human world (and human language). Nonetheless, in ways not true of Simmel’s “sociability,” the concept of Stimmung as it emerges out of the nineteenth century necessarily brings with it the broad range of connotations we discovered in Keller, including a far more macrocosmic sweep encompassing the natural world or Umwelt, a world beyond the merely human and even beyond language itself. As we will see, Fontane draws in these connections as well, linking through the associate word–group of
Stimmung the realm of sociability to his overarching concern for the “great connectedness of things,” with significant consequences for the magical, supernatural dimension of the work (suggesting, for instance, why divinatory presentiments [Ahnungen] can become, modestly, part of sociability).

The second distinct difference of Fontane’s engagement with sociability has to do not with its greater outward extension and umwelt-lich vibrancy but rather with its inner retreat and temporal fragility; with the unraveling of the shared language on which sociability depends for its material basis. Simmel’s model presumes a stable ground in common language, and we’ve seen how Fontane’s novel shows that ground giving way under the strain of historical time, threatening a loss of sociability (or Stimmung). One of the several thrusts to this added factor, in both its solvent and its temporal qualities, is, we’ll see, intimately connected with the greater extension inherent in sociability qua Stimmung—namely, as the novel progresses and the gaps in language and, concomitantly, in sociability begin to widen, there is an increasing tendency to attempt to (re)constitute connections to a realm beyond both the social order and language, indeed to that realm excluded by the modern restriction of the sympathetic Umwelt to these two, to (re)establish relations with the mute world of nature in its most magical, sympathetic form. Whether that attempt succeeds, whether access to the divined alternative world is opened up, whether such a participation, such a fulfillment, is indeed possible—this becomes increasingly integral to the future at stake in the novel.

But before exploring these differences from Simmel and their consequences for the sympathetic order and divined future in Fontane, let us consider where the two overlap, or rather where their differences emerge out of the shared context: in the constitution of sociability or Stimmung in and through small talk, and in the depiction of those forces that threaten its Verbindlichkeit, its binding sense of ob-ligation. As in Simmel, for the Stimmung that is sociability to emerge through such talk, there is a need in the novel for participant individuals to abstract themselves from the concrete realities of their material objective lives in order effectively to be joined and taken up into the conversational thread. This entails
tactfully attending to the outer and inner boundaries barring the intrusion of objective, external elements such as social position or political views and of subjective, internal ones such as mood or psychological need. Peter Hasubek offers a perceptive reading of how the small talk between the Countess Melusine and the mayor Kluckhuhn happily unfolds between these bounds, deftly excluding differences in class, education, and their personal stakes in the occasion of their meeting in order to achieve a momentary bond of likeness or Zu-stimmung (accord). And there are numerous similar occasions, in some of which the narrator explicitly remarks on a character’s efforts not to overstep these lines in order to preserve the Zustimmung.\textsuperscript{155} These limits define what we might call the spatial extension of the sociable Umwelt, an Umwelt no longer simply synonymous with the world as a whole, limits that must be maintained for the unified relationality (the Stimmung) to hold.

The significance of these bounds is as evident in their breach as in their keeping, and in ways that can both threaten and, more surprisingly, strengthen the woven fabric of ob-ligation or Verbindlichkeit. Only occasionally are these breaches of a purely subjective nature. As mentioned, the narrator himself mostly abstains from crossing this inner border and so keeps us and his characters in the more sociable realm: as is said of Dubslav at his funeral, “His life lay open, nothing in it was hidden, for nothing needed to be.”\textsuperscript{156} And so it is often only the inability or unwillingness of a character such as the pastor Lorenzen or Armgard to enter into the talk that hints at the abiding presence of this purely subjective realm. However, breaks in the outer limits are quite common: perhaps most comically near the beginning, when Rex and Krippenstapel both interject into the conversation embarrassing surpluses of erudition about ecclesiastical architecture, bringing the sociable moment to an abrupt halt, an interruption only smoothed over (and so bounds and bonds restored) by Woldemar’s remark “Nothing is harder than to arrive at certainties (Bestimmungen) in this area.”\textsuperscript{157} Equally harmlessly, the businessman Gundermann near the beginning works in an “equivocal” manner to pursue political ends beneath what should be mere polite conversation; far less harmlessly, Princess Ermytrud inserts her religious interest in
Dubslav’s conversion or Umstimmung beneath the apparent accord or Zustimmung of their talk, and Baruch Hirschfeld his economic interest in Dubslav’s finances into their talk—with both leading to discord or Verstimmung and a breakdown in social relations.\textsuperscript{158} There are also instances where Simmel’s outer limits of objective life have become so personalized by characters as almost to become the otherwise absent inner limits: Adelheid with her fiercely imposed restrictions on matters of religion or class, the composer Wrschowitz on all matters related to Scandinavia, or the critic Cujacius on questions of art.

The effect of these transgressions is twofold. On the one hand, and as Simmel predicts, they often lead to a tear in the weave of the sociable, a momentary opening and intrusion of a gaping, almost uncanny silence needing as quickly as possible to be covered up to restore the sense of Stimmung on which the characters suddenly almost desperately depend.\textsuperscript{159} We see this when Woldemar works to overcome the silence following Krippenstapel’s architectural lecture, or when Wrschowitz’s political rhetoric at the Barbys’ house simply silences the others: “Everything went quiet, so that there was nothing for the Count to do but somewhat belatedly express his halfhearted Zu-stimmung.”\textsuperscript{160} Such opening silences expose the fragility of the unified realm, the anxiously foreboded loss of its communicative connective network. And they invite both characters and readers to divine an even greater looming silence behind the talk, a silence ominous and, in the anxiety it provokes, pregnant with both significance and futurity—indeed its significance in its very omened, apparently fated loss of futurity. (And we note the complexity of levels: if sociability is the unspoken immaterial realm behind the concrete matter of conversation, then this silence is the equally unspoken immaterial realm beyond sociability—a silence seemingly associate with that of the still, supernatural, always ominous lake.)

On the other hand, these moments of transgressive intrusion of the objective, material real into the (merely) sociable Umwelt also secure the micro-macro threads and ties to “life” that sociability requires to sustain its vibrancy and vital force: whether in the form of Gundermann’s or Dubslav’s introjection of their political proclivities,
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Wrschowitz’s or Cujacius’s of their aesthetics, or Adelheid’s or Lorenzen’s of their religiosity. Such intrusions not only secure and maintain relations and connections to the (social) world outside of sociability proper. They also occasion the generative friction or conflict that Fontane’s novel, in contrast to Simmel’s model, suggests as necessary for sociability to self-realize: the antipathetic repulsive forces that are a part of, rather than apart from, the sympathetic attractive forces at work in conversation. In short, such boundary-overstepping moments can both threaten and secure, weaken and strengthen, the sociable order; its connective binding forces operate both from outside and within, extensively and intensively.

In either case, the reason for the observance of these restrictions in the first place is, as in Simmel, to generate a sphere of the similar or *gleich* out of the myriad, actually heterogeneous individual elements of the momentary assemblage. For this to be achieved requires characters with a gift for divining, inventing, and sustaining similarities out of a world in which, materially, they hardly appear. This indeed requires tact: as Hasubek observes of the conversation Melusine manages with Kluckhuhn, it unfolds as if between two speakers of similar value and rank, because of her perceptive glossing over of their differences in social and educational standing; we see the same in the opening dinner party when Woldemar seeks to establish a connection or *Verbindung* between Captain Czako and the forester Katzler, one achieved as a result of the social graces of all concerned. But it also requires more than simple tact: it requires a special kind of imagination and, as part of that, a special kind of reading, and this because, almost exclusively, the “like” must be sought in the language of the small talk itself. For the most part, the differences in subjective sensibility or objective social circumstances are either so great or so unknown among the momentarily contiguous conversants that they must look and attend to the actual words spoken to find a point of contact on which they can latch their similar, related, connected response, a “catchword,” as it were, some turn of phrase or image that can be responded and added to in kind and in turn (“catching” like a cold, contagiously). We see this, for example, in the opening dinner party, where Frau Gundermann reads the insignia of the Alexander Regiment on
Captain Czako’s epaulettes and transforms it into a reference to Alexanderplatz in her native Berlin, which then becomes transformed again, by Dubslav, into a reference to Russia in years past; or how, at the same event, Frau Gundermann’s reference to rats in Berlin leads to Czako’s reference to the Pied Piper (or rat catcher [Rat-tenfänger]) of Hameln and rat terriers as “rat catchers,” and then to his underground adventure in Paris with such rat-hunting dogs. Reading out these correspondences, or rather divining in the speech of one’s interlocutor the point of contact to which one can connect and out of which one can draw something similar, serially—this is what makes for the magic weave of sociable, catching conversation, for the constitution of a space of similitude that binds. And this proves another reason why so much self-conscious attention is paid to language in the novel and why there is a tendency to transform everything into language, associational, even allegorical language: language is very often the very basis for the likenesses, the similarities, on which sociability depends.

There are clear differences in the novel between the various characters’ abilities to produce this realm of likeness, with respect to not only the limits that need to be set in relation to the broader world or Umwelt, but also the variety and quality of connective elements that can be encompassed within the conversational sphere itself—and so too the peculiar quality, fullness, and durability of the Stimmung at stake. This ability has much in common with what Simmel calls personality and Max Weber all-but-magical charisma: it is perhaps best compared with what Henry James calls the “associational magic” by which a central character can render those around her “portentous,” with that character’s presence “spreading and contagiously acting . . . vibrating in the infected air” and thereby imparting the “tone” to the setting. The primary representatives of the contrasting extremes of this ability are the Stechlin siblings as seen in their respective hosted meals, but each has, as it were, as-sociates (their “like”): Adelheid in Rex, Wrschowitz, and Cujacius, and Dubslav in Czako, Melusine, and Count Barby. Indeed, in the contrast and affinities between and within these different sets of characters, the novel engages a wide range of similar and opposing realms of sociable extension.
Adelheid’s sphere is the most restricted and the least magical, the place where sociable binding is the most difficult and the most open to discord or Verstimmung. The narrowness of her sphere, which the narrator explicitly describes in both aesthetic and spatial terms (“her profoundly prosaic nature, her Brandenburgian narrowness”), is determined not only by the many matters that need to be excluded, but also by the need for the entire assembly of individuals simply to agree (stimmen) with her on those matters that are taken up—by the reduction of similitude to sameness. This is especially experienced during the visit to Adelheid’s cloister by Rex, who is in any case already the character most like her. He is repeatedly constrained to express his accord or Zustimmung, even his “complete Zustimmung,” in order to secure her and the occasion’s gute Stimmung and avoid anything discordant (Verstimmliches): anything that might contrast or be at all unlike occasions silence on either his part or hers, and neither one comfortably. And despite or rather because of this almost exaggerated need for uniform, monotonal Stimmung, Adelheid is also described as lacking the power “to hold the conversation and circle together,” leaving out those more given to playful poetic association (Czako and his momentary companion, Schmargendorf) as well as those simply left with nothing to say (Woldemar and Triglaff).

Dubslav’s joined assemblies and conversations also continuously strive for Stimmung, and are punctuated by repeated references to Zustimmung, by silent gestures of Zustimmung, such as nodding or joining hands, and by similarly repeated references to Verbindlichkeit, connecting threads or Fäden, and even Sympathie. But unlike with Adelheid, the Verbindlichkeit, Stimmung, and even Zustimmung do not depend on sameness, but instead encompass a wide world of difference, contradiction, and even opposition without losing the sympathetic connections. Indeed, the heterogeneity and expanse of oppositionally (or antipathetically) joined elements and participants clearly strengthen the fabric of unifying relationality. This is paradigmatically the case at the opening dinner party, where revealingly Czako is more in his element and Rex more challenged to establish ties (zu knüpfen): where poetic associations of similitude animate the language; where contrasting
sides of the same catchphrase are given equal or like force (“Had I said the opposite, it would have been just as right”); where the boundaries of exclusionary tact can be innocuously crossed in matters of taste (Czako’s rats) or of politics (Gundermann); where the particular participants linked in sociable small talk can be joined, loosened, and rejoined in new, different pairings and still maintain the binding unity in the increased interactions, wherein new similarities and points of contact are sought out, discovered, and spun out, so different from the fixed pairs at Adelheid’s tea; and perhaps most tellingly, where, like the moments of loosening, the moments of silence are not interruptive or exposing but supporting, included, contributory. Indeed, Dubslav can sit quietly and simply listen to the weave of different conversational threads extending out around him and silently express his Zustimmung and thereby display precisely that gift (that associational magic) that Adelheid lacks, of holding the conversation and circle together. It is this wide-ranging, emanating connective force with Dubslav as its silent sympathetic center that gives the spatial breadth to his sociable sphere, with topics extending from Berlin to Paris to Moscow and beyond, so different from Adelheid’s “Brandenburgian narrowness” at Cloister Wutz and so similar (and so connected) to the magical Stechlin lake, with its equally wide-ranging, emanating, world-encompassing connections and its underlying silence—with its sympathetic/connective magic so modestly but also convincingly replicated in the associational magic of Dubslav’s sociability.

**Stimmung (Time)**

Although here presented spatially, as the sphere of sociability, conversational Geselligkeit and Stimmung are also achieved temporally in the novel. After all, the connecting threads and their various interruptions unfold only in time, and so display properties best suited to allow the required pace, the mobile flow and freedom from the all-too-real progress of purposive action or plot. As Simmel suggests, these properties include the serial logic of seemingly chanceful, happy correspondences and connections outside the
teleological fabric of unfolding consequence, and grounded instead in discovered, linking similarities and resemblances; and a quality of “ex-changeability,” a (contagious) capacity to be caught up and moved along a relay of participant speakers so as to constitute a shared nexus external to but binding each individual alike.

We have a glimpse of the building of such an associational chain in the example of “Alexander” just mentioned from the opening dinner party, as it moves from Czako’s uniform to Frau Gundermann’s Berlin to Dubslav’s Russia, all in ways contrary to historical sequential time. But a far more telling example comes in the outing to the Egg Cottage, where we can see not only the kind of links formed in small talk contributing to Stimmung and sociability, but also the contributions made to both by the surrounding natural setting and silence—precisely those traditional elements of Stimmung beyond the merely social and lingual that Simmel’s model leaves out and Fontane’s seeks to reengage. Moreover, while avoiding the kind of teleological thrust and purposive action Simmel notes as anathema to sociability and Wellbery to Stimmung, the conversation here also does seem to have a hidden direction, a remote if absent end, and thus to acquire a type of future force and ominous quality. However, like the divine communication that can occur only where human intention is absent, this direction or end is not that of the participants but of the author, whose metatextual presence will come to fill that of the text’s natural and silent spaces.

The entire episode of the outing to the Egg Cottage takes place under the sign of Stimmung. It begins with the declaration “All were in that sort of cheerful Stimmung which inclines one to find everything beautiful and charming.” And it will end with the hand-clasping union or Bund among all the major participants—though notably not with the more intimate, exclusive, and plot-driven engagement bond between Woldemar and one of the Barby sisters (more anon). What occasions the opening Stimmung of the still loosely assembled group at the steamer landing is the ringing of bells—a well-established figure for Stimmung—both on the boat itself and from the surrounding towers of the city. Melusine comments on the disparate variety of these towers and wonders whether all can be brought together in a single group; but her
friend, the Baroness, decrees, “A tower’s a tower,” and so supplies the requisite *Gleichheit* or similitude at the level of language that will underwrite their unity—and so, too, in the chiming of those bells and linking of those towers, the omen of *Stimmung* that will structure the episode, the readiness or *Bereitschaft* that *Stimmung* always includes as a futural dimension.  

Although this prelude foretells the eventual binding experience of the episode, the *Stimmung* takes a modulated while to unfold, in ways that underscore its temporal quality. Dropping to a low point soon after setting out, it proceeds in three broad movements or chains—and it is important that the chains are movements, and the movements chains—that temporally speaking go from present to past to future, as if, in order for the temporal order of *Stimmung* to assert itself, it must first detach from the mundane order of present, objective sequence.  

The outing proper begins in silence, with the role of talk taken over by that of landscape description, rendered temporal by the movement of the boat; a viewing of the “colorful alternation” (*buntem Wechsel*) and “rapid alternation” (*raschem Wechsel*) of the changing scenery, whose linked, serial unfolding takes the place of talk itself.  

The scenery only slowly—and even then never completely—frees itself from “the things of the everyday and workaday world” and so opens up to the natural sphere; and even so does the talk, once it resumes, struggle to raise itself above, to move itself beyond, its prosaic ground and present ordinary time and into the free space of genuine sociability. That is, natural *Umwelt* and conversational flow are related, connected, linked, and, as in *Delusions Confusions*, *Cécile*, or *Irretrievable*, the connection with the natural realm is crucial for the release of sympathetic forces and relations in the human realm.  

We see the desire for such movement beyond the ordinary in Melusine’s initiating attempt to elevate the “thing world” of the landscape into associative language, and thereby to activate the associative, sympathetic forces of both sociability and the natural setting. She points, in passing, to a small island and calls it a “Lovers’ Isle,” looking to provoke an associative, connected response from Woldemar that would touch on and so reveal his still unrevealed amorous attractions. But Woldemar works to frustrate the magic
(Zauber) of that name by evoking a more prosaic one for the same place (Rummelsburger) and, equally important, he claims that she has completely failed to “read” his soul with her remark: the name fails to connect or associate with either the objective or the subjective sphere. The same initial failure of language to detach itself from, and so animate, the prosaic matter of the objective everyday comes when Woldemar similarly deflates the connotations of the name “Egg Cottage” and reduces it to the flat denotation of “a so-called pub (Lokal),” which almost leads to discord or Mißstimmung in the group and does lead them to avoid the Egg Cottage at first and instead try to recapture the opening Stimmung on a communal walk, again drawing on the power of movement. Even this is not yet enough: Barby and the Baron fall into a conversation in which their “persistent differences” in matters of religion and politics prevent Zustimmung, and the others all but bicker at the sight of a factory marring the landscape on the farther shore—a factory that produces ladies undergarments that also renders what should be mysterious, hidden, and suggestive prosaic and all too present. It is only when the group turns around and heads back downstream with the river, toward the Egg Cottage, with the intention of observing “life on the river (Fluß)” and, at the insistence of the old Count, the sunset, that the possibility of restored Stimmung asserts itself—which is to say, only when uncompromised natural imagery asserts itself—natural imagery, moreover, that easily yields to allegorical extension (temporal allegorization no less).

The second movement or chain begins once the sun sets and the group reassembles in the Egg Cottage. The restored potential for Stimmung is signaled—indeed omened and abetted—by the appearance of connecting points of light both in “the whole pub” and along the river and farther shore; in the latter two cases, these are moving lights. Their appearance repeats or echoes the micro-macro chiming of the bells on the ship and in the city at the outset, and so too—in both the image and the echoing—reasserts in the setting a trope for Stimmung, and with it a somewhat elevated and dematerialized presence to the Umwelt. And this time, the Stimmung implicit in the connected points, the movement, and the immaterial lift of the lightened setting manages to manifest itself in
the conversation as well. It does so precisely through the building of the type of swift-moving, “chance-ful,” and “exchangeable” associative chain Simmel specified, a chain that moves both the conversation and its participants out of the concrete present of their place and time.

The “thing” that provides the material anchor for the chain (much as the insignia on Czako’s uniform did at the dinner party) is the Swedish punch about which the group now tightly assembles, and from which the word “Swedish” gently detaches to begin the conversational flow. Melusine links it to the Scandinavian-averse Wrschowitz; his absence evokes in turn the freedom to venture forth beyond the type of constricted sphere associated with him (and with the first part of this outing) and into a more open, encompassing realm, such as we saw associated with Dubslav and his lake (both, we’ll see, symbolically present beneath what follows). In a rapidly moving, animated conversation of world-encompassing sweep—moving from Sweden to England, Berlin, Ruppen, Portugal, and Russia—and oscillating freely between polar views (“I’d have thought the opposite”), the chain of linked, connecting points extends ever forward. The Swedish punch that joins to the anti-Swedish Pole leads Woldemar to declare his own “Scandinavianism,” and to embrace, in addition to the punch, the “Swedish glories” of “iron and courage” (Mut und Eisen) and “Säkerhets Tändstickors” (a kind of match), to which series Melusine then adds the Swedish Nightingale, Jenny Lind. This in turn takes the conversational chain into a realm that is, significantly, detached from the material setting in both place and time: Melusine tells of her personal contact with Lind in London as a child (“Before my time,” says Woldemar), to which Woldemar couples an account of his own past encounter with Lind’s picture in the National Gallery in Berlin, and adds to this a description of a picture of Lind in the pastor Lorenzen’s room in Stechlin and the story of his former teacher’s long-ago, schoolboy “first love” with the singer—which leads to the spectral presence of the absent Lorenzen amid the assembled group. The conversational chain has, by its own formal, linking, and abstracting force, led the assembled participants to a point of harmonized unity: “I think so, too,” says Melusine in
agreeing (stimmen) with Woldemar’s sympathetic reading of Lorenzen’s love story, and “Armgard and the Baroness nodded”: the linked similarities in the conversation draw the participants into a similarly linked similarity among themselves.\textsuperscript{189} And that the end point of the thread is Lorenzen is both chanceful—the conversation breaks off only because the group must hurry to catch the boat back—and fortuitous: \textit{glücklich} or happy in both senses. Lorenzen will return as the connecting thread of the third movement and will yield there something of a premonition of the end of the novel: in both ways, he becomes a figure charged with futurity. (To pick up on the metaphorical potential of the Egg Cottage, first hinted at by Melusine and then momentarily thwarted by Woldemar’s literalism and now, with language once again open to its associational dimension, again available: this place has incubated and hatched the future of both this episode and the novel as a whole.)

The third movement, which culminates in the bond or \textit{Bund} of joined hands, begins with a fortuitous, \textit{glücklich} return to the water. The two previous figures for \textit{Stimmung} reappear in similar (not the same) form, echoing, connecting, and extending their own chain. The chiming of bells aboard ship and in town is picked up by the clanging below in the machine room and the crackling of distant fireworks on shore; the strings of connecting lights similarly reappear, now along both banks and mirrored close up in the surrounding (and moving) river; and the sounds and lights get linked, extended, and lifted up to new, otherworldly, immaterial heights in the exploding fireworks that appear in the air.\textsuperscript{190} And even more: beyond or beneath these two figural frames of \textit{Stimmung} for the coming \textit{Bund} comes another set, twinned and contrastive: the encompassing frames of silence and the darkened landscape. Despite the clanging of the ship, “otherwise everything was still, so still, that the women broke off their talk”; and although they can see the fireworks, they are so removed from the actual ground and earthly, social context that the explosions are not actually heard.\textsuperscript{191} The reigning silence brings the natural landscape to the fore: “Then everyone became silent again and looked out on the landscape, which lay there . . . in deep darkness,” with the very darkness, indeed invisibility, of the landscape adding to, even unleashing its
allegorical, dematerialized, suggestive potential, and reinforcing its link to the silence (similarly blank, open, ominous) as well.\textsuperscript{192}

Such a silence and landscape are indispensable to the sociable bonding that the subsequent conversation is to generate, every bit as much as the movement of the boat and river. The silence is from the first associated with the presence of the ever-silent and all-but-invisible Armgard: as Woldemar says to Melusine, “It suits some to talk and some to be silent. Every being-together needs its silent one (Jedes Beisammensein braucht einen Schweiger).” And although Armgard is the most prominent Schweiger present in the scene, she is not the only one. After all, the absent-but-present figure who is manifested in and silently holds together the conversation, namely, Lorenzen, is also frequently identified as a Schweiger. And, of course, even beyond these two, we have the dominant Schweiger in the novel and in this episode, too—not a person at all but the lake Stechlin, and its presence-in-absence as the underlying force or figure behind the binding relations of this “being-together” seems everywhere signified. We have it in the landscape as water; in the conversation in all its binding geographical reach; in the nearby lights connecting to the distant fireworks’ “cannon shots” as the lake to even more distant disruptions; even in the seemingly passing mention of the telegraph poles with “their wires strung from post to post” that emanate out from the shore.\textsuperscript{193} That is, beyond the concrete world of this episode and its associated, manifest conversation and lending it its unifying significance and relationality is a silent invisible allegorical realm, closely linked to the natural world and, in the spectrally looming form of the lake, bringing with it its ominous force—not least in the way the “all still, so still” (alles still, so still) here portentously echoes the opening “All still here” (Alles still hier), and so hints at a different temporal (and communicative) order, one that proceeds by linked, repeated likenesses rather than causal sequence.

The conversational chain emanating out of “Swedish” and leading up to Lorenzen in the second movement is not directly picked up again in the third. Rather, a new, similar but different one begins, even though reverting to the same unifying center—and it is significant that a new chain, a “byway” back to Lorenzen’s
spirit-like presence, must be and can be forged: the associational pathways structuring this kind of conversation do not follow a linear consequential logic, just a serial one that takes off from the present moment’s material and emanates out from there.\textsuperscript{194} It is worth noting, too, that the new chain implicitly incorporates two elements of the earlier series leading up to Lorenzen that at the time seemed especially dissimilar and inert, namely, the “Säkerhets Tändstickers” and “courage and iron”: the igniting match that transforms the earlier lights into exploding fireworks, and the spirit (\textit{Mut}) that transforms Lorenzen from a figure of infatuated love into one of a new kind of heroism. Conversational elements do not need to be linearly or immediately present to become links in the associational chain; they evade even this kind of temporal restriction, much as in the “all still” that echoes the novel’s opening or the upcoming funeral description that will adumbrate its end—the same sort of “other” temporality and imbrications we ascribed earlier to anecdotes.

The new chain begins with the fireworks and with them elevates the conversation into ever more ethereal realms. A discussion of the fireworks leads to mention of chance passing fancies “flying up into the air” (\textit{in die Luft fliegen}), which “heightens the charm” (\textit{steigert doch den Reiz}) of things such as “[hot-]air balloons” (\textit{Luftballons}) and “airship battles” (\textit{Luftschifferschlachten}), which leads to other topics that “float in the air” (\textit{in der Luft schweb[en]}), and from there to Lorenzen as an “aeronaut, an ‘Excelsior’ man and climber, someone from the real higher sphere” (\textit{Aeronaut . . . ein Excelsior-, ein Aufsteigemensch, einer aus der wirklichen Obersphäre}).\textsuperscript{195} Two points are of special interest. First, how even as the imagery system of the fireworks lifts up that earlier one of the lights and leaves behind the material base of sound earlier embodied in the chiming bells, even as Melusine’s whimsical embrace of “airship battles,” as the Baroness says, entails forgetting “the reality” (\textit{die Wirklichkeit}), even as the language itself leaves behind the concrete denotation of the fireworks and rises via associative similitude to ever more abstract, symbolic forms (to Lorenzen as a “climber”), just so does the sense of “reality” at stake rise into the symbolic, immaterial, spirit realm. Melusine’s “forgetting the reality” opens up to
“the real (wirklich) higher sphere,” which houses the kind of spirit heroism and spirit love connected with Lorenzen and his desire “really to live” (wirklich zu leben): a heroism as far removed from noisy conflicts as the group from the exploding fireworks, and a love as elevated from earthy sensuality as those same fireworks. Not incidently, this “real higher sphere” is also associated, via a further link of Lorenzen to the poet João de Deus, with literary art or Dichtung—which, in its own metatextual presence at this (and every) moment in the novel, is also part of this silent and immaterial “higher” realm and reality, and porously imparts, invisibly communicates to, the scene its own binding, unifying force (parallel to, indeed indistinguishable from, that more “subterranean” force of the similarly absent-but-present lake).

The second point of special interest is how, even as the conversational chain works by continued extension of the similar without ever falling into mere sameness or repetition, with continued handing over and on of the linked chain with the prospect—even the requirement—of continuous extension on into the future to sustain it, so does this very property of extension and “exchangeability” become the concrete subject-matter that the conversation latches onto and then, via the knight’s move of associative reading, omens forth for the assembled group itself, in both its macro- and microcosmic form. Woldemar quotes Lorenzen saying about João de Deus, “[Supposedly,] there aren’t men like that any more. But there are the like, there must be the like or must be again” (Es gäbe dergleichen nicht mehr. Aber es gibt dergleichen noch, es muß dergleichen geben oder doch wieder geben). The very associative, serial, and similarizing property of casual conversation that is needed to assure the maintenance of the “shadow-realm” of sociablity is also, we’re told, required for the continuation of “our entire society” (unsre ganze Gesellschaft); and although this we’re not told, we know that the futural imperative of that same property is of special, personal significance for the speaker of these lines, Woldemar. After all, the critical if unspoken side issue of this outing is Woldemar’s unrevealed plans for his engagement bonds, about which we earlier saw Melusine attempting to solicit signs. Those bonds signify and embody a crucial part of the novel’s overriding concern
with the future itself, with the chain of similitude that will extend the Stechlin line: they signify to both Woldemar and the reader the need to find “the like” (dengleichen), a new but similar someone to succeed not de Deus but Dubslav, and so for Stechlin time to proceed forward by repeated likeness—by kinship, as it were.197

Even as the conversation seems to move from present “real” and denoted matter toward ever more abstract, immaterial, and absent connoted referents, and even to extend into an as-yet-unforeseen future (“be again” [wieder geben]), so too does the unifying end of its chain point beyond the conversation itself, the end point that invests it with its symbolic but real significance from that beyond, binding it together, significantly; the point that animates and inhabits the silence behind the spoken, and does so from some as yet unseen future.198 That unspoken, spectral point—that “shadow-body”—binding together the conversation and its participants into a sociable unity (with futurity) is, I suggest, the absent Dubslav, the novel’s belated “silent one” and the figure for whom, we just said, “the like” must be found and given again.199 Just as the lake is the hidden allegorical presence lurking behind the natural Umwelt and investing it (or rather its Stimmung) with ominous force, so too is its human counterpart in Dubslav there (in the Stimmung of the conversation) as well, and to similar ominous effect—indeed, the presence of the one Stechlin, the lake, behind the setting silently and sympathetically summons forth the other, Dubslav, behind the conversation and accord (Bund). We see this in how the figure of João de Deus, first evoked for his associational resemblance to Lorenzen, subtly shifts, extends, and transforms in significance when an account is added on of his death and funeral, an account in which already can be divined the similar fated end not of Lorenzen but of Dubslav, as indeed comes at the novel’s close. Even as the beginning of the novel has its echo here in the “all still” of the water, evoking the lake, so the end in the funeral, evoking Dubslav: the two Stechlins who sympathetically share in the other, outside-of-time “shadow-realm” and to whom are attached the novel’s ominous force.

In implicit confirmation of Dubslav’s spectrally and ominously evoked presence and its crucial link to the very nature of language
and sociability, when the present, associated group does join hands
to materially manifest the bond or Bund of this outing, they do
so in the name of the simple letter D, pointing at once to Dub-
slav and the quality of language that makes that point appear. As
has been true of the novel in general but of this episode in par-
ticular, the conversation from the outset has engaged in name play
and even name changes, as part of its foregrounding of the simi-
lar metamorphic, serial character of conversation as it transforms
from one topic to the similar next, from one participant to the
next, and often discovering and enacting those similitudes and ex-
changes at the level of language itself. So too here, in the silent,
unspoken transformation of D from de Deus to Dubslav: as the
Baroness declares, they shall move, as it were, from C to D as the
joining object of their Bund. Language here, in its most elemen-
tal form—a letter—and in its most elemental, arbitrary series—the
alphabet—does the work of both symbolizing, signing, or con-
noting an “other” referent beyond the immediate denoted context
and, by that, binding together through its hidden associational ties
its entire order in sympathetic relations. That is the real magic, the
magically real of this binding moment, this micro unified world,
this conversation: language itself.

One further point. The quality of D that is foregrounded to ex-
plain its binding force is the italicized feature that “he” (de Deus
and Dubslav) lived “not for himself” (nicht für sich). This under-
scores the essential impersonality, even nonsubjectivity that Sim-
mel describes as intrinsic to sociability, that we have described as
equally intrinsic to the immersion in Stimmung and sympatheia in
general, and that proves inherent too in language once it has shed
its merely denotative referential character and opened up to the
associative play that allows D to reach out and attract connections
to other referents, other subjects. It is, I suggest, just this essential
impersonality that can also explain why this union (Bund) domi-
nates the outing rather than the alternative in the more personal,
purposeful, and earthly engagement of erotic ties—even subsumes
those attractive forces (that “love”) within its own and so, too,
determines the quality of its futurity. Woldemar’s engagement will
require the dissolution of his autonomous individuality in order for
him to become, as it were, a participant element himself, a “like, again” (*wiedergegebener Dergleiche*): it will not be based on a present, material, individual feeling but on a perpetuated future of the Stechlin line through a chain of similitude. This is the same kind of perpetuated chain on which sociability and language—and sociability through language—depend. The connection between the chains of the novel’s family line and its associative language is something introduced at its outset in the very word *Stechlin*, with all its open, nonspecific, multiple serial reference, and at the same time, and by that very property, its binding, connecting links. So it seems fitting that, in ceding to this serial, futural imperative, this unspoken and yet commanding force behind and within conversation proper, Woldemar should come to embrace the silent (and almost subjectless, almost invisible) Armgard over the voluble (and individual) Melusine, and thereby connect, too, to that other Stechlin in the linked chain, the lake, its biding omen, and its magic: for it is from this silent, and all-but-unfeatured, source that the present moment derives its principle of meaning, movement, and futurity. As Woldemar will later say to Armgard, “So the future lies with you *(Die Zukunft liegt also bei dir)*,” as it always has in the silent “shadow-realm” behind the apparent real.203

**Verstimmung (Anecdote)**

While the Egg Cottage episode demonstrates the associative chains that, as a property of small talk (*Plauderei*), produce the immaterial, unspoken realms of sociability and unifying *Stimmung* and so, too, a future force, the following episode, “Election in Rheinsberg-Wutz,” foregrounds instead that other element of sociable talk singled out by Simmel and already shown to be central to the ominous in Fontane, namely, anecdotal narration. But it does so in a context where the fabric of sociability and *Stimmung* is unraveling, loosening its connective threads and hence, too, its share in sympathetic magic and the future. The anecdote at the center of this episode—and arguably at the center of the novel—concerns the magically restorative blood-bath taken by a “compromised”
Siamese princess. Significantly, it is the most magically and supernaturally charged anecdote in the novel. But even as the binding power of the sociable realm seems threatened in this episode by its own artifice or nonreality, so too is the magic—and magic reading (which is to say, the futural force)—of its anecdote.

It might seem odd to characterize this episode, and particularly the specific scene in which this anecdote appears, as suggesting the breakdown of sociability and Stimmung, since the sense of social bonding or Verbindlichkeit and the concentration of affirming references to Stimmung are no less present here than in the Egg Cottage episode. This is especially true of the day of the election itself, which begins with Dubslav “in an excellent mood” (in ausgezeichnete Laune), a mood that becomes a heightened Stimmung when linked to the “magnificent fall weather” and the circle of his closest associates, all of whom converse in the most unified and obliging or verbindlich manner on their own little boat trip and shared repast, with “not a trace of discord (Verstimmung)” and instead “accord and cheerfulness” (Zustimmung und Heiterkeit), with everyone “in common accord” (allgemein zugestimmt),” nodding Zustimmung, shouting, “Yes, yes” (Stimmt, stimmt), and even joining voices (anstimmen) to sing in unison. Nonetheless, it is telling that this section actually begins under the sign of discord (Verstimmungen), indeed potentially “fatal discord” introduced by Adelheid, and this reveals something crucial about the Stimmung at stake in what follows.

The source of the foreseen Verstimmungen broached by Adelheid in a letter to Woldemar comes from her insistence that, in forging his marriage ties, he limit himself to the sphere of the Middlemark aristocracy: any reach beyond that would occasion the deadly discord. And as different as the Stechlin siblings otherwise are when it comes to the sociable sphere, in this episode it is their similarities that come to the fore. For the Stimmung of Dubslav and his associate aristocratic circle is in near-fatal disconnect with that of the larger social order within which they find themselves. The disconnect is itself thematized in terms of Stimmung: counterpointed to the chain of accord or Zustimmung generated by and binding Dubslav and his group is the Stimmung of the larger social sphere or Kreis exposed through the election. Despite the
efforts “to unite all the votes behind Dubslav” (alle Stimmen auf Dubslav zu vereinigen), “what the Stimmung in the district really was” (wie die Stimmung im Kreise wirklich war) is captured by the votes, the Stimmen themselves, which go decisively to the progressive or modern party with their “voting machine” (Abstimmungsmaschine)—and “the people’s voice, God’s voice” (Volksstimme, Gottesstimme).

This is notably different in effect from the counterpointed scenes with the servant class woven into the Egg Cottage episode (passed over by us). There the effect was to widen the expanse of the connected world in ways that increased rather than lessened the sense of unified relationality, whereas here it is far more to lay bare the loss of relation between the microcosm of Dubslav’s social circle and the macrocosm of the wider social sphere. The two Stimmungen are radically unconnected, and hence under the fateful sign of Verstimmungen. As Lorenzen will later put it in his all but metatextual and prophetic exposition to Melusine, “The old families are wasting and throwing away the sympathies” (Die alten Familien . . . vertun und verschütten [die] Sympathien). The former unity or Einheit of sympathetic relations within the social order is being dissipated, undone, and with it the connection to the broader world and future.

This is the thematic context within which the anecdote occurs: the story of the princess of Siam and her restoration or Wiederherstellung by means of a bath in animal blood. The proximate cause for its telling is another incidental story, the gossip (Klatschgeschichte) about wayward Lilli and her abandoned but then returned-to fiancé cousin, that moves the conversation away from the immediate, objective political context into the more detached sociable sphere: one anecdote invites another, contagiously. Like other anecdotes in Fontane, these introduce an opening in the concrete, historical, and diegetic fabric of the text, and present a different logic or significatory structure that calls for a different interpretive approach for characters and readers alike—that approach we’ve called the knight’s move of divinatory reading.

Reflecting this opening, the princess story lacks all objective temporal markers, is geographically far removed and set in the fantastic realm of the Orient, and is presented as at once marvelous
(märchenhaft) and factual (tatsächlich); and it is just this combination of the magical and real that becomes the focal point of its reading.\textsuperscript{210} Again like other anecdotes in Fontane, the interpretation involves not simply a reading of the story’s event in itself, but rather its analogical reading, its connection to the immediate present context and its future. In this case that context is twofold, encompassing both the just-told, embedded story of Lilli and the occasion of Dubslav’s failed bid for votes (Stimmen). But beyond this—for the reader if not the characters—it also involves a reading of how it might link up with other, similarly temporally detached anecdotes besides that of Lilli, other openings in the fabric, suggesting cumulatively an “other” force or order independent of ordinary historical sequentiality, or plot consequentiality, with determinative import for the future of the primary narrative.

It is in this last respect that this particular anecdote most stands out. While there are several such overarching serial chains of temporally discrete anecdotes built up across the narrative—such as that linking together significant acts accomplished in silence or from a distance—these have interpretive but little predictive force. But this story, although having only limited associational extension through linkage to other anecdotes, does attract predictive power, does acquire or draw upon an “other” ominous force and presence.\textsuperscript{211} It does so through its links to the super/natural imagery system that dominates the novel as a whole: the water imagery that begins with the lake and then runs as widely and subterraneously throughout the text as the lake does throughout the world, uniting characters as diverse as Gundermann, Rolf-Krake, Melusine, Sponholz, and Dubslav, and episodes such as the Egg Cottage outing, the boat trip taken here by Dubslav and his group—and in this anecdote carried through in the image of the bathing princess. It is just this linkage to the ominous lake and to the ruling authorial metatextual imagery system—much like the more traditional stars in Before the Storm—that in-forms (parasitically infuses) the magical thinking at stake in the anecdote itself and gives it futural force for the novel: the crucial combination of the natural, the metatextual, and the magical that invites and supports divinatory reading.
The crux of the anecdote is itself a futural one, albeit in that involuted way in which the only future imaginable is a repetition of the past—an inextricable aspect of divinatory time in general, wherein a past event is read in the present for its similitude with what is to come, but also and for that very reason creating a tension with the relentless unidirectionality of historical time. The anecdote revolves around the issue of restoration (Wiederherstellung) or, more specifically, restoration of purity (Reinheitswiederherstellung), and the italicized catchphrase “Blood makes good again” (Blut sühnt): the princess, having lost her original purity after being violated by a foreign prince, undergoes a ritual bath in animal blood and emerges with her natural innocence restored, and so able to rejoin society and marry (once more).\textsuperscript{212} The characters hearing the tale apply it to the story of Lilli and her fiancé, and use it to predict reconciliation. The reader, however, is led to consider the further resemblance to the broader but still immediate context of the lost election as well, and to speculate that the “restoration” at stake is also that of the Prussian aristocracy in the sociopolitical sphere.\textsuperscript{213} Certainly the magical thinking—the belief in this restoration of the original state—that preoccupies the auditors of the anecdote seems as much if not more a reflection on this latter future than that of Lilli’s return to her cousin. But there are still other details to the anecdote that point beyond even this immediate context to other readings of it as an omen of “restoration,” details that also bring with them the same question of the magical thinking at stake in their predictive force.

First and most obviously, the whole anecdote, with its tale—seconded by that of Lilli—of a “compromised” woman given a second chance at marriage and finding happiness therein, and, moreover, a woman magically transformed and renewed through her immersion in a bath, would seem to suggest a connection to Melusine in both her actual (tatsächlich) and her fairy-tale-like (märchenhaft) identities, and especially to omen forth a restorative marriage of Woldemar and Melusine, restoring both her and the Stechlin bloodline, and perhaps even in ways that bring back a human connection to the elemental, magical world of the lake. This seems the nearest, most forceful divinatory reading of the anecdote. But, crucially, it
goes unfulfilled: and this is of decisive importance for other, related readings also charged with futural force that, taken on their own, might seem to point toward a restored magic world in the novel—readings that place special symbolic weight on “blood.”

“Blood” points in two directions independent of, albeit potentially subsumed by, that which tends toward Melusine. First, it links to the dominant theme of the widely desired continuation of the Stechlin bloodline. This theme is borne throughout by the issue of Woldemar’s engagement and occupies the closing lines of the novel: the fervent hope that, at this incipient moment of Dubslav’s and his social sphere’s compromised condition, Woldemar will rise up, extend the line, and lead to a renewal that is at the same time a restoration, a return to an original state in which the new becomes the old and the future resembles the past. To quote again what Woldemar says to Armgard right after his father’s funeral and just before moving back into his ancestral home, “So the future lies with you.” This is a hope—and so too an omen—that will factually be fulfilled in the novel. But its magical thinking, its faith in a stable temporal order independent of historical time based on extended chains of similitude—this faith is no longer fully embraced: its factual fulfillment is no longer truly fulfilling, not forceful enough to actually fashion the future.

Second and both more materially and abstractly, “blood” links the matter of renewal and restoration to the natural, even animal realm, and this in vital liquid form—connecting hopes for “restoration” to a literal immersion that links to the novel’s water imagery. In this way, it seems also to point, at this moment of the dissipation of the merely human sociable sphere as the site of Stimmung and its magic, to the possibility of a restoration of the earlier conditions of sympathetic relations in the natural world with its magic—a magical restoration via a restored magical nature. This would seem an even more radical return to an original state; and while this turn, too—omened forth in this anecdote—seems fulfilled in the future of the novel, its magical thinking, its faith in a vital, healing, animating reconnection with “life” also falls short, for all its attraction, an attraction equal to that of a well-nigh mythical repetition of the family line, and equal, too, to that of a restored Melusine as
Woldemar’s bride. In all three cases, the magic, the future, and the divinatory reading go unrealized.

“Everything Takes Place in Silence”

After the lost election, the novel’s concern with “restoration” qua “social” futurity comes increasingly to center on Woldemar. Indeed, the novel as a whole comes increasingly to focus on Woldemar and his social life and connections in Berlin. But the concern with “restoration” and magic—and, with magic, sympathy and its futural properties—continues to center on Dubslav and his life and connections by the lake. Once Dubslav loses the election—which is to say, once the Stimmung of his circle fails to connect with that of the broader social sphere—Dubslav enters a new phase, a different pursuit of connecting to the macrocosmic order, with a different relation to futurity, and a different relation to language and signs as well. Increasingly—though significantly never completely—we see Dubslav loosen his ties to social life and conversation, and, as it were, to the forward arc of historical time, including that of the narrative plot. Instead, we see him binding himself to the natural world and, closely allied with it, to both the lower classes (and their language-not-language) and “nature women” of the kind we first encountered in Hoppenmarieken and Marie in Before the Storm, and have here at the end of The Stechlin in the figures of the “witch” Buschen and her granddaughter, Agnes. It is a world that is at once an older, more primitive one and a more childlike, primitive one; a world that seems withdrawn even from the Christian era (embodied by Adelheid and Ermyntrud) and its faith in the Word and everlasting future life, into something far more ancient and earth-bound: a world of sympathetic magic, of silence—and of death. For what we discovered in Green Henry proves true here as well: death is inseparable from the silent sympathetic ties of Stimmung in the natural (and the metatextual) world, is indeed a defining force, a binding future.

Already in the immediate aftermath of the lost election, on the ride home afterward, we see the beginning of this shift in Dubslav’s
relation to both the social and the lingual realms. Traveling alone with his servant, he comes across “the old souse” Tuxen passed out drunk in the road and takes him safely back to town.  

The scene newly displays Dubslav’s sympathetic relations with the people of the land and of marginalized social status, sympathetic bonds outside those of objective social relations—Tuxen voted against Dubslav in the elections—and powerfully supported by the dialect-laden language in which they converse, so different from Dubslav’s, and the novel’s, normative social speech and thus signaling a different, less socially determined and more “natural” set of bonds at work. And we see the same shift again in Dubslav’s first, relatively early, and more crucial encounter with Buschen and Agnes, where the move to a new relation to both the socially excluded and non-“social” language is further coupled with a new relation to the natural world and silence.

Dubslav has gone for a solitary walk to commune, as we say, with nature—significantly at a moment when, we’re told, “the sun was already below the horizon, and only the red of evening still glowed through the trees.” Dubslav’s shift toward solitary communion with nature is one that gathers momentum from here on out, and although not always so openly allegorical as with this setting sun, with its Stimmung between the human and natural worlds, his communion is always a matter of ever more forceful participatory identification. One sign of this is that as he reflects on the lake and setting sun Dubslav also reflects on himself, in one of the very rare moments—even the first moment—of reflected interiority in the novel. It is a moment remarkable not for its content or insight (both endearingly simple), but for its connections with nature and for how it changes Dubslav’s relation to language. Language becomes silent, indeed as silent as the natural world in which he finds himself, a reinscription of language captured in the lines “While he sat, he looked out and drew figures in the sand with his cane. The woods were completely still.”

This new, twinned relation to nature and language is then extended through its link to Buschen and Agnes, the novel’s “nature-child,” also a social outcast and uniquely associated with vegetal life. Between them, these two women—very old and child-young,
and significantly women—encompass not only the temporal opposites of the present social order, the distant past and the still distant future, but also the twin sides of nature’s ever-present, primal originality, so independent of the present sociohistorical moment. And while Buschen and Dubslav will converse both here and in what follows in the same naturalistic language as did Tuxen and Dubslav, and to the same sympathetic effect, Agnes and Dubslav, both here and in what follows, will share in the same communal silence as that of mute nature and the lake, and to the same effect of silently forging sympathetic ties.223

Still, the shift in Dubslav’s sympathetic relations with the world is not really complete until he becomes entangled not with others but, instead, with his own natural, creaturely body.224 This begins in the section portentously titled “Sunset,” as Dubslav returns by open carriage from Woldemar’s wedding, again caught up in contemplating the landscape and in a rare moment of silent soliloquy, and enters his house—now solely occupied by himself and his dialect-speaking servants—and finds “his foot is swollen.”225 This is the first sign (the first omen) of his body being touched by hydropsy or “water sickness” (Wassersucht), contiguously drawn into manifest, subsuming sympathetic relation to the novel’s water world: the world of the lake (his lake: “the Stechlin”), with its own widespread subterranean sympathetic connections throughout the world; and of the text (his text: The Stechlin), with its own wide, imagistic (and so nonlingual) net of associative connections throughout the work.226 And it is surely significant that it is only with the emergence of his water sickness that Dubslav becomes capable, however modestly, of divination, of “magically” and accurately reading signs for their future force, and so joins the only other character in the novel invested with this gift, Melusine—also a water figure, also connected to both elemental and magical forces—with both thus now connected, too, to the lake and its portentous force.227

Once Dubslav’s body begins to be taken in and over by the water—to become linked and one with it—there are three different attempts made at a “restoration” of his well-being, as well as one, associated with the “new” doctor, rejected as “not very
sympathetic (sympathisch),” although one can also read his water sickness itself, and its slow dissolution of his body, as its own “restoration.” In any case, each of these three attempts is more or less explicitly a mode of sympathetic magic or healing; each is tied up with the “old” world of nature—and, significantly, with key elements of the novel’s magical-realist poetics as well. In this way, the fate—the future—of Dubslav, sympathetic nature, and the novel’s poetics become inextricably linked.

The first attempt is made by Dubslav’s old doctor, Sponholz, himself a water man, off to spend weeks with his wife in healing, restorative baths. He prescribes “just a few drops” of digitalis to be taken with but a spoonful of water: as Dubslav says after taking it, “Now it starts. Foxglove (Fingerhut).” That Dubslav uses the older familiar term and the doctor the more modern scientific one is itself significant. From Fontane’s early work on, the foxglove flower has appeared as a sign or Zeichen of the magical world, specifically of the witching world. It appears in Grete Minde (1880) as a “fairy-tale flower” (Märchenblume) whose petals fall on Grete as she lies in a field and portentously sign her as a witch. And it appears again in Cécile (1887) as the flower linking Cécile to the nearby Witches’ Dance Floor. In The Stechlin, this magical dimension is left implicit, unspoken and merely silently connoted—although its connections to the wider natural world (of “forest and field”) are underscored. But rather than appearing as the foxglove flower itself, and so an open sign of the magical or märchenhaft, it appears as a few distilled drops of digitalis, in what seems a sober, realistic, modern evocation of nature’s forces.

Nevertheless, and in just this form, these concentrated drops reveal their close connections to the magical: to the homeopathic “particules” and the micro-macro relations they suggest that we saw in Irretrievable, connections seconded here by the equally small doses of the equally supernaturally charged water Dubslav takes with the drops. Homeopathy, we said, was represented as a kind of sympathetic magic that operated according to the same underlying principle as Fontane’s realist poetics, of representing the macrocosmic through the microcosmic. So here, too, with respect not only to the foxglove flowers qua digitalis drops, but also
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to the greater (social) world qua Dubslav himself, and the even greater (social and natural) world qua the adjacent lake. The wide world of magic is not so much absent as it is transformed into a concentrated kind of realism, one that aims to restore Dubslav to the greater world and, through Dubslav, to restore the greater world (of sympathetic relations) to itself. It is an attempt every bit as dependent on its associative magic as on its “realist” power to achieve its “restoration”—in its own updated way, not all that different from the blood bath of the Siamese princess and its restoration of her kingdom.

The second attempt does not so much displace as complement the first, and it draws on (or in) the second principle associated by Fontane with homeopathy and also with his realist poetics, namely, “similia similibus.” This time the attempt is specifically thematized as drawing on “witches’ arts” (Hexenkünste). Dubslav turns to the outside-of-the-social natural arts of the old witch Buschen, who prescribes remedies of tea with club moss (Bärlapp) and cat’s foot (Katzenpfötchen) according to the witches’ saying (Hexenspruch) “The water takes the water away” (Dat Woater nimmt dat Woater). Dubslav repeatedly chants this formula to himself as itself an effective form of magic, even as he also works to allegorize the two teas and attribute their effective powers to their “world-history”-encompassing symbolic force rather than just some objective property. But again, for all the emphasis on their witching nature, we note that the operating principles of Buschen’s remedy are the very ones that have sustained the novel’s poetics from the beginning: from the associative play of language in relation to things and names, always powered by similitude and drawing in an immaterial, allegorical sphere; through to the associative play of sociability in characters and conversation, again powered by similitude and sympathetic relations and again drawing in a symbolic, immaterial world; to here, in the associative play of nature in the relation of plants to people—or rather, crucially, of water to water, thus evoking the overarching image of the natural but also supernatural and metatextual forces linking Dubslav (Stechlin) to the landscape (the Stechlin) and both to the novel (The Stechlin). Dubslav’s turn at the end to Buschen’s sympathetic magic in his
pursuit of “restoration” is not, then, a turn away from the realist world of the preceding novel but rather a turn, even a return, toward its governing center, its “nature.” It simply returns that sympathetic magic to its starting point, its ground in the natural world.

The third attempt or remedy completely encompasses the previous two—indeed, even as the traditional sympathetic cosmos might be said to subsume homeopathy—and brings the novel’s overriding and formal concern with the “great connectedness of things” at once into natural material and allegorical form. This is Krippenstapel’s honeycomb or *Wabe*, which is repeatedly described as embodying “the complete” or “the collective healing powers of nature,” drawing or gathering into itself the concentrated essence of the entire natural order—and, Dubslav adds, “if everything is in it, then it’s got club moss and cat’s foot and naturally also foxglove in it, too.” Early on, Krippenstapel’s bees had been representative of the social-political order; here that fades away, and the honeycomb becomes instead “a sign” (*ein Fingerzeig*) of the great web of interconnected nature. And Dubslav makes a point of taking into (and so of making one with) his body not just the liquid honey but the entire, more substantive waxen *Wabe* (*from* *weben*, “to weave”) as well. As with the remedies of both Sponholz and Buschen, Krippenstapel’s honeycomb translates or metamorphoses one of the dominant (and in this case, the dominant) poetic principles of the novel back into the natural world as the source of the desired “restoration”; and in turning to it as the embodiment at once of natural and allegorical forces, Dubslav (and the novel) is also returning to a mode of magic—indeed, the magic of the novel itself.

And yet for all this reapproach to the sympathetic powers of the natural world, none of it is of any real effect. The magic doesn’t happen: there is no restoration of Dubslav’s health. The omen of the restorative bath fails in this respect, too, and not just, as mentioned, in its prediction of Melusine’s “restoration.” The only restoration arrived at is the dissolution of Dubslav’s liquified body back into the watery world, and the only signs or *Zeichen* that prove reliable are those pointing to “the immediate future” (*die nächste Zukunft*) of death (“The signs are there, more than too
many”). Similarly, the silent and “still” realm behind or beyond language that Dubslav comes increasingly to participate in and identify with, to find himself prepared for and attuned (gestimmt) with, seems to be not so much that of a powerful natural life force as that of death; or of death itself as a natural force and as whatever life and future one might expect by joining it, water to water, beyond the healing redeeming power of “the Word.” But also, apparently, beyond that of a restored, sympathetic nature as well.

And it is not only the restoration of Dubslav’s health—and with it, of a natural sympathetic sphere—that comes up short at the novel’s end and all but shuts out the future. The restoration of the Stechlin bloodline—and with it, of the aristocrats’ sympathetic social world—that is associated with Woldemar, that was also omened forth in the anecdote of renewal-by-blood, and that, via Armgard as the vessel of “the future,” is similarly linked with the silent realm; this seems similarly to be of no real effect, to have lost its power and hold on the future. As mentioned, this portended future seems strangely involuted, a wish to secure the future by turning it into a return to the past and shutting out the forward force of sociohistorical time; a future with no necessary relation to the “real” future, which seems something else entirely; a chain of similitude extended into a very different world. If Melusine’s letter that closes out the novel is to be given its due force, then this particular future of Woldemar and the old aristocratic order is of no real significance (“It’s not necessary that the Stechlins live on”), and its potential loss is of the same order as that of Dubslav and the sympathetic natural order. Neither proves sufficiently real, neither omen of a sympathetic “restoration” sufficiently significant.

This leaves us with the only other future omened forth by the novel, the one associated with the child Agnes and her red stockings—Agnes, the silent child of nature and asocial status who is gifted with Dubslav’s weathervanes and weathercocks, chief among them the one driven (metaphorically) by water, and who both wears and knits away silently at her red stockings. Adelheid fears these stockings, “because they are a sign,” but Dubslav replies, “That doesn’t say anything, Adelheid. Everything’s a sign. What are they a sign of? That’s what matters.” Adelheid will read them as a sure sign
of a coming democratic or proletarian future, or more forcefully, of the end-time, das “Letzte.” And for all their different attitudes toward this possibility, Dubslav’s response exposes one of its consequences for signs themselves, one directly connected to the breakdown in language we mentioned before as endemic to this novel; but where then the issue was how the breakdown in language threatened the social sphere (in ways unforeseen by Simmel), here it is how the breakdown in the social sphere threatens language, or rather, the future of divinatory language’s futural force.

That is, Dubslav’s question “What are they a sign of?” points to the necessary failure of such divinatory readings, and of such omens, in a world where the common ground or shared order behind its significatory systems—whether of nature, society, history, or poetics—has been lost, ended. If the omen of the bathing princess fails because none of its signed “restorations” seem fulfilled, then that of the stockings seems fated to fail because, in such a severed world, it could signify so many things—anything—that it means nothing, and the future is closed; or if it does succeed, then that is only because what it portends is the end of the known world or reality, and so again, a closed future, as closed as Dubslav’s life and as in-significant as Woldemar’s future child. And I should stress how different this seems from the openness and undecidability of signs and omens in earlier Fontane texts and other realists as well, where the openness was still contained within a stable if polysemous world; here it is the signifying world itself that loses ground. Indeed, to give full weight to the novel’s last line, the only realm of “connectedness,” the only common ground of secure signification left standing is not of the world but of *The Stechlin* itself: which is to say, the very novel that is now finished, that we have just finished reading and that alone secures for the future the closed world of its significatory systems. Foucault claimed that literature was the last refuge of the ancient belief in magic and divinatory reading after the seventeenth century, and while I believe we have shown that not to be true through much of the nineteenth century, it does seem to come true here at its end, along with its faith in the future.

Of course, many of the directions that seem so melancholically arrived at and even ended in *The Stechlin* will have their own
future life, their own restoration in the modernist movements to come. The reemergence of immersion in an original, natural, sympathetic realm of forces outside language will occupy the vitalists and their Lebensphilosophie, even their blood talk, albeit with a symbolical sign system pointing more toward some distant past than future. Similarly, in the work of Freud, Proust, Benjamin, and others we will see the kind of temporal involution that turns the past into a secure repository for divining the future, albeit a future often enough itself already past: a reading forward that looks only backward and predicts the future only as a repetition of what has already been, leaving aside the truly new. There will also be some magical, futural thinking closely tied to expectations of social revolution, and of course a renewed emphasis on art itself as an all-but-autonomous, magical realm of self-enclosed and self-referential significance. In all these various ways, magic and divinatory reading will survive into and thrive in the European literature and culture of the early twentieth century. But for Fontane, the point is this: in significant ways, The Stechlin represents the end of both a strictly realist poetics and magical thinking. The same notion of a future has been taken away from both; both are thereby together robbed of one of their chief supporting forces—and the reader, too, of one of the chief determinants of his engaged participation. The insight we are left with is just how much of a common ground realism and magic—and with them, literary and divinatory reading—always shared, in their similar modes of associative signification and allegorical structuration, and in their shared cosmos of sympathetic relations and reasonings: a cosmos in which the real was often magical, and the magical could be real.