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Grenzen im Raum – Grenzen in der Literatur

Herausgegeben von
Eva Geulen und Stephan Kraft
„HIER IST DIE GRENE [...].
WOLLEN WIR DARÜBER HINAUS?“

Borders and Ambiguity in Theodor Fontane’s „Unwiederbringlich“

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Abstract


Theodor Fontane's “Unwiederbringlich” may be productively read as an exploration of boundaries. The historical context creates a distinction between bordered and unbordered spaces, between crossing thresholds and staying within limits. This double focus mirrors the text’s thematics, in which clear thresholds in morality and time are balanced against exhortations to relativism. The represented landscape reproduces this antithesis and functions as a symbolic map against which Holk’s and Christine’s actions and feelings may be read, charting trespass and ironic misunderstanding. A study of boundaries in the text reveals a complex and multifaceted spatial symbol appropriate to a literary exploration of thresholds in human life.

I

Theodor Fontane (1819–1898) had a lifelong sensitivity to the pregnancy and meaning of space and the world around him. Writing to Georg Friedlaender in 1890, he comments:

Es giebt doch wirklich eine Art genius loci und während an manchen Orten die Langeweile ihre graue Fahne schwingt, haben andre unausgesetzt ihren Tanz und ihre Musik.¹

Fontane was thinking of two places of his childhood when he wrote this, Neuruppin and Swinemünde, and in the letter, he goes on to describe them thus:

Diese Beobachtung habe ich schon als Junge gemacht; wie spießbürgerlich war mein heimatliches Ruppin, wie poetisch das aus bankrutten Kaufleuten bestehende Swinemünde, wo ich von meinem 7. bis zu meinem 12. Jahre lebte und nichts lernte.²

Here, in Fontane's own recollections of his life, opposing themes and values crystallise around divergent locations, becoming biographical symbols.

² Ibid.
Yet Fontane was not only aware of the moods and attributes of locations in a general sense. As Paul Schlenther noted, even “das Unbedeutendste“ can acquire meaning when seen through Fontane’s artistic eye.3 This essay will focus on the significance of a spatial detail, the boundary, and once again Fontane’s non-literary œuvre provides evidence of his sensitivity to this aspect of topography. A good example may be observed in „Die Grafschaft Ruppin“, as the wanderer-narrator describes his experiences at the convent, Lindow. Having walked through the convent’s grounds, he eventually realises he has entered a different garden, without having noticed a wall or a fence. Fontane comments on the absent demarcation between the two spaces, which in his eyes indicates the quality of the inhabitants’ relationship:

[Eine] Scheidelinie fehlte, weil der Trennungsstrich auch im Herzen nicht vorhanden ist und der Besitzer des Gartens Frieden und Freundschaft hält mit den Klosterfrauen von drüben.4

Fontane reads the landscape symbolically, ascribing meaning to the non-existence of an expected physical boundary. These reflections in his letters and journalistic work on the significance that places and spatial configurations have for human beings justify a detailed investigation of the represented world in Fontane’s literary œuvre, with a view to uncovering symbolic nuances that may contribute towards a fuller understanding of the texts; the fact that borders and thresholds specifically are an object of interpretative rumination points to their potential poetic importance within the novels.

Indeed, in many of Fontane’s novels space is recognised as an important mode of literary expression5, and the represented world in some texts can become a dominant aspect of these slow narratives: the market garden in „Irrungen, Wirrungen“, Hohen Cremmen in „Effi Briest“, and the lake in „Der Stechlin“ are good examples. Yet of all of Fontane’s novels, it is perhaps „Unwiederbringlich“ (1892) which is most obviously open to spatial analysis: as the only mature novel set outside Berlin-Brandenburg, the landscape of „Unwiederbringlich“ is of interest even for the simple fact of its distinctiveness within the œuvre.

The novel tells the story of an affable Graf, Helmut Holk, and his wife Christine, his adultery and its consequences. Though they have many happy years of marriage behind them, the narrative begins in a period of tension for the married couple, who appear to be drifting further apart; their personalities, values and interests seem incompatible, as Christine’s words to her husband confirm:


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Holk, a man of limited intellectual capacity, has a philosophy of „Leichtnehmen“. He is interested in agriculture, genealogy and his building projects. Christine is a woman of strong religious belief, with a tendency to self-righteousness. She is clearly aware, too, of her intellectual superiority over her husband, and scornful of his indifference to issues of importance to her: their children’s education and the construction of a family mausoleum.

Holk is thus pleased to receive news that he is expected earlier than usual across the water in Copenhagen, where he is a gentleman-in-waiting to Princess Maria Eleonore of Denmark. In Copenhagen, Holk is at first attracted to his landlady’s daughter, Brigitte, and then to the young Swede, Ebba von Rosenberg, a lady-in-waiting with a questionable history. During a prolonged trip to Frederiksborg castle, Holk finally succumbs to Ebba’s allure, but on the evening of their adultery, a fire breaks out in the castle and the lovers just manage to escape via the roof. The escape from the fire appears to Holk as a sign that a new life with Ebba is preordained, but his thoughts are a clever piece of dramatic irony. The state of shock into which Ebba and the princess have fallen prevents him discussing his plans and hopes with them before he returns to Holkenäss and breaks with his wife. Returning to Copenhagen, Holk finds himself rejected by Ebba. After some years apart, Holk and Christine are brought back together through the efforts of family members and a local priest, and they take up their old lives again in Holkenäss. Christine is however deeply unhappy; she is unable and unwilling to forget Holk’s infidelity, and eventually commits suicide.

The relative importance of spatial representation in the novel and specifically the text’s construction of two antithetical realms, Holkenäss and Denmark, were noted by Otto Brahmin 1891:


The function of these two spaces, and their correspondences with other oppositions, principally the differences between husband and wife, between wife and mistress, between taking things seriously and taking things easily in life, continued to draw attention through the twentieth century. Given the focus on difference and distinctiveness in the scholarly discourse, it is however surprising that the border as a spatial expression of separation in this novel of divorce has not been examined specifically in the past. This apparent oversight is all the more puzzling given the thematic prominence of thresholds in a novel that deals with middle age and adultery, and the relative frequency with which the reader’s attention is directed towards boundaries in the representation of buildings and the landscape.

6 Fontane, Werke [note 4], vol. I, 2, p. 607f. Page numbers in brackets throughout this text refer to this volume.
7 In: Fontane, Romane und Erzählungen [note 3], vol. 6, p. 487.
The purpose of this essay is to demonstrate that the border is a significant thematic and formal aspect of the novel. The discussion will begin by assessing the thematic importance of thresholds and borders in the text, and it will be argued that notions of limitation and boundaries are central to the questions that the novel raises. The analysis will then proceed to address the geographical and historical situation of the novel. Here it will be shown that the historical discourse highlights the border theme. More specifically, we will see that through the geographical and historical situation, Fontane creates an opposition between places which are boundary rich and places with few boundaries, and that he also introduces the question of crossing borders. The text’s represented world will then be studied under these two foci: we will examine how Holkenäs appears to be lacking visible thresholds, whereas these abound in the representation of Denmark, and subsequently consider Holk’s many border crossings, their problems and potential meanings.

It will be shown that „Unwiederbringlich“ ostensibly deals with issues in which there are clear boundaries, and that these once crossed, cannot be regained. A closer look at the text’s thematic and representational thresholds, however, demonstrates a more open-ended view. It will be argued that borders in the novel represent the text’s moral thrust and the recurrent theme of necessary self-restraint, and yet because many of the borders in the text remain ambiguous, ill-defined and often invisible, they also function to question the validity of prescribed moral codes and the idea that human feelings and conduct can be clearly compartmentalised. This informs our understanding of borders in literature more generally. If the border, a defined dividing line between two separate zones, appears to invite overly simple and reductive textual analysis, inappropriate to the paradoxical nature of literature, then Fontane’s text, „Unwiederbringlich“ demonstrates the capacity that the border has as an expression of irony and incertitude.

II

The novel’s title, „Unwiederbringlich“, announces a thematic and formal concern with boundaries, thresholds and points of no return. In the first instance, there are temporal points of change. This is, as Alan Bance argues, a novel about middle age. The Holks’ marriage is entering a difficult transitional period as the narrative begins: they are going through the challenges of managing their relationship in the face of diminished attraction, though there is still evidence that they love each other. The sense of change in their lives is mirrored in the text’s temporal references: the novel begins in autumn (cf. 572), and Holk returns to tell Christine about his plans for divorce at Christmas (cf. 773), a season which signals the birth of a new era. It is also possible to see Christine’s suicide, her transition from life into death, as one of the text’s most important temporal changes. Yet perhaps the most significant temporal boundary in terms of plot is left unclear. The novel leaves the reader speculating as to whether the marriage was destined to fail from the beginning of the narrative, or, if not, looking for a Wendepunkt in the relationship for which there are several candidates: Holk’s act of adultery (cf. 758), his departure from Copenhagen (cf. 621–627), the separation on Christmas Eve (cf. 773–779).

The notions of ‘open’ and ‘closed’ or ‘inclusive’ and ‘exclusive’ are also important motifs which recur in various guises throughout the novel. Through his adultery, Holk breaks his marriage’s exclusivity, its closedness from the rest of society. Yet the Holks’ relationship could already be described as open before the affair: Christine’s former school friend, Julie Dobschütz, becomes her main confidant (cf. 571), and the interference and influence of third parties is a distinguishing feature of the mature stages of the Holks’ marriage throughout the novel. Thus the novel poses questions about the extent to which close relationships must also be closed to others: it is arguably because Holk and Christine allow the emotional barrier separating themselves from the rest of society to fall that a rift between them occurs. In another variation, both Holk and Christine experience being outside, excluded from social groups: Christine’s decision that Holk should go to Copenhagen and that she should stay in Holkenäs (cf. 606f.) leaves her alone with her thoughts, while Holk is isolated after the affair.

Perhaps the most obvious boundaries that the novel discusses are moral limits. Holk undoubtedly crosses a moral line through his liaison with Ebba, and Christine’s suicide may also be seen as sinful in a religious sense, though this is more ambiguous. Yet the novel does not pretend that morality or life have clearly defined paths. Many of the most significant limits that this text discusses are relative: extremism on the one hand and restraint on the other are recurrent themes. Jost Schillemeit makes a convincing case that Holk and Christine are people without self-limitation and are exaggerated versions of character types found throughout Fontane’s work. Holk is like Briest but embodies the philosophy of „alles leicht nehmen“ taken ad absurdum; Christine resembles Adelheid von Stechlin, but is presented in a tragic, rather than a humorous light. Charlotte Jolles observes similarly that it is not Christine’s religion, but her dogmatism which causes problems. Thus the central problem in the Holks’ marriage is arguably not their incompatibility as they believe, but rather the real issue is a trait that they share: their inability to regulate their own dreams and desires. They know no bounds.

By contrast, characters close to the married couple frequently produce maxims on the theme of restraint and self-control: „Jedes Zuviel ist vom Übel“ (619); „der Ton [macht] das Gedicht“ (720); „Selig sind die Friedfertigen“ (591). Before Holk’s night of adultery, he receives a letter from his brother-in-law, Arne, which warns him:

„Muß ich dich darauf aufmerksam machen, daß in all unserem Tun das Maß entscheidet und daß der klügste Rat [...] sicherlich in sein Gegenteil verkehrt wird, wenn der, der ihn befolgt, das richtige Maß nicht hält und den Bogen einfach überspannt?“ (736)

The advice to which Arne refers is his own, namely that stimulating jealousy in Christine may help to rekindle the flame in her heart (cf. 736). For Arne, the problem is that Holk has gone too far, stepped over an invisible, but important line. In this social novel, Maß and the ability to generate the right Ton are portrayed as necessary condi-

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11 For example, the scheming of Arne and Schwarzkoppen (cf. 596–599).
12 This ambiguity is reflected in divergent interpretations. For an overview, cf. Grawe [note 8], pp. 611–613.
tions of successful human relationships and thus to happiness, at least as much as pre-
scribed, visible moral codes.

The notion of thresholds thus has an important role in the thematic weft of this text. Significantly, reflecting on how the text explores boundaries as a concept reveals that although this novel deals to a large extent with limits which are recognisable, such as borders in society, morality and even biology, most of the time this novel of death and adultery raises questions which it does not answer: many of the boundaries it points to are unclear or absent, and it is the reader who is left searching for them. This initial analysis seems to indicate that „Unwiederbringlich“ tells a story of transgression, but at the same time it forces the reader to reflect on the contingency, function and desirability of thresholds of all kinds.

III

Having established that „Unwiederbringlich“ raises questions about borders in a general sense, we may now consider the significance of the historical and political background to the novel in this light. On 21. November 1888, Fontane wrote to the editor of the „Deutsche Rundschau“, Julius Rodenberg, explaining the origins of his latest novel: he had received a letter detailing the adultery of Baron Plessen-Ivenack auf Schloß Ivenack in Strelitz and its consequences. In his letter, Fontane relates how he has relocated the events from their real life setting for use in his novel:

Dies ungefähr das, was mir Frau Brunnemann in Damenstil und Damenhandscrift schrieb. „Ich könne damit machen, was ich wolle – ich hätte es zu freier Verfügung.“ (Sie ist eine Cousine des Hauses.) Ich bin aber doch kluger Feldherr gewesen, was ihr nachträglich sehr lieb zu sein scheint, und habe die Geschichte nach Schleswig-Holstein und Kopenhagen hin transponiert, so daß sie jetzt zu kleinerem Teil auf einem Schloß in der Nähe von Glücksburg, zu großem Teil in Kopenhagen und auf der Insel Seeland spielt. Solche Transponierung ist nicht leicht. Ich ging sämtliche deutsche Höfe durch, nichts paßte mir, als ich aber Nordschleswig und Kopenhagen gefunden hatte, „war ich raus“. Nur Strelitz selbst wäre vielleicht doch noch besser gewesen und hätte meiner Geschichte den Ton des politisch Satirischen gegeben; nun klingt nordisch Romantisches mit durch.

This letter and Fontane’s long and detailed notes from his historical research testify to the importance of the historical and geographical situation in this narrative.

The events of the novel take place in the Holks’ home near Glücksburg in the far north of Schleswig, and in Copenhagen and Frederiksborg castle on the large Danish island, Zealand. The novel is set for the most part in 1859, during a period of considerable political tension between Schleswig-Holstein and Denmark. The two duchies had been joined through a personal union to Denmark since 1460, but were not integrated into the kingdom. Holstein had become part of the German Confederation, established in 1815, whereas Schleswig had not, and, to further complicate matters, despite Danish
pressure, the two duchies insisted they could not be separated, according to the 1460 treaty. In 1848, Danish attempts to incorporate the duchies led to an uprising, which was supported militarily by the German Confederation at first. However, the Prussians signed a peace agreement with the Danes in August of that year on behalf of the Confederation, and the Schleswig-Holstein forces were crushed. The London Protocol led to Schleswig being occupied by the Danes, Holstein by the Austrians. This unsatisfactory solution only buried the conflict temporarily, which eventually led to the 1864 Danish-Prussian War.

Fontane situates his novel in an historical context of disputed allegiance, separation and union which becomes a symbolic template through which the private fates of Christine and Holk can be read. The historical conflict between Schleswig-Holstein and Denmark creates tension in the novel’s topography between the place of the Holks’ marriage and the site of Holk’s adultery. The confrontational and divisive nature of the political situation mirrors and in fact contributes to the Holks’ worsening marital state, as Helmut and Christine support different factions in the conflict, Holk being pro-Danish, while Christine is in favour of Prussia and Germany, although neither Holk nor his wife want to see Schleswig-Holstein annexed by a foreign power (cf. 586–591). Furthermore, the historical setting creates its own sense of an irretrievable world, as to Fontane’s contemporary readers 1892, Schleswig-Holstein had by this time been incorporated into the Prussian state after Denmark’s defeat in the 1864 war.

While the function of the historical situation is generally well recognised, considering it within this discussion of borders in the text brings new insights. Firstly there is the fact that because of the war, the Holks live in a border state. Although the Prussians and their allies intervened ostensibly to prevent Danish domination of Schleswig-Holstein and to preserve its freedom, Fontane’s readers knew that Schleswig-Holstein had later been annexed by Prussia: seen from this perspective, the conflict was fought to decide where the border between the two states would lie. Indeed, the faction of Danes who wanted to see the more culturally Danish Schleswig made part of the kingdom were known as Eider-Danes, because of their desire to establish a border at the Eider river. Thus the border as a concept may be said to form a significant aspect of the extra-textual historical discourse.

Secondly, and more significantly for an analysis of the novel, borders are central to the way historical events are perceived and articulated within the text. When the political and military situations are discussed in chapter four, Holk implies that boundaries and the ability to cross them have been decisive factors in the 1848 conflict, and define the two combatants:

„Mit Dänemark vorbei! Nein Herr Preuß‘, soweit sind wir noch nicht, und unter allen Umständen haben wir immer noch die Geschichte vom Storch und Fuchs. Der Fuchs in der Fabel konnte nicht an das Wasser heran, weil es in einer Flasche war, und der neueste Fuchs, der Preuße, kann nicht an Dänemark heran, weil es Inseln sind. Ja, das Wasser! Gott sei Dank. Es ist immer dieselbe Geschichte, was der eine kann, kann der andere nicht, und so gut die Preußen ihren Parademarsch marschieren, über die Ostsee können sie nicht rüber, wenn es auch bei Klaus Groth heißt: „de Ostsee is man en Puhl.“ (586f.)

Holk continues his discussion of borders, when he decrees that the Prussian state will not last, because of its lack of natural boundaries:
The geographical or historical accuracy of Holk’s statements is not the important factor here. Rather, what is significant is that in the novel Denmark is being perceived and represented conceptually as islands, as boundary rich, compared with Prussia on the one hand and Schleswig-Holstein on the other. This mirrors Fontane’s topographical distinction between Schleswig-Holstein and the island of Zealand in his letter to Rodenberg. There is thus a conflict between bordered and unbordered spaces here. After all, the aim of the Eider Danes is precisely to create a border in Schleswig-Holstein, a land which understands itself as being indivisible, as remaining “ungeeilt” (648); though in Holk’s discussion of bordered and unbordered enemies, his own Schleswig-Holstein remains curiously unmentioned. Holk’s comments also raise the question about border crossings: having borders, in this case inhabiting islands, is linked to the capacity to cross them, while for those who live in unbordered spaces, boundaries remain paradoxically impassable.

IV

The border issues that the historical and geographical settings raise are mirrored in the smaller boundaries in the text’s represented world, in the descriptions of buildings and their locations in particular. The Holks’ home, as has already been mentioned, is situated in Schleswig-Holstein: a border state, a frontier, yet curiously itself a symbolic rejection of the divisive nature of imposed political boundaries. The Holks’ manor house is situated on a dune by the sea (cf. 567). Again, the text’s ambiguous play with boundaries in this land of uncertainty is apparent: the house is seemingly located on a border, indeed on what is for the Prussians the impassable boundary of the sea, and yet the word ‘dune’ points to a potentially transient and shifting place. The house’s position on this relatively unstable ground is replicated in the description of its generally fluid threshold spaces. Solid, visible barriers are conspicuously absent and the closedness of this Schloss is deliberately deconstructed. Seen from the sea by a casual observer in the first paragraph, the Schloss is characterised by colonnades and walkways:

Denn was man von der See her sah, war wirklich ein aus Säulen zusammengestelltes Oblong, hinter dem sich der Unterteil des eigentlichen Baues mit seinen Wohn- und Repräsentationsräumen versteckte, während das anscheinend stark zurücktretende Obergeseßo wenig über mannhoch über die nach allen vier Seiten hin eine Vorhalle bildende Säuleneinfassung hinauswuchs. Diese Säuleneinfassung war es denn auch, die dem Ganzen wirklich etwas Südlisches gab; teppichbedeckte Steinbänke standen überall die Halle entlang, unter der man beinahe tagaus, tagein die Sommermonate zu verbringen pflegte, wenn man es nicht vorzog, auf das Flachdach hinauzusteigen, das freilich weniger ein eigentliches Dach, als ein ziemlich breiter, sich um das Obergeseßo herumziehender Gang war. (567)

The walls of this Schloss are open and permeable. They are partial barriers, not solid walls. Rather than shielding the inhabitants from the elements and closing them in, the building’s construction and favourable position promote a way of life where much time is spent out of doors, in the threshold spaces of the colonnades. In particular the roof, perhaps the most symbolically significant part of a house, becomes a walkway at
Holkenäs. In contrast to his view of Denmark, then, Holk has constructed a house of indeterminate thresholds, characterised by accessibility and openness.

Unlike Holkenäs, Denmark and Holk’s experience of it are represented in a way that has frequent recourse to visible boundaries and thresholds: the pier wall at Copenhagen harbour, the doors and windows of his landlady’s guest house (cf. 628). Frederiksborg castle, where Holk commits his act of adultery, is separated from the town, Hilleröd, by a lake (cf. 705). Space in Denmark is, in addition, compartmentalised in a way which is alien to the openness of Holkenäs, in large measure due to the more formal society at the Danish court and its etiquette. For example, as gentleman-in-waiting, Holk has an audience with the princess shortly after his arrival in Copenhagen. He is led through an antechamber into a reception room, which the princess enters from another room beyond (cf. 646f.). After the audience, she, and her lady-in-waiting, Ebba, once again retire behind closed doors (cf. 651). Moreover, whereas the action in Holkenäs takes place principally in public rooms, private spaces are brought to the reader’s attention in the representation of Denmark. Holk’s personal rooms are a frequent setting for action in Copenhagen, and the narrator gives specific details of the guests’ quarters in Frederiksborg: Holk and Ebba sleep in one tower, Pentz, Erichsen and Schimmelmann in another, and the princess in the central corps-de-logis (cf. 708). On the way there, the princess describes Ebba’s room as a „Turmverlies“ emphasising its security and closedness (704).

Frederiksborg castle is a location of particular importance, as it is here that Holk’s act of adultery occurs. In general, Frederiksborg may be seen as the antithesis of Holkenäs: it is northern and romantic, where Holkenäs has the air of the classical south. Of particular relevance to the present discussion, however, is the fact that the buildings are also opposed in terms of their barriers and boundaries. As the princess tells Ebba:

„Was steht uns da noch bevor, wenn wir erst in Frederiksborg an unserem Reiseziel sein werden, den Esromsee zur Rechten und den Ar seesee zur Linken, den großen Arressee, der schon Verbindung hat mit dem Kattegat und dem Meer. Und er friert auch nie zu, die Schmalungen und die Buchten abgerechnet. Aber was spreche ich von den Seen, die Haupt sache bleibt immer noch das Schloß selbst, mein liebes, altes Frederiksborg, mit seinen Giebeln und Türmen und seinen hundert Wunderlichkeiten an jedem Tragstein und Kapitell. Und wo sich andre Schlösser mit einem einfachen Abzugsrohr begnügen, da springt in Frederiksborg die Dachrinne zehn Fuß weit vor, und an ihrem Ausgange sitzt ein Basilisk mit drei Eisenstäben im weitgeöffneten Rachen, und an den Stäben vorbei schießt das Wasser auf den Schloßhof.“ (703)

The castle is flanked by lakes on either side. Unlike the apparently absent roof at Holkenäs, Frederiksborg’s pointed roofs are visible here in the gable-ended buildings and made into an ostentatious defining feature through the extended gutters. Frederiksborg is furthermore a place of concealment and mystery: „Alles wirkt so geheimnisvoll, als berege jeder Fußbreit Erde eine Geschichte oder ein Geheimnis.“ (703)

It is thus clear that whereas Holkenäs is an open place, the representation of Denmark has frequent recourse to barriers and the division of space. Yet the differentiation between the two spaces is not simply a contrast between open and closed. Indeed, it may be noted that many of the borders in Denmark are both movable and crossable. As Holk’s comments about the Prussians’ inability to march across the sea suggests, what
matters is whether a boundary can be crossed or not. Holk’s comments suggested that the Danes were adept border crossers, unlike the Prussians, and thus it is not only the multiple borders which characterise Denmark, but the suggestion that they should be traversed: Denmark invites trespass.

This may be observed in small details. When Holk arrives in Copenhagen, he sees his room in the guest house from afar: he notices that the window is ajar, and surmises that there will be a fire inside waiting for him (cf. 628). It is the image of an inviting house. Holk knocks at the closed door, the widow Hansen opens it for him, and he enters. As he is being shown upstairs, the narrator reports the following:

Unten an der Treppe aber blieb er einen Augenblick stehen, was nach dem Anblick, der sich ihm bot, kaum ausbleiben konnte. Die zweite Hälfte des nur schmalen Hausflures lag nach hinten zu wie in Nacht; ganz zuletzt aber, da, wo mutmaßlich eine zur Küche führende Tür aufstand, fiel ein Lichtschein in den dunklen Flur hinein, und in diesem Lichtschein stand eine junge Frau, vielleicht um zu sehen, noch wahrscheinlicher, um gesehen zu werden. (629)

Holk is here allowed to catch a glimpse of the beautiful Brigitte Hansen through an open door. He is allowed a stolen glance into a separate room, creating the impression that what is seen ought to have been hidden. This corresponds to Brigitte’s character: she is a married woman, yet is clearly available to Holk, were he to make any advances. There is a similar scene shortly after. When Holk arrives back from dinner on the first night of his stay in Copenhagen, Brigitte opens the front door for him, excusing her mother, who has gone to bed (cf. 638). As Brigitte holds the lamp high to light Holk’s way up the stairs, her sleeve falls back and reveals her arm. Like the *chiaroscuro* of the hallway scenes and Frau Hansen’s suggestive tale of Siam (cf. 640–645), with its ambivalent mixture of fact and fiction, the windows and doors of the guest house mirror Brigitte’s flirtatious game of partially uncovering what is hidden, and suggest the possibility of crossing a moral threshold.

The playful mixture of respectability and scandal in the Hansen household is indicative of Danish society as a whole, which is characterised by its superficiality: Ebba can be „affektiert“ (660), Brigitte’s beauty can be a shield (cf. 669). Denmark and its court are places of gossip, fictions and stories. Denmark has „das Zeremoniell“ (650), of which the formal address of Pentz’s letter to Holk is a good example (cf. 603), but the ceremony of Denmark is a screen which it is expected an individual can see beyond. The many borders of Denmark, the fact that the Danes are shown to be capable of crossing borders, such as the sea, and the open doors and windows are symbolic expressions of the ambivalent Danish attitude to social and moral codes.

Whereas Brigitte’s evocation of desire is primarily physical, Ebba’s coquetry is mostly verbal. She engages in daring and witty conversation, pushing the bounds of respectability, and playing with Holk, as the narrator reports in chapter eight (cf. 692). Like Brigitte, Ebba too is associated with boundaries. Pentz tells Holk about Ebba’s past at the Swedish court, and her affair with the Herzog von Jämtland (cf. 686f.). Pentz suggests that they met and were seen on the boats between the „Liebesinseln des Mälarsees“ (687). Ebba is thus associated with islands, with the same type of border crossings as the Danes.
Holk’s night of adultery with Ebba occurs at Frederiksborg castle, and here borders and threshold spaces become appropriate symbolic expressions of Holk’s trespass. The windows and doors in Frederiksborg castle are the subject of specific discussion. When her guests complain of the rattling windows and the draughts, the princess gives the following explanation:

Und nun erzählte sie mit der ihr eigenen Jovialität, wie sie vor Jahr und Tag schon einen fei-
erlichen Antrag auf „schließende Türen und Fenster“ gestellt habe, was ihr aber von der be-
treffenden Verwaltungs- oder Baukommission rund abgeschlagen worden sei, weil die Be-
wohnbarkeit des Schlosses oder doch wenigstens die Brauchbarkeit der Kamine mit dem Fort-
bestand undichter Fenster im nächsten Zusammenhange stehe; schließende Fenster wür-
den gleichbedeutend sein mit Kaminen, die nicht brennen. (726)

The opinion that fires need open windows is an indirect reference to Brigitte and the Hansen house in Copenhagen. With Brigitte, however, Holk is unwilling to cross any boundaries, moral or otherwise. Indeed, when Holk questions Pentz about her, Pentz retorts:

So wünschen Sie, daß ich Ihnen eine furchtbare Geschichte zum besten gebe, die Sie jederzeit als Sicherheitsvademekum aus der Tasche holen und wie eine Schirm zwischen sich und der schönen Frau Hansen aufrichten können. (678)

Holk in fact tries to re-establish a psychological barrier between himself and this threateningly alluring woman. With Ebba however, Holk does cross over. On the day of Holk’s adultery, the party at Frederiksborg go ice-skating (cf. 746–749). The narrator reports that the cold weather has frozen the castle lake, then the moat, and then finally the large lake Arresee itself has become partially frozen over at its edges. The water, the barrier whose traversability has been in question from the beginning of the novel, becomes crossable even for those only on foot. After a trip on the Arresee ice, the party return to the shore, but Holk and Ebba go back out onto the ice, during which the text seems to layer and compound the references to boundaries:

Und nun flogen sie [...] der Stelle zu, wo sich der eisblinkende, mit seinen Ufern immer mehr zurücktretende Wasserarm in der weiten Fläche des Arresees verlor. Immer näher rückten sie der Gefahr, und jetzt schien es in der Tat, als ob beide, quer über den nur noch wenig hundert Schritte breiten Eistücher hinweg, in den offnen See hinauswollen [...]. Aber im selben Augenblicke, wo sie die durch eine Reihe kleiner Kiefern als letzte Sicherheitsgrenze bezeich-
nete Linie passieren wollten, bog sich Holk mit rascher Wendung rechts und riß Ebba mit sich herum. „Hier ist die Grenze, Ebba. Wollen wir darüber hinaus?“ (749)

In this passage, Fontane conflates in a single spatial image the concepts of nearing boundaries (the edge of the ice) and crossing them (the trees and in a more extended sense, the water itself), with a move towards boundlessness (the expanse of the lake). Holk’s journey on the ice with Ebba indicates thus not only a moral transgression, but a move away from moderate behaviour too: he errs against morality seen both from a dogmatic perspective, as Christine would perceive it, and from a more relative, pragmatic point of view, represented by Arne.

On the evening of Holk and Ebba’s adulterous act, boundaries mark Holk’s experiences. This occurs firstly in Ebba’s challenge to Holk:
Michael White

„Holk, Sie sind beinahe deutscher als deutsch ... Es dauerte zehn Jahre vor Troja. Das scheint ihr Ideal.“ (758)

Ebba evokes an image of herself as a closed space, mirroring the divided spaces in border rich Denmark, and dares Holk to breach the wall. That evening a fire breaks out in the tower where Holk and Ebba have their rooms. While on the one hand the fire is a simple indication of their ultimately destructive passion, on the other it can be argued that the fire is the symbolic consequence of Holk and Ebba’s boundlessness, within the context of the earlier statement by the princess that draughty winds aid fires.

To escape from the fire, Holk carries Ebba up through the tower, and out onto the roof „ins Freie“ (758). In an oblique ironic reference back to Holkenäs, the narrator notes that here, the couple are unable to walk along the roof, because of its steep incline, and eventually Holk and Ebba are saved by the king’s men who create a hole in the roof of the adjacent building, allowing them to get down through there to safety (cf. 760). This episode is of particular interest to an investigation of boundaries, and the interplay between open and closed spaces in the text, especially because of the effect the fire and its aftermath has on Holk, and its function in the plot. In terms of action, the fire isolates Holk, because Ebba comes down with a fever and the princess too becomes ill as a result of the traumatic experience. Holk is thus unable to verify the depth of Ebba’s feelings for him, or to share with the princess his vision of a new life with Ebba, before he sets off to Holkenäs to separate from Christine. Had he been able to speak with Ebba, and find out that she would never marry him, he might have saved his marriage. In terms of plot, then, the fire ensures that Holk becomes an isolated figure, cut off from the most meaningful human relationships in his life, and compelled to live abroad.

Yet it is perhaps Holk’s thoughts about the events on the roof which are most significant for an investigation of boundaries in the text. Breaking through the boundary of the roof appears to symbolise liberation: Holk steps out „ins Freie“ (759). Ruminating on the events of the evening, Holk later concludes that „dieses Hinaustreten ihnen doch die Rettung bedeutet hatte“ (765). Crossing boundaries thus seems not only to signal moral trespass in the text, but also appears to serve as an expression of Holk’s sense of liberation from the constraints of an unhappy relationship and the sanctified beginning of a new life. Yet Holk is mistaken. It was not getting out onto the roof which saved Holk and Ebba, but rather the action of their rescuers, which permitted a re-entry into the castle. The text hints to the reader that safety and, to follow Holk’s own feelings, liberation are to be found within, rather than without boundaries. Holk’s misunderstandings about thresholds and boundaries and their meanings lead thus to his isolation.

His exclusion is itself expressed via borders when he arrives at Holkenäs to break the news to his wife Christine. This part of the novel is told with great subtlety, as Fontane evokes Holk’s feelings of uncertainty, his latent fear about the step he is about to take, and yet at the same time creates a sense of inevitability about the end of the marriage. As Holk’s ship arrives, the narrator reports that the outlines of the manor house are unclear because of the bad weather, but when the fog lifts momentarily Holk can see his house „öd und einsam“ (773):
„Hier ist die Grenze […]. Wollen wir darüber hinaus?“

Die Vorhalle selbst zeigte sich mit Brettern verkleidet und mit Matten verhängt, um die hinter gelegenen Räume nach Möglichkeit gegen den Nordost zu schützen. (773)

The weather conditions which allowed Holk to cross boundaries in Denmark have here made the erection of additional shelter necessary. Christine, in the open and exposed house of Holkenäs, has created a barricade between herself and the outside world. After Holk and Christine have spoken, and she and Julie Dobschütz have left the house, Holk decides he cannot remain there, and instead goes to Flensburg (cf. 781). Holk is shown to be excluded and isolated here too: the reader sees him looking in shop windows, and into family homes to see „das Glück da drinnen“ (783). Holk’s journey „ins Freie“ has left him outside and alone at a time when warmth and companionship can only be found indoors.

Upon his return to Copenhagen, Holk goes to see Ebba, and is rejected by her. A small detail acts as a warning that Holk will be rejected: when he arrives, he sees Ebba sitting by the window. She rises as he enters, and then sits again, but this time „abseits vom Fenster“ (785). She moves away from the kind of crossable threshold which symbolises the invitation to cross moral and social boundaries. Significantly, Ebba explains, Holk has misunderstood the kinds of relationships which are desirable or possible at court: he wants to be a cavalier, a „Hofmann und Lebemann“ (787), but through his „deplacierte Feierlichkeit“ (788), his seriousness and his demands for rights and legitimacy he has become a Don Quixote figure. Ironically, he has been serious, where he should have been easy going (cf. ibid.).

After his European travels, Holk eventually settles in London in a house on Tavistock Square (cf. 790). In this place of transition, the description of his flat recalls several images from earlier in the novel: the open window and fire resemble the earliest days of Copenhagen, while the window’s large size, and the free movement onto the balcony seem to be a small expression of yearnings for Holkenäs (cf. 794), the only place he feels free (cf. 792). Holk is here a reluctant bachelor. He is shown sitting outside, but the reference to the iron railings of the gardens emphasise his sense of containment in England, the land of liberty.

The physical boundaries as represented in „Unwiederbringlich“ can thus be seen to have multiple, often overlapping symbolic connotations, and this formal variety corresponds to the numerous themes that the novel explores which centre on the notion of limits or thresholds. Most obviously, borders in the text can be interpreted in terms of Holk’s adultery. Holk’s border crossings indicate his trespass, whether perceived dogmatically as breaching a defined line, or seen as immoderation, going beyond reasonable limits. However, the many boundaries of Denmark also serve as symbols of the circumstances in which Holk’s adultery takes place: they indicate temptation and the superficiality and libertinism of Danish society. Following Holk’s adultery, boundaries may also be said to indicate the consequences of his error, in that Holk is shown to be excluded and isolated.

Yet beyond Holk’s more immediately visible trespass, boundaries function in addition to express a different kind of error: Holk’s apparent inability to see things which are important to him, to know himself. Charting the differences between the representations of Holkenäs and Denmark in terms of boundaries reveals that the text constructs...
an opposition between an open space and closed spaces. It would seem thus that „Unwiederbringlich“ might be another example of a pattern James Bade has observed in Fontane’s landscapes, namely that Fontane’s novels contrast places of freedom and places of oppression. Holkenäs represents for Holk, during much of the narrative a place of constraint, whereas Denmark and Europe are to him the scenes of imagined future freedom and happiness. By the end of the text however, Holk has realised that this search for freedom beyond his home is illusory, and that in fact he feels free and accepted only there, whereas his attempt at a new life in Denmark resulted in isolation and exclusion. From this point of view, the distinction between Holkenäs as an open space and Denmark as a closed space functions as an ironic commentary on Holk’s actions, a prefiguration of his later insights, and an indication of his true character. The border thus emerges as an ironic element of the text’s spatial representation.

Holk’s experiences seem to indicate then, that staying within the social, moral and geographical boundaries of marriage and the home is advocated by this novel of bourgeois Realism. Yet Helmut is not the only Holk who crosses borders. Christine’s relationship with borders is of interest too, although it is not represented as frequently as Holk’s. Significantly, Christine engages in arguably the most dramatic border crossing of all: she commits suicide, making a metaphorical step from one world into another, and she does so by drowning herself in the sea, the boundary between Schleswig-Holstein and Denmark (cf. 810). Like Holk, an immoderate, unrestrained personality, Christine proves unable to live within a limited relationship, or even life. Significantly, her border crossing, like Holk’s, leads to exclusion: she is buried outside the family mausoleum, as she did not live long enough to see it rebuilt (cf. 808).

Christine not only crosses boundaries however, she also creates them. She does so metaphorically through her dogmatism: Holk complains that his wife can always separate right from wrong easily (cf. 699). Christine erects physical boundaries too, however. As we have seen, she has the walkways and colonnades covered to protect Holkenäs from the wind (cf. 773). Although this detail certainly serves to evoke sympathy for Christine, the sign is ambiguous. By creating boundaries in open Holkenäs, Christine ironically makes it more like Denmark. This suggests, perhaps, that the Danish boundaries not only express Holk’s trespass, but also show that trespass itself is more likely in a boundary rich environment. It may be that Christine’s imposition of rules, symbolised by the erection of barriers at the moment when Holk has come to talk to her at Christmas, is just as much to blame for Holk’s error as the libertine atmosphere in Denmark.

„Unwiederbringlich“, like many of Fontane’s novels, appears to be built around paradox and unanswered questions. It has been shown that borders in the novel chart trespass, which suggests that the text advocates obeying certain moral and social norms. Yet at the same time, boundaries also serve as a representation of the specific circumstances of those border crossings, which in turn relativises our view of the trespass. In other words, the readers acknowledge Holk and Christine’s errors, but are given

18 Bade [note 5], p. 153.
enough information to dissuade them from condemning them. Furthermore, the topography of the novel balances bordered and unbordered spaces, as the novel itself leaves the decision between „Leichtnehmen“ and „Schwernehmen“ unsettled. It is through this balance that the novel prompts the reader to reflect on borders as concepts which shape and govern human lives. The novel uncovers the human causes of trespass, shows us the human origins of our own laws and morals, and leads us to recognise, like Holk, the limits within which we may find our own freedom. Thus while at first the border, a dividing line between two zones, may appear a straightforward symbolic tool, in „Unwiederbringlich“, Fontane demonstrates its expressive power in a nuanced exploration of human limitation.