

**WHEN A HOUSE IS NOT A HOME:
THE ALIEN RESIDENCES
OF *EFFI BRIEST* AND *ANNA KARENINA***

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[A] home is much more than a shelter; it is a world in which a person can create a material environment that embodies what he or she considers significant. In this sense the home becomes the most powerful sign of the self of the inhabitant who dwells within.

(Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 123)

The idea of the home as a powerful sign of the selves of its inhabitants is vividly illustrated in two 19th-century novels, Theodor Fontane's *Effi Briest* and Lev Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*.¹ This commonality links two books that are otherwise so different that they would seem to have nothing in common apart from their generic resemblance as novels of adulterous women whose behavior leads to their social ostracism and ultimate death. In both, however, the author places his heroine for a crucial period in an alien domestic environment (a deliberate oxymoron) which affects and at the same time reflects important elements of her individual psychology, and of her relationship with her mate and with society. Furthermore, attentive reading reveals essential likenesses in Fontane's and Tolstoy's depiction of this interaction between house and inhabitants.

The theme of the house generally and its social and psychological importance is a crucial one in both books and is heralded in the opening pages. Tolstoy begins with the disturbance in the Oblonsky home -- Vladimir Nabokov has observed how the word "*dom*" resounds throughout the beginning of *Anna Karenina* (210). And Fontane starts with a leisurely description of the manor house where Effi lives with her parents, identifying it in the first sentence as the residence of the von Briest family for over 200 years.

But the houses on which I wish to focus are those where Effi and Anna live with the men who are their partners in the crucial emotional relationships of their lives. For Effi this is the house in the coastal town of Kessin to which Baron Geert von Instetten, the administrator of the district, brings her as his bride;² for Anna it is the country estate of

¹A brief version of this paper was delivered at the annual AATSEEL meeting, 1990. Although there is no documented evidence indicating a direct influence of Tolstoy on Fontane, the two novels of adultery have often been compared in the criticism, beginning with J. Stern's seminal article.

²In his English version, Douglas Parmée calls Instetten "governor," which is not really equivalent to "*Landrat*," although it is admittedly more concise than the "district (or county) administrator" which more accurately conveys the level of Instetten's position. Page references are to the Penguin edition cited below

her lover, Count Alexei Vronsky, to which they withdraw after society snubs her. Despite the differences in their legal status, the women's experiences in these houses are much alike, in that their hopes for contentment are soon replaced by the anxiety, isolation and uprootedness that help seal their fate. This similarity in their lives is reflected in the dwellings, for, little as the modest *Landratshaus* and the vast *Vozdvizhenskoe* resemble each other physically, their psychological portraits as embodiments of rupture and alienation are strikingly alike.

Each of these houses is also contrasted to another, normative home, which is characterized by continuity and integration. Both authors link these pairs by introducing the deviant place through the eyes of someone who comes to it from the valorized home. Fontane uses Effi herself, who (after a preview by Instetten) compares the house in Kessin to the home in Hohen-Cremmen where she grew up; Tolstoy depicts *Vozdvizhenskoe* from the point of view of Anna's sister-in-law, Dolly, who comes over from Levin's estate.

This contrast is not required to convince us that the alien houses are abnormal, since they are decidedly unusual by any standard, but it does define more precisely the nature and extent of their departure from the domestic norm. In this regard, it is interesting that both Fontane and Tolstoy illustrate the "alien" nature of the houses quite literally by making foreignness one of their salient features. It is also important that this is not the natural and inevitable foreignness of an abode in another country, but the intrusion of outlandish elements into a domestic environment in the homeland. In fact, ironically enough, the two couples settle down in these alienated residences after actually being abroad in Italy -- a real honeymoon for Effi and Instetten, an artificial one for Anna and Vronsky.

Effi's introduction to her new home is Instetten's commentary as they are driven from the train station upon their arrival in Kessin. As he informs her, her new environment, in contrast to the long-settled, homogeneous situation in the area of Hohen-Cremmen, is saturated with foreigners. The people of the countryside around Kessin are not Teutons but Slavs. Kessin itself, as a seaport, is populated by all sorts of strangers (that is, people whose parents or grandparents lived elsewhere). There is a Scot, a couple of Danes, a Swede, and a Portuguese. Alonzo Gieshübler, the apothecary whom Effi meets next day and who becomes her devoted friend, had an Andalusian mother and keeps an African servant.³ Even the dog, Rollo, is named after a duke of Normandy. Most notably, there was even a Chinese man, now dead and buried in the dunes just outside the cemetery.

Alien elements have also invaded the house. In the blaze of lamplight which dazzles Effi upon her entrance, she sees suspended from the ceiling a model of a ship under full sail, complete with canon ports, and behind it a stuffed shark and a young

unless otherwise noted.

³Perhaps we should not overlook "Marietta Trippelli," born in Kessin, the daughter of Pastor Trippel, who Italianized herself for the sake of her singing career.

crocodile. All three exhibits are out of their element, and the creatures are out of their habitat, far from their native waters. Nor is their presence justified and, as it were, domesticated by any logical connection to the Instettens, since they are left over from the occupancy of the seafaring Captain Thomsen, who had the house before Instetten.

Most foreign of all is another memento of the captain's tenancy, the ghost of the Chinese, who had lived in the house as his servant and friend until the day the captain married his niece (or granddaughter, no one is sure which she was) to another captain. This young woman disappeared without a trace from the wedding ball held in the drawing room upstairs after dancing with the Chinese, who himself died mysteriously a couple of weeks later. This unquiet spirit of domestic tragedy now haunts the place, alien not merely in the commonplace sense of coming from a far country, but even from another world.

Vronsky's estate is also permeated with foreignness, beginning with the English cob Anna is riding when Dolly first sees her. Like the *Landratshaus*, Vozdvizhenskoe is not integrated with its native surroundings, for while the house had belonged to Vronsky's grandfather, he has completely redone it, leaving only the outside shell as it had been. Virtually everything inside and around the estate is aggressively new, costly -- and imported.

The sumptuous room to which Anna conducts Dolly, for instance, reminds Dolly of "the best hotels abroad" (646).⁴ The wallpaper is French, everything is done in the "new European kind of luxury" (647). In the nursery, all the equipment and furniture is "of English make" (649). Most of the personnel are also foreign, the wet-nurse being Italian (648) and the head nurse (whose "wanton" face Dolly does not like) English (649).

When they make a tour of the grounds, Vronsky welcomes the chance to explain to Dolly all the changes he has made, and to show her the new hospital he is having built. The hospital is spacious, quite luxurious and new-fashioned, with parquet floors, plate-glass windows, the latest equipment, all carefully planned and "everything straight from Paris," as Anna's aunt Varvara tells Dolly (651). Indeed, as Sviazhsky remarks at dinner, the very planning is foreign, being done "American fashion" (661). For the work in the fields, Vronsky is replacing the Russian manual labor which Levin reveres (as the company at dinner mirthfully notes) with machines, and imported machines at that, Russian models being, in Vronsky's view, inferior.

Anna's books, of which she reads a great many, are also imported (she receives a box from Gautier's just before Vronsky goes to the elections); she orders "all the books favourably reviewed in the foreign papers and magazines she took in" (674).

While foreignness is perhaps the most conspicuous form of rupture and discontinuity evident in these houses, a number of others also reflect the isolation and estrangement which Effi and Anna experience in them. Sheer distance from their previous homes is one, as is interruption of the organic flow of family life, and separation from or suppression of nature is another.

⁴Page references are to the Penguin edition cited below.

For instance, Effi lived before her marriage in her parents' manor house, or more precisely, the house of her father's family, the seat of the von Briests, as the narrator tells us, "since the time of the Elector Georg Wilhelm" (15), that is, since the first half of the seventeenth century. In this balanced, stable environment Effi had been sheltered and doted upon all her young life, making few excursions outside its familiar, comfortable sphere. There we see her almost always out of doors, or at least by an open window, in constant contact with the abundant friendly sunshine, light and air, with freedom and easy access to companions.

When she marries, not only is she suddenly removed to a distant place where she knows no one (scarcely even her husband), the house she enters cannot compensate the loss with any equivalent social network or sense of continuity. It is simply Instetten's latest professional post, not his ancestral home. Indeed, it is no one's ancestral home -- even Captain Thomsen had come to it as a stranger late in life. Here Effi is virtually a prisoner indoors, cut off almost entirely from nature except for walks in the copse behind the house in fine weather, since the house has only a small, neglected garden and her husband is frequently too occupied with his work to be able to escort her on outings (a fatal problem once Major von Crampas, her seducer, is on the scene). Effi finds even the sunlight different in Kessin: wan, yellow and depressing.

The location of the house also limits her social life. In town, the couple is on visiting terms only with Gieshübler. The socially acceptable set is scattered widely about the countryside, almost impossible to reach even if they and Effi were not mutually antipathetic. In the house there are only the servants, of whom Johanna is covertly hostile, the mad Frau Kruse communes only with her black hen, Christel scarcely appears, and of course, the male servants, the valet and coachman, are not eligible as companions for Effi. Only the dog, Rollo, and later the nursemaid, Roswitha, provide emotional warmth. Nor does Effi, accustomed to the companionship of her friends and the devotion of her parents, have the inner resources to deal with her isolation. Unlike Anna, she is no reader, she has no intellectual life to help fill the lonely hours.

Certainly the single most socially divisive feature of the house is the ghost, which inhabits the entire upstairs, to the detriment of the household's peace of mind and the Instettens' living arrangements. Because of Instetten's curious determination to leave the several rooms upstairs derelict, despite their obvious potential for being delightful living space, the family must crowd into three rooms downstairs and sacrifice any place in which to entertain -- an interesting anomaly in this otherwise unswervingly conventional man. This state of affairs cuts the couple off even more from outside society and also drives a wedge between them, for not only has Instetten himself lived for three years with this awkward and melancholy arrangement and failed to adjust it when redecorating for his new wife, he clings to it in the face of her objections to it. When Effi suggests making two guestrooms out of the drawing room so that visitors, such as her mother, can stay with them, Instetten first agrees, then immediately reneges, giving the ridiculous reason that an identical space is available in the office across the street and that Effi's mother would be more to herself over there, as if that were what Effi or her mother would want. (We

cannot forget, or course, that Instetten had originally ardently courted Effi's mother and may now prefer to keep the woman who passed him over at some distance.)⁵ He even declines to cut the curtains in the rooms overhead, so that they won't make their disturbing brushing sound as they blow in the wind, saying "it's not certain whether it will help" (60). He likewise refuses to move out of this house, on the grounds they would lose face if the town knew they moved because the administrator's wife was afraid of spooks. He seems incapable of imagining that he could give the town some other reason for moving.

Many of the same issues are involved for Anna on Vronsky's estate, although superficially everything here seems idyllic, and she declares to Dolly she is "inexcusably happy" (644) and "perfectly at ease" (650) there. It is true that Anna has more control over the details of the household arrangements than Effi, first because she is an older and more selfconfident woman, and second because Vronsky is not as controlling as Instetten. Nevertheless, this place also epitomizes the discontinuity of Anna's life. First, the situation of Vronsky's house deep in the countryside emphasizes her removal from her previous home and connections. Second, as we have seen, although the house has been in Vronsky's family for three generations, his wholesale changes and artifices have utterly broken the organic flow of the place, distancing the inhabitants from family history and the natural life now around them.

Despite the fact that the house is in the country, nature is kept rigorously at a distance. We have already noted Vronsky's preference for machines for field work. After dinner, the company plays lawn tennis (an English game) on a carefully rolled croquet lawn, with gilt posts holding up the net. And, as Vronsky rather abruptly tells Dolly as they tour the hospital, it will have no maternity ward, despite the fact that, as she ventures to say, it would be much needed in the country.

This differs drastically, of course, from Levin's estate, which remains substantially as it was in his parents' day and is cherished for its ties to them, and where Levin's modifications are all designed to intensify the bond to the land and the peasants. And while Vronsky obviously has numerous horses and other animals, he is never depicted taking the kind of intense and intimate interest in them that Levin takes in the new calf on his return home from Moscow after Kitty refused him.

Although the number of guests at table during Dolly's visit might seem to challenge the notion that Anna is isolated, it is soon clear that this group does not provide her with a meaningful social nexus. Of those who reside in Vronsky's house, the architect, the doctor and the German steward are employees and socially impermissible as intimates of Anna, even if their personal qualifications recommended them. Princess Varvara, who, as Anna's aunt, might be expected to provide a sense of familial continuity and moral ballast, fails on both counts. She is not the aunt who raised Anna (and manoeuvred Karenin into marrying her), nor is she an exemplary woman, but a rather sleazy,

⁵See Brian Holbeche, "Instetten's 'Geschichte mit Entsagung' and its Significance in Fontane's *Effi Briest*," *German Life and Letters* 41 (1987): 21-32, for a fuller discussion of the effect on Instetten of his failed romance with Luise von Briest.

hypocritical woman who pretends to be sacrificing herself for Anna, but who is glad to have a luxurious roof over her head.

The others are transient guests. Sviazhsy, the district marshal, is not a bad person, but he is visiting primarily because he wants political help from Vronsky. Then there are Tushkevich, the recently overthrown lover of Vronsky and Anna's relation Princess Betsy, and the ebullient young Veslovsky (in his Scotch cap), whom Levin has recently thrown out of his house for flirting with his wife, neither of whom is a source of Tolstoyan moral fiber. Only Dolly is there for love of Anna, but she soon leaves because she finds the atmosphere so uncongenial.

Indeed, once summer is past, everyone else leaves, too, and the solitary life begins to wear on the couple, particularly on Anna. Vronsky, as she well realizes, can come and go at will, because he is a man and has business of various kinds in the world, because he is not penalized socially as she is, and because he has the money and the inclination. Anna, lonely, frightened and without resources, becomes more and more possessive, Vronsky, more and more determined to assert his independence.

Anna is the more vulnerable because, having rejected the task of mothering, she has no real work and is not central to the household. For instance, she laments in the nursery that she is "useless" there (650), and seems to have no sense of having control over that. At dinner, Dolly observes from Vronsky's behavior that it is he who runs the house, and that Anna is "as much a guest" as everyone else and is only in charge of the conversation (661). And, while Anna is involved in rebuilding the estate through all the research she does in books on architecture, agriculture, and other activities, and although she claims credit for launching Vronsky in this project to begin with, her participation in the work on the estate is conditional: It remains Vronsky's work, Vronsky's estate and employees, Vronsky's money, and if he were to stop, she would be unable to continue. And he might stop, for his life as a landowner, as the narrator says, is only a role he has chosen to play (674), the whole enterprise at bottom an absorbing (and lucrative) hobby, which he could drop, as he dropped the painting which had occupied him in Italy.

It would be easy in both cases to see the houses solely as constructs and reflections of the men, and the women as their prisoners and innocent victims. The men own the houses, after all, and since they hold the purse-strings, they also control all structural and decorative alterations. But this would be too simplistic a reading and would overlook the numerous, if subtle, indications that Effi and Anna contribute as much to the character of the houses as Instetten and Vronsky.

For instance, at least some of the foreignness in the house in Kessin is a matter of Effi's perception. When she joins her new husband in his room for breakfast, for example, on her first morning in the house, she remarks that the coffee is superb -- as good as hotel or café coffee, she says, such as they had in Florence, thus making it non-

domestic in two senses.⁶

As to the room itself, while the narrator describes Instetten's ponderous rolltop desk (a cherished heirloom), the right-angled sofa in the corner and the breakfast table before it, Effi herself remarks on the collection of weapons and trophies on the wall. Such displays were common in that markedly militaristic society, and even her father had a modest version of one. But for Effi, this one conjures up the memory of a picture she once saw in a book of a Persian or Indian prince, sitting on a red silk cushion, a billowing roll of silk at his back, the wall behind him bristling with spears, daggers, leopard skins, shields and Turkish guns. Effi declares her husband has only to tuck up his legs to look just like this prince.

Now, while Instetten's arrangement may be more lavish than her father's, it is unlikely to be worthy of an Eastern potentate, but in any case, the only description we have is of what Effi remembers from the picture book. She then reiterates her impression of orientalism, and says, "I feel all the time that there's something foreign about everything here ..." (59). This in spite of the fact that, certain exoticisms notwithstanding, most of the furnishings of the house are perfectly typical for homes of this class at that time: the grand piano, the old-fashioned wall stove, the new electric bell, etc. But Effi had shown from the first chapter a tendency to oriental fantasy, as when, after ceremoniously drowning some gooseberry hulls in the pond, she asserted that in Constantinople unfaithful wives were treated the same way (21).

It is also important to note that Effi reconciles herself to the necessity for her husband to leave her to attend on Prince Bismarck because she wants advancement even more, she says, than he does (77) and she accepts remaining in the haunted house from the same motive. And if she sees her husband as a prince, that is also a neat way of promoting herself to princess. This desire for worldly success above all else is another trait Effi has brought with her. We see this in an early conversation with her mother before her marriage, in which Effi treats love rather offhandedly, but says -- very seriously -- that she is for riches and a *very* distinguished house (36). She also scorns the idea of marriage to her cousin Dagobert, although she finds him entertaining, because he is too young, and Instetten is a man with whom, as she puts it, she can put on a show (38).

Effi also assists in the creation of the ghost. Her very first night in the house --

⁶This detail is not in Parmée's translation. The relevant passage reads:

'Der Kaffee ist ja vorzüglich,' sagte Effi, während sie zugleich das Zimmer und seine Einrichtung musterte. 'Das ist noch Hotelkaffee oder wie der bei Bottegone ... erinnerst du dich noch, in Florenz, mit dem Blick auf den Dom.' (Goldmann ed. 52)

['The coffee is really superb,' said Effi, while she surveyed both the room and its furnishings. 'That's hotel coffee, or like that at Bottegone's ... do you still remember, in Florence, with the view of the cathedral.']

that is, *before* she has seen or heard of the curtains blowing across the floor upstairs, or heard the story of the miscarried wedding -- she is disturbed by a sound overhead as of dress trains or silk slippers sliding over the floor and "something like music" (59). A few weeks later, when Instetten is away and still before she knows the whole story, she wakes to the presence of the Chinese ghost. While others in the house have been disturbed by the sound of the curtains overhead, and Instetten clearly feels some affinity to the tale of the aborted wedding party, since he enshrined the scene of the ball, there is no indication that anyone else has actually encountered the Chinese himself.

And if we remember from our first view of Effi her pose as a midshipman, her longing for a ship's mast to climb, and her incessant desire for "something unusual," it would seem there might be some connection after all between her and the symbols of the sea hanging to such odd effect in the hall.

Anna, too, contributes to the unnatural shape and quality of life in her home with Vronsky, and not only by her active assistance in planning the estate (guided by foreign books, rather than Russian soul). First of all, if she has no real work here, it is because she has repudiated her natural role of mother. She is, of course, cut off from Seriozha, her son by Karenin, but she takes little interest in her daughter by Vronsky. It is clear to Dolly when they visit the nursery that Anna is a stranger there, not knowing where the baby's toys are kept, nor even how many teeth she has. In addition to not caring for her child, Anna is practicing birth control (although Vronsky seems not to be aware of this), in order to preserve her beauty and hold her lover. This horrifies Dolly, herself the frazzled mother of six (although she was dreaming of it, as she was dreaming of having an affair on her way to visit Anna), and in the Tolstoyan scheme of values marks a definitive turn in Anna's deterioration.

There are many indications in the text that the life lived here is not real life, but some form of fiction. Dolly finds the luxury of the place such as "she had only read about in English novels" (647). At the end of the day she feels she has been acting in a troupe all of whom are more skillful than she, and that she is "spoiling the show" (666). Anna herself suggests that the whole thing is an act when she tells Dolly that she is glad for all the company, for Vronsky needs an audience (651). The very house, gutted and redone, with only the facade remaining real, has the air of being a stage set.

Here again, there is a connection to what we have already learned of Anna. Early in the book, when Anna comes to help reconcile the Oblonskys, Dolly recalls that she had found "something artificial in the whole framework of [the Karenins'] family life" (80). Anna had always been a persistent reader of English novels, one of which absorbed her on her train trip home from the Oblonskys', when she imagined herself leading the lives of the characters. Play-acting in life is also nothing new, for even Anna's devotion to her son had been, as the narrator says, "the partly sincere, though greatly exaggerated role of the mother living for her child" (311).

It is worth remembering at this point that theater and other forms of fiction are also an important theme in *Effi Briest*. The curtains upstairs, for instance, suggest an empty stage. Then there is Effi and Crampas' participation in the play *Ein Schritt vom Wege* [A

Step from the Path], which contributes to the development of their relationship. And for Effi, fantasy often colors and even replaces reality, as in her constant enthusiasm for romantic stories (remember her storybook Persian prince), and her declaration that Instetten's description of the inhabitants of Kessin is "as good as six novels...." (50).

Clearly, then, while Effi and Anna both come to houses which are already in the possession and under the control of the men, the foreignness, unnaturalness, discontinuity and isolation which mark them can be attributed only in part to their owners. The traits the women bring with them also contribute to the nature of these abodes and the fate that overtakes them there.

Effi is as ambitious as Instetten and as ready as he to sacrifice domestic harmony to an idea of societal expectations. Her passivity matches his rigidity, his frozen inability to alter what has been handed to him. The extent to which this is a choice (however subconscious) is illustrated by Effi's decision when they move to Berlin to take an apartment in a brand new house, one without history, which she can furnish with her own things, and where they can start with a clean slate. Of course, the history goes with them after all, and the earlier failure to lay the ghost finally proves fatal, but that does not obscure the change in her behavior.

Anna also brings her values and character with her. Her fundamental lack of commitment to family, her devotion to foreign fictions and her refusal to regularize her position, lead to her increasing distance from Vronsky, and from nature and reality (we must not forget her morphine habit), and to her morbid self-absorption.

Given the close correspondences in these books, one cannot help speculating on the possibility that Fontane had read and been influenced by *Anna Karenina* before he wrote *Effi Briest*. It would have been possible for him to do so, for a German translation of Tolstoy's novel appeared as early as 1885, three years before Fontane began work on his novel, and nine before he finished it.⁷

One must be wary, however, of insisting on a connection, tempting as the thought may be. There is certainly no question of Fontane's trying to produce a clone, and possibly not even a conscious response to Tolstoy's work. *Effi Briest* is unequivocally "a Fontane," in style and subject matter. The theme of the adulterous woman was embraced by a wide range of writers in America, England, the European continent and Russia as they grappled with questions of the institution of marriage and the position of women in society and in the home that were raised by the profound social upheavals of the 19th century. and Fontane's output includes numerous nuanced studies of the predicament of women caught in the confines of the society of the time.

Furthermore, while Fontane knew and admired Tolstoy's work in general, he saw himself as a very different sort of writer. It is telling, too, that neither Fontane himself nor any commentator I have seen cites *Anna Karenina* as a source for *Effi Briest*, which

⁷This is a translation by Paul Wilhelm, published in Berlin by Wilhelm. There were also editions in French (Hachette, 1885), a language which Fontane knew at least to some extent, and English (London: Vizetelly, 1887), in which he was fluent.

is known to have had its principal genesis in an incident which took place in 1886 in Bonn.⁸ Many distinctive features in the book are also accounted for by Fontane's observations of life: Stanley Radcliffe has noted that the stuffed sea creatures and the ghost in the *Landratshaus*, for instance, were inspired by a house Fontane lived in as a boy (12). Nor does it strain credulity that two authors could arrive independently at the idea of using the domicile as a reflection of and agent in a troubled intimate relationship. Still, it is possible that, if he had read Tolstoy's book, Fontane then echoed in his own fashion, and perhaps unconsciously, elements that were apposite to his work.

In any case, each author has brilliantly used the depiction of domestic life in an alien residence to illuminate and explore the theme of alienation and incarceration.

⁸Hans-Heinrich Reuter quotes Fontane as acknowledging a debt of gratitude to Tolstoy and other writers of the "realistic school," while at the same time distancing himself from them and declaring his love for what he calls "true" Romanticism (539). The origin of the novel is attested by letters of Fontane to various correspondents, cited in the Goldmann edition, 318-322.

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