

Die Ringe des Saturn

W.G.Seбалd

Dec 11 - 23, 2005

Seбалd made a stir in the nineties. An obscure German academic lecturing in Norwich since 1970, making his 'debut' close to the advanced age of fifty. His rise was swift, his demise was abrupt, an auto-accident (in December 2001) putting a definite stop to a belated career that had hardly gotten off ground.

Die Ringe des Saturn is one of those mystifying titles most likely signifying nothing. Ostensibly it is about trekking on foot among the desolate marches of East Anglia, Suffolk to be more precise. Travel literature was classically one of reporting back home to an incredulous audience the exotic adventures of an intrepid explorer. After the whole world has been domesticated there is little opportunity to play the role of explorer, and the traveller instead reduces to the more modest one of a mere tourist. As a consequence the travel by itself takes second seat to a succession of disjointed writings held together by the chronological act of transportation alone. In this way a writer is able to empty his drawer of all kinds of scraps from the jetsome and floatsome of his writing efforts and string it along. This ultimately casts doubt on the very veracity of the travel itself. Did it ever take place, or was it just invented to give to the story a spurious narrative line? And once you start to doubt the very act of travelling, your trust in the veracity of what is being narrated starts to crumble as well. This is true to post-modernist attitudes of questioning the authenticity of the text, still to an old-fashioned reader it smacks too much of cheating. Thus I will take on trust the trek, as well as anything the author choses to tell me.

East Anglia is flat and not very populated. So much you can read off automatically from a map. Many parts of England are quite familiar to you. London of course. Its south-west with Cornwall sticking out. The middle part of Oxford and Cambridge with the Cotswolds, and the industrial center. The Lake District and the part north of Newcastle bordering to Scotland. Most of those have definite literary associations. The London of Dickens (not to mention Sherlock Holmes), the Lyme Regis of Austen, the Lake District of Wordsworth, the coal mines in Nottinghamshire of D.H.Lawrence. But East Anglia. It is green on the map, but white in your mind. Forgotten, on the side, exactly the kind of obtruse area to attract and intrigue the traveller who was born a bit too late into this world.

Of the trek by foot we learn very little. There is a scene by the shore when the author looks at swallows darting to and fro undermining with all their burrowings the very cliff on which he rests. You also learn about desolate hotels and long tedious stretches along empty roads. Once in a while there is a visit. Some old mansion, a farmer that is obsessed by building a model of the temple of Jerusalem. (The kind of story that would have attracted the late Chatwin). The author allows himself free associations. Once we find him in an airplane about to cross the narrow sea separating the flat lands of the Dutch from those of the Anglians. He remarks that while manmade structures are so prominent from above, man himself remains invisible among his works. Some of the stories he tells

you catches your interest. Like the one on Conrad and Casement and the Belgian atrocities in Congo. He does not need to be systematic, but can afford to be fragmentary. After all he is trekking on foot with a heavy backpack and he only dwells on what interest him, hence being stuck on transportation by foot, he can dispense with transportations of narrative. He can express his disgust of all things Belgians, a prejudice which I as a reader cannot but sympathize with. We are treated to the once big town of Dunwich with all its churches. A town which was reclaimed by the sea, it once so proud buildings attacked by repeated storms reduced to ruins which are slowly being swallowed by the sand. And the people flee to the westwards. The whole of history having been a tale of people fleeing towards the west chasing the setting sun. Herring was once abundant along those shores, pulsating with the swelling surf, and then it dried out, and with it entire ways of life coming to their ends. Recent storms hitting the few remaining forests hard, enfeebled by Dutch elm disease. A storm in the night surprises him in his bedroom and in the morning his customary views are replaced by emptiness. The reader learn about the mulberry tree and the assorted European attempts from the 18th century onwards to cultivate the silkworm, as well as a presentation of the various cycles such an insect undergoes during its development. Fitzgerald was a great translator of Arabian poetry, but led a stunted life made meaningful only through a homosexual passion, the subject of which meeting a untimely death left him shattered. Or the case of Chateaubriand, a refugee of the French revolution once stranded in an East Anglian Vicarage almost entrapped into marriage to its adoring daughter, before he managed to extricate himself from a delicate situation and embark on a most perambulatory career, which he tried to justify through obsessive memoirs. The effect is not unlike the one you get from browsing haphazardly through an Encyclopedia. Reading snatches here and there, never finishing, always hunting for something new before being tied down by boredom. Modern travel literature provides an excellent opportunity for the writer who does not want to burden himself unduly with organization, but prefers to zip and zap.

Who is Sebald? The fragmentary data provided by the covers are intriguing as are the snatches I have gleaned from reviews and comments. An obscure personage, but yet literarily gifted. An exemplary story to infuse courage and hope in those of us still obscure but with similar secret ambitions. I picture him as a genial man, a bit fat, probably bald, scholarly, mild-mannered, unpretentious. There is a picture of him in the book, a snapshot of the usual amateurish kind, showing in fuzzy detail, a bespectled young German (in his early forties) standing against the huge trunk of a Libanese cedar in some English oversized garden. The picture gives other kinds of associations. The fat, jovial man of unpretentious demeanour, is replaced by that of the earnest type of German, with impeccable political views, an ecological conscience, and thought-out opinions, speaking English with a harsh and pedantic accent. Somebody you will respect out of principle, but find it hard to warm up to.

December 25, 2005 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se