

Önskeresan

G.Schildt

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This is the prelude to the sailing to the Greek Archipelago¹. It takes the author and his wife from a wharf in Stockholm (where their yacht *Daphne* is being repaired and properly outfitted) along the Baltic down to the 'Göta Canal'² transversing Sweden. The idea was to get some practice in handling canals and their locks in preparation for going through France. Then crossing some open sea, namely *Kattegatt*, to Denmark, where they pass through the 'Limfjorden' which separates the northern tip of Jutland from the rest, the only part of Scandinavia connected to the continent. The idea being to then follow the Danish, Frisian and Dutch coasts down to *Osteende*, rather than passing through the Danish Archipelago and avail themselves of the *Kiel Canal* connecting the Baltic with the North Sea and in the process cutting off Jutland from the continent. In the end they decide to be more adventurous and actually cross the North Sea and land at *Ramsgate* and from there cross the channel obliquely to *Le Havre*, and then avail themselves of rivers and canals to go down to the Mediterranean coast and then heading east.

As far as a trip is identical with its itinerary, and a travel report identical with the trip it describes, and this book is actually a report of travel by boat, this is a fair summary of the book. But a report is expected to be more than just a log, you are also to be made to feel what it is like to be tagging along, to share in the adventure, and to be informed on what is seen and ultimately be instructed not only on the sights but also by the wisdom of the traveling narrator who is free to regularly digress on whatever strikes his fancy no matter how tenuous the connection may be to what is being traveled through. In other words concomitant with the stream of water which carries them physically, there is a mental stream of consciousness. This supposedly provides the charm of travel writing and an excuse for a writer to present his thoughts not logically but by association through his route. No sustained argument needs to be constructed, one damned thing after another is permitted to follow, just as extended trips or war campaigns are supposedly nothing but an incoherent collection of events with no particular relation to each other. But read almost seventy years after the events described it also becomes a species of time travel, one of its unintended consequences.

The sailing takes place in the summer of 1948, almost seventy years ago. The Second World War has just stopped a few years ago and areas have not yet been swept free of mines, so you needed to keep a sharp outlook and follow the more or less safe routes. This is not always so easy, the author finds that sailing contending with tides as in the English Channel is a very tricky business. Seventy years, go seventy years back and you are talking about 1878, could it really be that there is less difference between now and the immediate

¹ Previously reviewed in this volume

² Built in the early 19th century but never acquired the commercial clout it was intended to have and nowadays serves the tourist industry.

post-war times, than between the latter and the decade following the reunification of Germany? Have more inventions taken place in that period than in the last, inventions which have revolutionized our daily lives? Airplanes and cars did not exist in 1878, but were of course established in 1948. But the yacht would as well have been working back in 1878 as 2018, and consequently few things we encounter in the book would seem rather familiar to us who grew up in the 50's and 60's.

Basically it is an account of a following of canals and rivers through France. Canals means locks, the procedures they soon get used to, while navigating rivers such as Rhone is quite hazardous. The author would prefer to use a map, but good maps are hard to come by, instead, much to his initial chagrin but subsequent relief, he has to employ a pilot, who brings along his young son, being initiated in the craft. The Seine was different, its noteworthy character being its meandering, which means that you travel for quite a stretch without covering any distance. They do not travel alone, initially they are joined by a Swedish friend, and after he has left they pick up the philosopher von Wright in Paris, who eventually has to disembark, duties awaiting him at Cambridge, where he has just succeeded Wittgenstein at his chair. The author is well-connected with an extensive network, which of course tends by associativity to expand, as friends of friends often can come in handy, actually more handy than the friends themselves. One example is the shipping firm of Worm, which treats them with such consideration and generosity that it almost embarrasses the author and his wife, as surely it must be some mistake, their connections to them being far too tenuous to warrant such treatment. On the other hand they take it in stride, no remonstrations, and after all well-connected people tend to feel entitled to lucky breaks.

In Rouen they make a stop, the place with its associations to Flaubert intrigues. They also go slumming, seek out a seedy bar in the city with its clientele of bewildered sailors and allures of prostitutes, naturally with hearts of gold taking a motherly interest in their customers. In Paris they stop longer, their boat moored to a quay in the heart of the fabled city, which unlike London, the author has already visited in his early youth. Most owners of yachts, do not travel very much more than satisfied with showing-off at ports, and of course never sailing their boats themselves but employing hired men to act as a crew, for which the author and his wife are often taken. At one time they find it expedient to enlist their friend von Wright, residing at a cheap hotel, to act as the owner as he does splendidly, distinguished looking as he is, if only a year older than the still young author. More notable though is the connection to Andre Gide, whom the author visits in his apartment discussing his Nobel Prize. Gide, who on principle has turned down all honors to be bestowed on him, is nevertheless delighted by the prize, which he must have seen as a late recognition not to say vindication of his work, the author speculates. He is also invited to their boat, but it does not work out, advance warning of his visit is leaked and paparazzi appears, and it has to be called off. This is interesting, Gide a mere author being such a celebrity, at the time. Would that be possible now?

Schildt has not much regard for tourism, on the other hand being painfully aware that this is exactly what he and his wife are engaged in. The idea of systematically inspecting sights as if it was a chore to perform, he finds preposterous, this certainly is not the way to go about experiencing a place. You only do so when you are actually working at the

place and then 'en passant', so to speak, being made aware of the surroundings catching the sights unintentionally as a natural and integral part of the location. But of course tourism becomes an inevitable aspect of a stay, while in Paris. There is a visit to the cathedral at Chartres together with an artist couple they have befriended and who offers them hospitality down in Rappallo. The wife suggests that Chartres should be turned into a museum. The author is immediately appalled by the suggestion without really understanding why. Later reflection reveals to him the source of his aversion. It has to do with the prevalent emphasis on the aesthetics of life, thus viewing it externally, something intimately related to the deplorable phenomenon of tourism. You become a mere tourist in your own life. He makes a comparison between France and Italy. France is often accused of a lack of piety when it comes to the past, but this is actually a sign of soundness. Once a function no longer exists the form it assumes dies. What made that form once beautiful was the function which was paramount and for which it served as a remainder. Italy is far more deeply ensconced in the past, and that of course will have dire consequences as far as its national development, while France is still vibrant, looking for new functions. Thus, the past is only interesting as far as it still survives, one may be tempted to paraphrase his musings. The past may be interesting as a recollection in the present, but that very recollection is not interesting to the future, which only looks for what is really alive in the present to constitute its recollection of the past. One should never add too many meta-levels.

In Paris, the author spends a large part of his free time visiting the Museum of Impressionism, the Museum of jeu de paume, which at the time was just opened in the former 'ball house' erected by Napoleon III*. He observes sadly that if you want to study the impressionists it cannot be done properly in their own country, so little of their works seems to remain in France. He is also struck by the fact that their itinerary happens fortuitously to coincide with the life-nerve of Impressionism. He places its ultimate origin in the paintings by Turner, especially those related to the light of the outlet of the Thames. Honfleur inspired Boudain and Jonkind, Monet worked along the Seine (we all now know about Giverny) as did Corot and the school of Barbizon, while Gauguin and van Gogh in Provence, and of course not to forget the master of them all Cezanne in Aix. Along the coast you will encounter Cagnes where Renoir painted. In fact they have already personally seen many of the views on impressionistic canvases, and more will come, as will opportunities for pilgrimages (Schildt thinks in particular of Cezanne). He discusses impressionism with his friend and companion, the philosopher von Wright, and they seem to agree on the fact that impressionism is founded on an outdated idea of the scientific basis of art. It is a completion of basic perspective, based on the objective nature of light rays. By following formal rules they thought that they could induce identical impressions among every viewer. It is an objective art form, and as a consequence the author claims that it is impossible to distinguish the different artists, they all paint the same things in a more or less identical manner. This I cannot agree with at all, there is a huge difference between the paintings by Monet and those of Pissarro. The latter seems to paint what is in

* In fact in 1947, in 1986 the collections were moved to the newly opened Musee d'Orsay, housed in the former eponymous railway station. The former museum is now devoted since the early 90's to modern art.

front of him, and there is no sense of composition. One may think of them as painstaking snapshots; while Monet takes care of the composition as well, no doubt changing what is in front of his eyes. Pissarro is conscientious and does not take liberties, but this of course does not preclude the possibility of once in a while selecting his subject and viewpoint with care as to composition. In short impressionism is a kind of perfection and hence signifies conclusion and closure, while he reactions to its creed has created a much more varied, individual and subjective tradition, as exemplified especially by the expressionists.

It is a charmed trip indeed, although it does not involve any sailing, nor any adventures on an open sea with a straight unbroken horizon, it presents a more pedestrian experience of picturesque villages and medieaval cathedrals, to be truly savored not on the boat but on land. Often they go on bicycle trips. The roads in France are so much better than those in Scandinavia. Almost always asphalted making for seemingly effortless speed when seductively meandering through a delightful landscape, already made familiar by impressionistic paintings. Curiosity compels them to discover whatever hides behind the next turn, what surprises are in store, the succession of which have an intoxicating effect, leading them to go ahead with no goals no plans content just to accept wherever it will lead to. As a result the bike trips are far longer than those they are used to at home and they return in the evenings happy and exhausted.

Once the author gets to visit the church St-Pierre just above the city of Tonnerre. He eschews a merry gathering by the boat in order to indulge in the pleasures of a heart to heart talk with his philosopher buddy, dwelling on existential questions. They sit outside the church as the sun is setting and reminiscence about their youth. Both took a trip to Toscana together and that was ten years ago, just the war. The author reflects sadly that he does no longer feel the same excitement and energy as he did back then. Could it be that they already have their best years behind them, and he refers to a poem by Leopardi and quotes a few lines *Ma la vita mortal – poi che la bella giovinezza spari, non si colora –d'altra luce giammai, nè d'altra aurora....* His friend shakes his head and reminds the author that the ephemerity of youth is a very common romantic theme. It is an attitude that gives priority to mere feeling and sentiment, but are those really the most valuable thing life has to offer? Are there not other things which are more important? Could it not be so that the business of life only begins seriously once we have outgrown this immature fixation? And they continue to talk until an old decrepit nun comes over with the keys of the gate. She excuses herself fr interrupting, but it is already eight o'clock and she wonders whether they can help her, they are still young.

At another occasion the author and his philosopher friend visit the monastery at Fontenay. This is indeed a bleak place as far as there is nothing for the eye to feast on, everything is very austere, no flowers, no painting, no views, only nondescript forests which could have been anywhere in Europe. Anything that would give pleasure to the moment, is abolished. The monks work in silence, whenever there would be any need to communicate anything they had to use sign language or write it down on a pottery shard. The philosopher claims that one may dispense with living in the present much more than Western man realizes. For him time is the sum of different moments, different 'nows', while for those Cistercian monks, time is made up of pieces of eternity. While the modern man collects moments of happiness, which when once savored cannot be taken away, while the

monk is concerned with eternity, a sin purged is a sin exterminated. Inevitably they are effected when encountering a way of life so antipodal to that of the tourist.

Finally they reach the Mediterranean, their masts have to be erected and they will once again be able to sail. They head east, stay at Marseilles, at the old harbor in the historical center of the town, as they note as they are travelling in their own boat, they are always treated respectfully and enjoy privileges not extended to ordinary tourists. They make interesting connections, once with what must be a mafia-boss of sorts. In St-Tropez the author is disgusted by all the tourists he sees. How bored they are, how pointless their activities. I guess mass tourism became first visible in the Riviera, where the rich congregated after the war. But then the author and his wife arrive in Italy, and everything changes drastically from France. No ostensible wealth, no luxury cars in the streets. They have finally arrived in the catsouth, and the author engages in a lengthy reflection of what this longing for the south really means? He refers to Goethe and his Italian Journey. Goethe was exalted when he arrived in Italy, he felt that he had really come home. So intense was the feeling that his life back in Weimar merely appeared to him as unreal as a dream. Goethe took it seriously and assimilated the south, really made it his own. With Stendahl it was different, the author explains, when the young man arrived as part of Napoleon's army, he too was exalted, but his exaltation was different from that of Goethe. He was the tourist who was invited to a splendid party, but he remained an outsider. He was a romantic, just like his successor Flaubert and Baudelaire, both obsessed with a longing for a romantic south. The romantic soul is basically a pessimistic one, knowing deep down what he loves will always be out of reach.

The adventures are not entirely over. Arriving in Rapallo they are caught in a storm. The author loses control over his boat, the anchorage is lost, it hits other boats, and some serious damage is done. But in the end it is repaired and they eventually have to leave, duties beckon back home, and boat is left in the wharf, to be returned to at some future date.

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