

Sangen om den røde rubin

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This is traditional 'Bildungsroman' but set in peripheral Norway the years before the war, but written in the 50's. It reminds me somewhat of so called Swedish 'Arbetarlitteratur' especially the books by Jan Fridegård about Lars Hård, which I was assigned to read during my first year at Gymnasium back in 1966. I found that book raw and rather depressing, but nevertheless it made a deep impression on me. Just as Lars Hård the protagonist - Ask Burlefot - of the 'Red Ruby' is a young man (twenty-three as opposed to Hård twenty-five or so) coming from simple circumstances and with a predilection for sleeping with young women, of which there seems to be no dearth. Obviously this is the cause for the scandal associated with its publication, which led to a court case on the grounds of obscenity. There is plenty of sex in the book, systematically described, and hence rather unexciting. There is probably as much carnal expression in Lars Hård, but it tends to be evocative and poetic, rather than instructional, and hence the accusations of pornography were not that far-fetched. In what way did it really differ from what was presented in pornographic magazines? I do not know. The issue is of course not really to make a distinction between high-class literary eroticism and simple literal pornography, a distinction which may be impossible to uphold, but rather the issue of freedom of expression, into which literary and artistic considerations would only confuse and muddle.

Burlefot, opposed to Lars Hård, has ambitions in life. He wants to amount to something. He is not a so called 'Streber', this pejorative word to describe those who just wants to succeed in superficial bourgeois society, he on the other hand simply wants to make something of his life. That something being symbolized by the Red Ruby of the title. He has been good at school and is proud to be accepted at a Business School (Handelsgymnasium) at a major city¹. To go there he takes a ship *Hurtigrutten*) and one is somehow reminded of the protagonist of Flaubert's 'Sentimental Education', although he has no epiphany on the boat, only a rather sordid tryst with a young woman. He does not intend to land a job as an executive of a firm, or some other lucrative venture, which apparently motivates most of the 49 other students, but to acquire technical expertise which he can use for his political cause, namely that of achieving socialism. The socialist vision not only gives a meaning to his ventures, it also supplies an identity, a group to belong to. But apart from that he has also artistic dreams. He is a musician and wants to be a composer, and figures that the studies at the Business school, ought not to be so demanding that he cannot pursue his musical studies on the side. And then finally he wants to meet a woman, with whom he can fall in love. A rather conventional dream, but of course true love can never be conventional.

He finds the studies disappointing as he does the professors and teachers. He has very little money, all he has is borrowed, so he needs to keep a low profile, initially sharing a

¹ Never named, but indicative of being Bergen, the second largest city in Norway

room with an old class-mate he has met by chance, and who conveniently enough is going to be a fellow student, but of course a junior partner, not as intelligent, not propelled by such strong emotions as is the protagonist. And as to love, there is much lust, but no love. He feels no guilt for his sexual excesses, decides that he is not deceiving any of the young women, and if so it is bound to be mutual, he is just disappointed that he cannot feel that mysterious love that he longs for. But in the meantime, why do you need to feel that you are in love, when you make love? When there is no love, there is always lust to distract you. One reckons that our protagonist is found very attractive to women, attractive enough that they are willing to engage with him, without any ulterior motives. He is tall, physically strong, but of course with a tender heart and sensitive soul.

In addition to a sequence of beddings, we are treated to his encounters with fellow students, teachers, interesting people among the Socialists, and even a preacher who, for reasons that are never disclosed, but could be of a murky dark nature, tries to make him mend his reckless sowing of wild oats. Of course he has sown more than wild oats. Prior to his introduction in the book, he has made two women pregnant, both older than he. One Gunnhild, a notorious horizontal in his town, kept the daughter and is constantly hounding him for parental support, the other an older divorced woman, manages to have their offspring adopted. This history of his, makes it a bit difficult to sympathize with him as a young, innocent man, temporary at loss, trying to find his bearings. And his women. Those he never converses with, when he tries to do so, he is up for some harsh surprises. One turns out to be an admirer of Hitler, another one, has nothing set higher than get a fancy home with fancy furniture. And then there is finally a woman whom he admires and imagines himself to be truly in love with. While he before had no difficulty in getting the woman to bed, in some cases with a brutality bordering on rape, (but of course the women in the end all love it!) with his elated object of desire he becomes tongue-tied and shy, unable to think of her in sexual terms. This is degrading. Of course this is all rather hackneyed, but as most hackneyed notions catchy and no doubt appealing to many readers, inspired to develop similar tendencies in themselves. So important does the author consider this courtship that he begins the book with it, without naming any names or circumstances, making the reader at first think of it as independent of the book, or maybe even a false start, until the tread is taken up again in the last chapter. The protagonist is struck dumb by the emotions welling up inside him, emotions he is unable to give any expression. The result is that they part with nothing consummated, nothing revealed. He takes off for a prearranged trip to Paris on a motorcycle and she takes up with another man. Eventually they meet again, marry and have children, and it turns out that she never had any inkling of his desire that night in the park, she even had forgotten that they had met then. It makes him understand that love is something that really just exist in your head, and if not communicated it remains where it was originated. That the feeling of love is indeed the most lonesome of all feelings. And this gives to the story a certain twist.

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