

A winter's journey

Notes on the social democratic sublime

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The secret heart of Stockholm is Slussen, which takes its name from the lock-gate or sluice where the inner waters of Stockholm's - and central Sweden's - lake and canal system pour into the open waters of the Baltic, just a few feet below the pavements of the old town, right in the heart of the city. Walking back to the hotel from the Kryp In, a small restaurant and jazz club in Gamla Stan, the old town, the temperature 5 degrees below zero, the snow frozen thick and still coming down, we take a short diversion, gingerly climbing down the icy steps, dropping below the streets, just to watch the black waters rush through the narrow, dark and brutal canal. It's the Stockholm of lost souls in Graham Greene's *England Made Me*. Freezing black waters, flecked with snow, rushing headlong into the Baltic as if escaping from some dark interior.

Yet even on a bitter morning, it is easy to forget the cold in the bustle of central Stockholm, the 'Venice of the North'. The giant Baltic ferries sail right into the heart of the city, just below the brown and yellow ochre cliffs of seventeenth and eighteenth-century buildings rising up from out of the water on the islands of Gamla Stan and Södermalm. Everybody ignores the ice and snow underfoot, and gets on with daily life as in any other city. But just a few stops from T Centralen, the central underground station, you step out into an extraordinary landscape that combines the aspirations of twentieth century Nordic architectural modernism, with a carefully constructed attempt to evoke the pagan burial mounds and desolate forests

of pre-historic Sweden. This is the Stockholm Woodland Cemetery.

'*Pas de cimetiere, pas de cite!*' shouted the Parisian crowds, when demonstrating against Haussman's plan to remove the cemeteries from central Paris in the 1870s. Cemeteries provide a gazetteer of a city's people, their beliefs, their family relationships and their trades. Stockholm's great twentieth-century cemetery, designed by Erik Gunnar Asplund and Sigurd Leweretz, was started in 1915 and not finally completed until 1961. It is one of the very few attempts in twentieth-century Europe to create a thoroughly new kind of urban cemetery. In doing so Asplund and Leweretz broke completely with both European and Islamic traditions - the city of the dead or paradise garden - and created a landscape in which the individual memorial was wholly subsumed within a more powerful landscape or 'natural' terrain.

Apart from the return to pre-historic forms, the influences were also rather painterly. As you enter the main gate, all you see is a view of a gentle but massive snow-covered grass knoll and an uninterrupted view of the iron-grey sky. One third/two-thirds: the classical landscape proportions, connected only by a vast granite cross that locks earth and sky together. The symbolic meaning of the cross remains in dispute. It is based on a recurring image in the work of Caspar David Friedrich, generally assumed to be German but in *fact* a Swedish national by birth, and rightly a pivotal figure in Simon Schama's recent epic, *Landscape and Memory*. In many of Friedrich's landscapes there is at least one wayfarer's cross, a sign of hope in an otherwise abandoned world. Asplund and Leweretz claimed that the cross was open to non-Christian interpretations, and quoted Friedrich himself: 'to those who see it as such, a consolation, to those who do not, simply a cross.' To the side of the cross is a path which leads up the hill to the Monumental Hall, a vast, angular, open plan colonnaded temple in a style that mixes National Romanticism with a rather aggressive functionalism. The views everywhere are of artificial ponds, earth mounds, oak circles, elm groves and natural pine forest, and it is deep in the last that the insignificant memorials and grave markers are mostly hidden.

The development of the cemetery and crematorium coincided with the rising influence of Swedish social democracy, particularly strong in Stockholm itself. Cremation was thought to foster a greater sense of equality in burial practices, eschewing the excessive differences of the ornate marble mausoleum at one extreme, and the pauper's grave at the other. A socially conscious aesthetic - influenced by William Morris and the English 'Art and Crafts' movement and

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emphasising the unity of art and life (or in this case art and death) - promoted the idea that death and bereavement were part of a shared, enduring human condition rather than a matter for wholly private, and sometimes ostentatious, grief. There was also a strong tradition of large processional funerals, particularly for working-class people, with hundreds following the coffin with standards and trade union banners held aloft. Ironically, this public and collective tradition was finally broken as a result of the success of social democracy itself. Traditionally most funerals were held on Saturday or Sunday, when people were free from work, but with the accomplishment of paid leave to attend funerals for close family and friends, the public funeral was transformed almost immediately, and irreversibly, into a private affair. Politics has so often been a story of unintended consequences, more tragic than comic, which only those with a developed sense of irony should take seriously

Just such a funeral was taking place as I walked through the Monumental Hall: the men and women in dark overcoats shuffling and coughing as they waited for the hearse to arrive, some surreptitiously smoking from cigarettes held hidden behind their backs; a punk teenage girl with pink hair and spangled tights being glowered at by older family members. I took the train back into central Stockholm later with some of them. The electronic signs on the factory and office buildings we passed displayed the date, time and temperature: it was nine degrees below zero. I had gone to pay homage to a unique experiment in urban design and culture: an attempt to combine a modernist aesthetic with the spirit of collectivist social democracy and a respect for the enduring natural terrain, with all three ideals now frozen solid beneath the snow, and the temperature getting colder.

The next evening I flew to Ornskoldsvik, far in the north of Sweden on the Baltic coast, just a hundred or so miles from the Arctic circle. I and two colleagues had been invited over by the Swedish Cultural Ministry to exchange views about the future of public libraries, and each of us had been flown to a different part of the country to look at libraries and talk with staff and local politicians. Ornskoldsvik airport is about 30 kilometres inland from the town, and is located in a clearing in a forest. The plane landed, or so it seemed, in an empty snowfield, the lights of the aircraft cutting a bright swathe through the surrounding blizzard. But the most heart-numbing part of the trip was yet to come. Seven people boarded the airport bus, operated by a smiling middle-aged woman, who welcomed everybody on board, sold the tickets, shut the doors and roared off. Then, it seemed,

we simply tobogganed down the mountain. The bus swayed, rocked, and glided down hills, over bridges, and round bends at a ferocious speed. There was no visible road to follow, just striped poles on both sides marking where the road should be, even though it had lain buried for months beneath packed ice. In the headlights, we rocketed through forests and hurtled along beneath the black sky, like Gorky's mad troika ride through Russia in *Dead Souk*. I could hardly breathe. Occasionally a car or timber truck came towards us, its headlights basking in the bright snow, blackening out the whole sky, but our driver didn't let up at all, keeping her foot pressed down on the accelerator and roaring through the narrow gaps.

It was Advent, and every so often we passed a clapboard house in a clearing, silhouetted against the dark, and in each of the many windows were hundreds of lights and artificial candles, glowing and flickering. Each house was latticed with lights, every hallway room and attic. The furniture, the dinner tables, the kitchens, the bedrooms with the children's toys were all stage-lit, with lights strung from the roof too, and even festooning some of the surrounding trees. The whole impression was of a series of fairy castles, of mythical gingerbread houses ablaze in the wood.

When the bus arrived in Ornskoldsvik - a small Baltic port handling largely timber and industrial machinery, and mostly shipping out to Russia, Estonia, Latvia and other late communist Baltic countries - I was dropped off at the hotel, opposite the harbour which was completely frozen over and covered with snow like a vast ice rink. The air was almost too cold to breathe, except through pursed lips. My ears stung. In the hotel room, a large modern room with kitsch paintings of tundra and forests, I poured a large whisky and carried on reading *The Poetics of Space*.

In this book, Gaston Bachelard attempts to create a phenomenology of the house, the room, the empty wardrobe, the drawer and even the small chest or box, as a way of understanding how and why humans relate to certain kinds of intimate space, and are in fact emotionally constructed by these associations and residual memories. By happy coincidence I came quite quickly to a chapter on the psychological associations and meanings of *lighted windows*. The lamp you see, also sees you. The light in the window is a form of a vigil, and through it, the house becomes human, keeping watch on us as we draw comfort from its illuminated presence. More poetically, Bachelard concludes that what we find almost magical about a cluster of lit houses at night is that, 'In such images we have the impression that the stars in heaven come to live on earth, that the houses of men form earthly

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constellations.' A good work of theory, such as this, is hard to find.

Arne was the architect of the Ornskoldsvik's new town library; and this is what I had travelled to see. It is already famous throughout Sweden, and beyond. The fact that Arne was a local architect, who had never designed a public library before, yet who had created such an accomplished and fully realised building, was in itself remarkable. On a previous visit I had been shown round the library several times by different people, but the following morning I was shown round by Arne himself.

The new Ornskoldsvik public library occupies one-third of a large modernist-vernacular building, triangular in plan, facing the harbour. The other two-thirds are taken up by the new town business centre and the local technical high school. All three are linked by an indoor street, a lively and bustling public space, with a cafe, an employment centre, an information bureau flanking the central aisle, along with the two main library entrances. As you first enter 'The Ark', as the building is called, you find yourself facing a large circular atrium, a rotunda, with book-lined galleries at first floor level. This great library dome covers the public street, and a bridge which crosses the circular basement performance area, leading beyond the library towards the business centre. In this open basement arena, a local choir may be rehearsing, a school group exhibiting paintings, or a local pianist practising Debussy, all to the benefit of the people passing overhead. The library shelves are open to view from the 'street', but are not directly accessible because they are on the first floor. The main entrances to the library, at ground floor level, lead into the adult fiction library on the left, the children's library on the right, through which you can walk upstairs or take a lift, and find yourself back in the public area again looking down on to the crowds below.

Arne tells me, with just a hint of bravura, that the rotunda is almost exactly the same diameter as that of the Stockholm City Library, one of the great library buildings of Europe, designed in the 1920s by Erik Gunnar Asplund - the very same person responsible for the Woodland Cemetery - which has provided a reference point for much international library architecture since then. It testifies to the self-confident politics of this small town that they commissioned a new public library of such impressive grandeur and size. For Ornskoldsvik is a town of just 20,000 people, with a further 40,000 to be found in the surrounding hinterland, made up mostly of suburbs or hamlets attached to paper plants and timber

processing factories. There are also many small farms within the district boundaries.

The new library, I am told, probably represents a final great civic bequest by a local government tradition which, as in many other parts of Europe, is never likely to have the same confident spending power again. Throughout Europe there has been an absolute transfer of spending from the public sector to the market-place - education, transport, health, pensions, even policing - and public taxation is no longer seen by most people as the necessary, if restrictive, good that it once was. In Britain even taxation itself has been partially privatised through the new National Lottery, a 'voluntary' levy to pay for what were traditionally public goods such as village halls, opera houses and national archives. Yet the new Ornskoldsvik library wins universal approval throughout the district, and is already the centre of local life.

Most of Arne's previous commissions have been designs for housing, offices and small factories. He had never been interested particularly in libraries as buildings, but now he was fascinated by the richness of the architectural and social tradition, and he told me that it had been the most important project he had ever undertaken. When his firm had been awarded the job, he had started by visiting libraries elsewhere in Sweden, in Finland and Germany. Asplund's Stockholm library remained the most influential reference point, although that had been designed as a civic temple to knowledge, whereas the Ornskoldsvik library had been intended as the town's 'living room' or 'salon'. This sea-change in the perception of the public library, not simply as a repository of information and knowledge, but as a meeting place of an educated and informed democracy, is one of the great paradigm shifts in civic architecture in this century.

Asplund's Stockholm library represents the most formal expression of the 'temple of knowledge' tradition, with its almost sarcophagus-like front elevation, the wide steps, the imposing front door and the rising bulk of the rotunda appearing to suggest a forbidden inner chamber. Inside, it is even more severe. The lobby is an ante-chamber of dark marble decorated by a frieze exhibiting stories from the *Iliad*, by the artist Ivar Johnsson, and the atmosphere is oppressive and gloomy. Once inside, there stands another marble portal, a dark, narrow staircase climbing up into the central rotunda itself, and symbolically leading from the darkness of the entrance hall into the light of the great library room. The library is a highly formal arrangement of inner and outer chambers, decorated in art deco style, and represents a last flowering

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of Nordic Classicism, before the final and happy arrival of Scandinavian social democracy and architectural modernism, the era of timber (particularly light softwoods), stainless steel, airiness, light and glass. Inside the rotunda, there is a cantilevered book gallery running the circumference of the great room, which when I was last there one bitterly cold autumn evening was gloomy and lit by a melancholy yellow light from within.

A number of different architectural models now compete to embody the ideals of the public library - and of public, accessible knowledge - in the modern city. Three paradigms dominate: the library as a temple of knowledge; the library as an enclosed arcade or town square; or the library as cultural department store. Until the 1970s Asplund's Stockholm library prevailed as the dominant model of the traditional 'gallery library', which deliberately provided only space enough to browse between the stacks, with little space for social or convivial uses. In the 1980s, in Sweden and Britain, libraries were increasingly modelled on department stores, presenting books, records, videos face forward, occupying large open plan, single storey buildings, with windows on to the street to display the 'goods' inside. This is probably still the dominant model in Britain, with the new - and enormously popular - Croydon central library out-doing Marks & Spencer for

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escalators, integrated interior design, opening hours, and crowds. In Sweden, though, the department store model is no longer in favour, and a renewed concern for public and civic values has led to the design of libraries, such as the one in Ornskoldsvik, based on re-creating the town square or street indoors, with civic sendees such as the library-, the information department, education advice services, congregated around an inner street, with a cafe and even shops. Within the library space, armchairs are grouped together to create a living room effect,

where elderly people and students often sit for hours reading the newspapers, gossiping. In the winter months, when temperatures regularly fall to minus 20 degrees, Ornskoldsvik library comes into its own as the town salon.

The building has been a stunning success, and I got the feeling that the challenge, now completed, has left Arne restless. Over several days, I was in and out of the library more than a dozen times, and always the inner street was packed

with people, meeting, gossiping, promenading. On my last morning with the library staff, I was told we were all to have coffee and cakes before the library opened, a small celebration to mark the end of a successful school holiday programme. At 9.30 we all gathered in the staff area to light candles and sing folk songs. There were 25 full and part-time staff running the library - all women. And that day, in addition, there was me. We danced in a circle, singing, did a 'strip the willow' processional, holding hands, all through the library, up and down spiral staircases, in and out of all the offices, through the public foyer, and back to the staff area, singing. One final circle dance, and a long song about all the different animals, with gestures - we wagged our bums like rabbits, woofed woofed like dogs, miaowed like cats, flapped our arms like birds - and then sat down exhausted for cakes and coffee. Then we talked about book acquisition policies, current levels of stock-holding, the demographic make-up of the library users, and so on. My Swedish hosts effected the transition from carnivalesque to professional decorum with barely a flicker of self-consciousness in their traditional reserve.

Arne picked me up at the Stadshotell at three in the afternoon; we had arranged to have tea. I was due to return to Stockholm early the next morning. However, he was keen to drive me into the hills above Ornskoldsvik, from where we would be able to get a bird's-eye view of the town, the port and the bay. We drove out along the harbour road, past the endless stacks of oozing, resinous Russian birch logs stacked on the quays like pyres, past the Gothic, castellated, wooden railway station (now permanently closed), past the ship repair yard, past the oil terminal, and followed the road round into the next bay. Then we took a sharp right, and climbed steeply into the hills until we came to the top. Here the snow was still thick and iron-hard. There was a weather station with a look-out platform.

Behind us, to the west, there was an endless succession of snow-bound hills, with frozen lakes iced in between the folds. Each lake had a dull, gun-metal sheen. The air was almost blue and slightly opaque, draining the scenery of colour, rather like yet another painting by Caspar David Friedrich, one of his elemental, melancholy winter landscapes, abandoned by God. To the east, beyond Ornskoldsvik and the lattice-work of rivers and lakes linking it up to the sea, the sun made everything glow. The small suburb surrounding the paper mill on the far side of the bay stood washed in the late afternoon sunlight, and glowed golden too. Arne says he never tires of this view. He pointed in the direction where his

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own island summer house is to be found, where he goes most weekends - except in the deepest winter - to sail, to fish and to sleep.

We drove back to town, and went for a drink in the new English pub on the quay. I asked him if the water was clean these days, what with the paper mills strung out along the shore-line, wafting out steam or smoke from the great industrial chimneys. He tells me that recent legislation has greatly improved things, and that people now swim in the harbour as they used to do when he first came to the town.

'Isn't it too cold, even in the summer?'

'No, not at all. Some people swim all the year round, even when there is ice.'

I feigned disbelief.

'Sure, particularly after a sauna. You get accustomed to it. I grew up on an island outside Stockholm. Every Friday night we had a sauna, and we made a hole in the ice outside, and we jumped in when we got very hot. After you have been in the water you can walk round in the snow, completely naked, for five to ten minutes and still feel warm. Even in the middle of winter, say minus ten degrees.'

Arne went on to tell me more about his childhood.

'Because we lived on an island, our parents had to teach us how to survive in the ice and the snow. We had to learn what to do if we fell through the ice, which happened to me several times in my childhood. You see, in the winter we had to walk to school across the ice because the boat could not be used, and the school was on another island.'

So how *do* you survive I asked? This had been a great terror instilled into me during my childhood: the unspeakable horrors and awful death suffered by those who ventured onto thin ice and fell through, their bodies only recovered after the thaw, and of the other children who had gone to their rescue and in turn had also drowned. My mother told stories of such incidents as a warning, painting a grim picture - which years later I finally saw realised in Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevsky* - of a never-ending succession of capsizes, attempted rescues, and further drownings, bodies filling the water like logs.

'There is one simple rule: as soon as you fall in, you must turn to face the way you were coming from, and then climb out - as quickly as possible. Logically the ice you were walking on must be stronger than the ice you were walking towards. But we always carried two small steel pins, on a string around our necks, which were used to grip the ice to pull yourself out. But you have to be quick! Once your clothes become heavy with water, and your muscles start to get - do you say 'cramp'

- then you are finished. Lost.'

We sat for several hours, talking, occasionally looking out beyond the harbour, watching the late evening sun retreating west, the night sky clouding over with inky whorls and pink tendrils, casting longer and darker shadows over the whole bay. Arne tried to explain a Swedish folk saying, but it remained untranslatable. 'We have the same expression to mean to sit waiting for the dawn and also to fool somebody' But I never worked out what it was, or how these two very different things could share a common metaphor. We ate baked perch, with potatoes and salad; outside the occasional car or timber truck swished by on winter tyres, studded with metal pins, crunching the salted roads. Ornskoldsvik seemed such a remote and simple idyll. It was easy to understand how people earned a living and fulfilled their lives - they cut down trees, they worked in paper factories, they fished or farmed, they built their own houses, went to the library, joined trade unions and political parties, went to church, had children, perhaps had affairs, and one day died.

Yet, even this fairly remote town in Northern Sweden now had a small immigrant community, made up of several hundred Bosnian refugees who, on the several occasions I visited it, were nowhere to be seen. I imagined they had been settled in a couple of the large public housing blocks on the edge of town and largely left to fend for themselves on welfare. How they might ever adjust to this austere, Protestant setting, I can't imagine - or whether they would ever be made fully welcome. But this is one of the key *leit-motifs* of the European economic and social future: that even the smallest of towns or cities will not remain untouched by the great exoduses and diasporas of global migration, and even fair-haired, neutralist and somewhat isolationist Sweden - though often a generous host in the past to refugees - is now becoming as multi-cultural as France, Germany or Britain.

When it finally grew too dark to make out the harbour jetty, we paid the bill and we left. Arne escorted me back to the hotel; we shook hands and wished each other goodnight - and goodbye. The following morning I was on the plane looking down on Ornskoldsvik disappearing fast behind me, its hinterland of lakes and forests frozen a bluish white, its harbour a cracked jigsaw puzzle of ice, as I flew back south to Stockholm in the cloudless, golden light.

A Winter Journey by Billy Young Sandy travels by coach through a snowy night with his work mates two weeks before Christmas. They travel from Dumfriesshire up through the Scottish Uplands&39; passes towards Ayrshire. To while away they&39;re time they joke amongst themselves in a nightly ritual as the snow slowly clears to reveal the hills and mountains in all their wintertime splendour, which all go unnoticed by the tired and sleepy workers as they travel onwards into cold night, homeward bound.