

CARL OLOV SOMMAR (ed.):

Gunnar Ekelöf: Brev 1916-1968

Bonniers, Stockholm 1989. Pp.223. ISBN: 91-0-047517-3.

From a collection of material roughly ten times as large held either in public archives or by individual correspondents Gunnar Ekelöf's biographer Carl Olov Sommar has sifted out a selection of 141 representative letters of the Swedish poet and essayist. The letters span over fifty years of the author's life, from rather pathetic childhood letters to his mother Valborg Hahr and his maternal aunt Hanna von Hedenberg to letters written to friends and relatives during the very last years of his life, when he was already being treated for cancer of the oesophagus. As Sommar indicates in his foreword, a number of the letters collected here have already been published elsewhere, notably in Ingrid Ekelöf's posthumous edition *Gunnar Ekelöf: En självbiografi* (1971). The entire correspondence between the Finland-Swede Elmer shortsighted as the notion of the 'crisis of the novel' or Peter Szondi's Hegelian analysis of the 'crisis of the drama.' The criticism of Ekelöf's epistolary style seems to me furthermore to reflect a confusion between the letter as a literary genre and the letter as a means of private communication, though admittedly as soon as a writer is in the public domain readers and critics alike have, I suppose, the right to approach his letters as they do any other aspect of his literary production. Ekelöf's letters, it would seem to me, are written almost entirely as means of communication and are completely devoid of that 'flirting with posterity' which make Rilke's highly stylized, 'magisterial' contributions to the genre virtually unpalatable to many a reader, and, I might add, perhaps unreliable as interpretative background. To view Ekelöf's letters by the standards of Goethe and Schiller (or even Strindberg and Lagerlöf) seems to me unfair. That, on the other hand, Ekelöf's letters do not mark the apex of epistolary art in Scandinavia is equally patent, but as George Steiner has underlined in a pointed criticism of so-called 'intrinsic' interpretation, anything we can learn about a writer, especially such an intensely private writer as Ekelöf, is of value.

Sommar's edition is a valuable addition to our understanding of Ekelöf, both for professional and nonprofessional readers. Sommar has provided the individual letters with an apparatus of short, unpretentious and for the most part accurate notes which supply useful background for the uninitiated reader. Indexes of correspondents and of persons discussed complete the volume.