



Saxon Switzerland: "Die Bastei im Elbsandsteingebirge" (detail), 1840, by Karl Gottfried Traugott Faber

Before the fairy tales

PAUL BINDING

Hans Christian Andersen

Shadow Pictures

From a Journey to the Harz Mountains.
Saxon Switzerland, etc etc in the Summer of 1831
Translated by Anna Halager; edited by Sven Hakon
Rosell and Monica Wenusch Praesens
161pp. Praesens, £24.
9783 7069 0653 1

On May 16, 1831, at the age of twenty-six, Hans Christian Andersen left Denmark for the first time, boarding a steamer at Copenhagen for Lübeck. In his diary he noted his night's anxieties that a storm might be brewing, and how, outside his window, a swallow sang to tell him something (but what?) about the six-week journey ahead. Friends saw him off, probably among them Christian Voigt, a study-mate with whose sister, Riborg, he had fallen unequivocally in love the previous summer. When he came to write his account of this journey in *Shadow Pictures*, however, Andersen omitted anticipatory fears, portents and quayside well-wishers, as he did the "unbearable" toothache plaguing him (as it would do, on and off, all his life). The sea turned out to be "like a mirror", but during the peaceful crossing and the subsequent journey on land from Lübeck to Hamburg, he permitted himself two bursts of poetry; both signalling reluctance to put his unhappy love experience behind him.

Both the title and subtitle of his travelogue announce Andersen's admiration for Heinrich Heine, who five years earlier, in 1826, had brought out his own *Die Harzreise (Journey in the Harz)*, the successful first part of his *Reisebilder (Travel Pictures)*. Heine's travelogue describes his journey into these mountains, going north-east from Göttingen, made two years before, when he was Andersen's age. It blends the lyrically descriptive, the analytical and the personal in colloquial prose entirely suitable for periodic outbreaks into poetry (indeed into some of his most inspired). Andersen's offering aimed to do likewise. Andersen is over-

whelmed by the wild beauty of the highest peak in the Harz, the mist-beset Brocken, to be celebrated in Goethe's *Faust*. Both Heine and Andersen delight in the *Brocken Book*, in which hikers sleeping in mountain accommodation had to write their responses to the scenery. The gorge of the Ilse elicits comparable ecstatic homage from the two, both stirred by the tragic legend behind the river.

Andersen was familiar not only with the work of Heine and Goethe (whom, uncharacteristically, he was too diffident to contact) but with the eminent dead like Matthias Claudius and the Harz-born Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock (resident in Denmark between 1751 and 1770) and the influential living – significantly, Ludwig Tieck and Adelbert von Chamisso, whom he would meet in Dresden and Berlin respectively. (Chamisso's masterpiece *Peter Schlemihl*, 1814, will be a presence in Andersen's powerful story *The Shadow*, 1847.) When he writes of a production of Weber's *Der Freischütz*, he displays awareness of technical problems in stage production and of the music's felicities. Later in his journey, he visited Wolf's Glen,

a zigzag ravine in the mountainous country south of Dresden known as Sächsische Schweiz (Saxon Switzerland), which had inspired Weber's librettist Richard Kind's most haunting scene. Andersen's account of the place shows his familiarity with *Der Freischütz* and his own sense of the ominous. Similarly, when he met the Norwegian painter Johan Christian Dahl in Dresden, he appreciated his marriage of Nordic landscape and internationalist artistry.

Andersen fervently wanted, and needed, to be recognized by such men as a fellow artist and a likeable human being. In both the travelogue and his diary he records his successes in this respect with the same fervour with which he followed up introductions in the first place, a trait which irritated many compatriots. And by this stage in his life he had achieved a great deal: a Hoffmannesque fantasy published to acclaim, a play staged at the Royal Theatre (both 1829) followed by two books of poetry. But, mindful always of his lowly origins and of others' mindfulness of these, Andersen still took any criticism, personal or literary, painfully to heart. Unrecorded here, this German tour was blighted by a snub from the person he cared for most deeply, his benefactor's son, Edward Collin, at the heart of the Copenhagen establishment, who had refused his request that they use the intimate pronoun "Du" to each other.

Nevertheless, *Shadow Pictures* shows Andersen to be wonderfully responsive to all sorts of people, whether they are students, farm boys or Catholic Bohemian women – and to the traditions and tempers of the communities, rural and urban, he passes through.

European conflict – the Thirty Years War, the Seven Years War, and the long fight against Napoleon – preys on his mind as he surveys its geographical scars, as in the neighbourhood of the Battle of Leipzig. But, essentially a meliorist, he proclaims:

We are moving in strides towards a new and better era. Yet Europe needs to fight. But first of all, the wild lava must seethe from the mountain before it can carry the rich vines of peace and prosperity. A sensible independence coupled with natural enlightenment will then spread its gentle summer breeze over the nations. Then the new Gimle will rise behind the fighting Ragnarök [sic]. Our time is also interesting!

The strength of Andersen's art came to lie in his imaginative refusal to acknowledge pain and frustration even as it conveys the beautiful and the tender. In Sächsische Schweiz he visited Sonnenstein, a sanatorium for the mentally ill:

Here imagination, this life's best cherub that conjures up an Eden in the desert sand, lifting us on its strong arms above the deepest abyss, over the tallest mountain and into God's glorious heaven, is an awful Chimera whose Medusa head paralyzes every common sense, breathing a magical circle around the unfortunate victim, who is thus lost to the world.

In his moving portraits of three deluded patients, the daring empathy which distinguishes the creator of *The Little Match Girl* and *The Shadow* is fully revealed. *Shadow Pictures* is illuminatingly introduced and excellently annotated by Sven Hakon Rosell and Monica Wenusch Praesens. Andersen's translation captures Andersen's conversational mode.