

**"WHY IS THE JUNE NIGHT SO PALE
ON THE WAVES OF BOTHNIA?"**

Harry Martinson. *Chickweed Wintergreen. Selected Poems* Translated by Robin Fulton, Introduction by Staffan Söderblom. Bloodaxe Books. 2010.

Lars-Håkan Svensson

Among the four or five truly outstanding Swedish-language poets of the twentieth century, Harry Martinson, who was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1974, was in some ways the most remarkable. Left parentless at an early age (his father died when he was 6, his mother emigrated to the US when he was 9), he spent six years as a parish orphan and had no formal education beyond erratic attendance at rural elementary schools. For seven years, between ages 16 and 23, he sailed the seven seas. After signing off definitively in 1927, he soon established himself as the most celebrated of the generation of self-taught writers that emerged in Sweden in the 1930s. He was primarily a poet, but also wrote some very successful novels. In 1949 he was elected to the Swedish Academy. Some of his books met with exceptional critical acclaim and sold in large numbers; however, despite his solid reputation and popularity among readers in general, the decision to award him the Nobel Prize (together with novelist Eyvind Johnson) in 1974 was severely, not to say viciously questioned by some influential critics, and Martinson, always sensitive to the criticisms that had also come his way, spent his last years in retirement and illness. He died in 1978, aged 74.

English-language readers have so far been able to familiarize themselves with Martinson through Robert Bly's translations in *Friends, You Drank Some Darkness* (1975), five of which later found their way into *The Rattle Bag*, Ted Hughes' and Seamus Heaney's 1982 anthology. In 1999, Leif Sjöberg and Stephen Klass translated *Aniara*, Martinson's epic science fiction poem, by many considered to be his masterpiece. The present volume is, however, the first to provide a full-scale selection in English of Martinson's oeuvre from his debut in 1929 to the various collections that have appeared after his death. The translator, Robin Fulton, is well prepared for his task. In addition to being a fine poet himself, he has a thorough command of Swedish and has published a large number of translations. Most notably, perhaps, he is the translator of *The Great Enigma* (2006), a volume that collects all the works published to date by last year's Nobel Prize Winner, Tomas Tranströmer. Having translated Tranströmer with great expertise is a very relevant qualification for taking on Martinson. Tranströmer owes an artistic debt to

his older colleague, having honed his knack for metaphors and keen observations of nature under Martinson's tutelage. Not surprisingly, Martinson himself recognized Tranströmer's talent early on. And when Tranströmer was attacked in the 1970s by relentless Swedish Marxist critics, Martinson was presumably aware that his kind of poetry was indirectly targeted as well.

In putting together his Martinson volume, Fulton has benefitted from the advice of a number of prominent Martinson scholars. The result is a finely calibrated anthology that includes nearly all of Martinson's most famous poems. For my own part, I only miss one poem ("Juninatten", 'The June night', from the 1953 collection, *Cicada*) that includes one of the best-loved of Martinson's many proverbial lines; in fairness, however, the omission of this poem's celebration of the June night that never takes place may simply be due to the difficulty of rendering its verbal music in English. It is likely that the assistance of the advisory board provides the basis for some of Fulton's deft solutions of various linguistic and referential difficulties that Martinson's poems pose for a translator. What some of these conundrums are is carefully elucidated in Staffan Söderblom's informative and well-balanced introduction.

I have already suggested—and Söderblom drives home the same point—that much of Martinson's greatness resides in the peculiar word-music of his highly idiosyncratic, often deliberately naivistic idiom. Reading through his oeuvre, one cannot fail to be struck by the fact that he started out as a traditional poet, relying on rhyme and metre, but very soon discovered the mind-boggling effects that could be achieved by adopting the techniques of the great modernists. In Martinson's case, these two seemingly contradictory modes of writing were fused into one, often also marked by his fine ear for metaphors and word play and his keen sense of the peculiar quality of Scandinavian nature. Thus, in his finest and most characteristic poems, Martinson mixes rhyme, neologisms, and a heightened sensitivity to natural beauty, as in "Evening Inland":

Silently the mystery is mirrored. It spins evening
in quietened reed-beds.
Here is a gossamer no one notices
threads from grass to grass.

Silently cattle stare with green eyes.
Soon, evening-calmly, they reach water.
And the lake holds to all mouths
its giant spoon.

In his translation, Fulton makes no attempt to rhyme though he conveys the musical quality and the imagistic precision of the original.

Martinson's wide appeal to Swedish readers consists to a large extent in his ability to capture the Scandinavian love for—some would say obsession with—nature. Yet, though this predilection was apparent from the beginning, he was also able to voice his experiences of the far-away countries and places that he had visited, speaking of them with the same intimate authority as of the Swedish countryside he knew so well. Here is another 1931 poem, "Out on the Sea":

Out on the sea we feel spring or summer only as a breath of wind.
The drifting Florida weed blossoms sometimes in summer,
and on a spring evening a spoonbill flies in towards Holland.

However, contrary to some other representatives of his generation of self-taught writers, Martinson, despite his modernist leanings, was suspicious of the lure of industrialism and the cult of the machine, and also saw through the prejudices of colonialism, racism, and male chauvinism. In fact, Martinson from the very beginning was skeptical of technique-driven ideas of progress. "After" (1931) is an early and well-known example of his strictures of modern civilization:

After the Battle of Helgoland
and after the Battle of Tsushima
the sea dissolved the driftwood of the human corpses.
Treated them with its secret acids.
Let albatrosses eat their eyes.
And bore them with dissolving salts
slowly back to the ocean –
a creative Cambrian Age water,
to try again.

Despite the wide perspective of a poem such as this, Martinson scholars have shown that the poet's critique of civilization, including among other things an ill-received attack on the sacrosanct position of the car in modern society (*The Carriage*, 1960), is linked to his early personal experiences as a parentless—and homeless—child. Martinson's celebration of nature—ranging from his infatuation with the white midsummer nights to the microcosmos of the tussock (*Tussocks* was the title of the last collection Martinson published himself, in 1973)—was an aspect of his life-long search for attachment, for a home, and for recognition. His most experimental and prophetic volume, *Aniara* (1956), is at once an outlet of the anguish produced

by this search and an expression of the anxieties brought about by Cold War fears of a catastrophic atom bomb war. The *Aniara* is a space ship traveling through space with 8 000 evacuees after the earth has become inhabitable. A malfunction knocks the ship off course, and the voyagers are doomed to travel indefinitely through space. In a sequence of 103 poems, the narrator of the poem conveys the immense tragedy of this involuntary odyssey. The closing 103rd poem is an epitaph on mankind, written in a metre that in English cannot fail to evoke the heroic quatrain:

I bid repose and now turn down my lamp.
Our tragedy is done. I was to tell,
with emissary's right, from time to time
our fate reflected on galactic swell.

To distant Lyra for fifteen thousand years
with unrelenting speed our ship would steer,
a museum, bits and bones stacked on tiers,
and pressed plants from our far-off native sphere.

Laid out and cold in our sarcophagus
we'd sail on desolation's endless wave
the night of space forever lost to day
a glassy silence wrapped around our grave,

By mima's burial place set in a ring
we lay transformed, now guiltless mould
redeemed from bitterness of stars that sting.
And through us all Nirvana's billow rolled.

On its publication, *Aniara* met with exceptional success, enhanced by its adaptation by Karl-Birger Blomdahl into an opera which premiered in 1959. It also marked the apogee of a lyrical oeuvre that would prove hard to match, let alone surpass. Martinson had started out as a well-traveled sailor turned modernist poet. During the 1930s and especially the 1940s and 1950s he had slowly transformed himself into a learned poet-philosopher with a keen interest in science. Though he wrote many remarkable poems during this period, he was also, at times perhaps justly, criticized for not always quite living up to expectations. However, the savage criticisms leveled at him after he was awarded the Nobel Prize were wildly off the mark, causing him great distress and ultimately inducing a despair that killed him. However, throughout the last years of his life, Martinson continued to write, hoping that the poems he produced would be published after his death—as they have. *Chickweed Wintergreen* contains some 20 poems culled

from these posthumous volumes, showing him to be in full command of the voice that had once made him famous.

Robin Fulton has now translated two worthy Swedish Nobel Prize winners into English. In my view, he has been very successful on both counts. It might be argued that he is by temperament—and also through his own lyrical idiom—more suited to translating Tranströmer. Though Tranströmer makes noticeable use of neologisms, Martinson's inimitable word play is a far more formidable stumbling block for the translator. When he invents words such as "torr-rykande" (literally 'dry-smoking') and "inbillningsfiske" ('imaginary fishing'), what is a poor translator to do? Go native or domesticate? Remarkably often, Fulton manages to convey the innovative character of Martinson's language (though, in the two cases listed above, he opts for domestication, settling for "a dry as dust image" and "an imaginary fishing trip"). Irrespective of our preferences in this matter, we have every reason to be grateful to Fulton for making a great European poet from a small language available—and highly enjoyable—to English-language readers.