

## MEDIUMICITY

Göran Sonnevi. *Mozart's Third Brain*. Yale University Press, New Haven: 2009

*Johannes Goransson*

Yale University Press's edition of Göran Sonnevi's *Mozart's Third Brain* (originally published in Sweden in 1996, here superbly translated by Rika Lesser) goes to great lengths—by means of packaging—to establish that Göran Sonnevi is indeed a very important figure in Swedish poetry: it has blurbs from Richard Howard and C.K. Williams, uses the word “important”—and synonyms thereof—repeatedly in blurbs and jacket copy. And it's in hardback from *Yale University Press*.

Indeed, Sonnevi is, by any account, one of the crucial Swedish poets of the last half century (or even whole century). He quickly emerged as a central poet in the 1960s generation of writers and artists and musicians that radically transformed Swedish culture. In particular, he was part of “*Nyenkelheten*,” a movement in Swedish poetry that rejected what was seen as the bourgeois nature mysticism and over-literariness of previous generations (think Tomas Tranströmer), in favor of a more urban, socially conscious, less literary style. *Nyenkelheten* had one foot in the nouveau roman from France and one foot in Marxism. In the early to mid-1960s, it was part of a radical shift in the arts, which also included pop art and concrete poetry (Swede Öyvind Fahlström was the first to coin this idea in 1953, however his take on it differs significantly from the Swiss and Brazilian models.). Nonetheless, while those other radical movements gradually disappeared (or were exiled), *Nyenkelheten* became in the 1970s the dominant mode of Swedish poetry.

Sonnevi began publishing his poems in his early 20s (he was born in 1939), participating in the key avant-garde journal *Rondo* as both poet and translator of German avant-garde texts. As the 1960s rolled on, *Rondo* and the young poets of the time moved from the more experimental avant-gardist style toward a more socially conscious, Marxist influenced poetry. In 1965, Sonnevi published what may still be his most famous poem, “About the War in Vietnam” (in the journal *BLM*). This poem has remained a kind of model poem for Sonnevi's work, as it draws a connection between the imperialist war and devastating suffering elsewhere in the world and Sonnevi's own life in the safety of the welfare state:

Behind the TV the light changed  
 outside the windows. The darkness changed  
 toward gray and the trees appeared  
 black in the clear gray light  
 from the new snow. In the morning  
 everything was snowed over. I now go out  
 and sweep up after the storm.  
 I hear on the radio that the USA  
 has published a white book  
 about the war in VIETNAM  
 in which the North Vietnamese are accused  
 of aggression. Last night  
 on TV  
 we saw a film recording from  
 the Viet Cong's side...

After a meditation on the war in Vietnam, the speaker returns to Sweden, to Sonnevi's hometown of Lund, which is "an ever whiter book." But while 2 million have died in Vietnam "barely anybody" has died in Lund, except "for personal reasons." The poem concludes by the startling image of snow falling on a photo of President Lyndon Johnson:

Every day  
 more and more are murdered in USA's horrible war.  
 The snowflakes on the photo of  
 president Johnson.../...  
 fall tighter and tighter across the white pages.  
 More dead, more justifying  
 until everything snows over  
 in the night that finally  
 changes its light outside the windows.

What has always interested me the most about this poem is not its politics, or its historical value, but the way the snow seems to not just represent, but embody, media. While the other members of *Nyenkelheten* proposed a turn toward urban concerns, Sonnevi was always a nature poet. But not nature as idyll or escape; rather a nature saturated by media and mortality. Here the experience of watching a war on TV is connected to the snow falling outside, a snow that later is echoed in the mention of napalm, and later still that connects the little provincial town of Lund with the photograph of Lyndon Johnson and his "white books." Snow is a media that connects different parts of the world, different times, different moments.

Sonnevi returns to this experience over and over again in his poetry,

and *Mozart's Third Brain* is no different in this regard. In fact, it might be the most intensive instance of this poetics of a media-saturated environment, as he makes it the explicit topic of the book. He wants to explore the mediocrity of the world: "How can I widen the interplay strata, surfaces, networks,/spaces" he wonders. He repeatedly expresses a desire for different worlds and people to "touch." But media is not a force for something as simple as a humanist good, and Sonnevi realizes this, noting the exploitation of ultra-media global capitalism.

The context of the poem has changed. The world of *Mozart's Third Brain* is not the era of the Vietnam War, but the era of global capitalism, the fall of the utopian world of the welfare state (emblemized by Lund in the Vietnam poem), as well as the era of genocides in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia. In one striking passage, Sonnevi seems to rewrite his iconic Vietnam poem:

I hear someone in Sarajevo deny it is  
 a civil war; for him it is rather  
 a desperate defense, of Europe, of the  
 possibility of a multinational culture                      I look out  
 through the birch trees' branches    Snow on the ground, less here  
 than in Bosnia                      Here, where everything  
 still functions Does it? What is Europe Does this country belong  
 there? Here or there?...

Here the snow returns, and as in 1965, it brings news of genocides from far away; or rather, it connects, physically, as a medium, Sonnevi to a far-away horror. Nature, that traditional icon of Swedish refuge from the rest of the world, is in fact where Sonnevi goes to get connected to the rest of the world. Sweden is no longer its own little utopia; it is now part of Europe, a fact that seems to cause confusion in the poem.

It's a different Sweden in 1993 than in 1965. The welfare state is falling apart, and, more importantly, people are dying in Sweden. And these people are quite frequently Sonnevi's friends. While Sonnevi spends much of *Mozart's Third Brain* considering issues of media, genocides and global capitalism, he seems to spend just as much time elegizing and remembering his friends, such as Bengt Anderson. Against the backdrop of CNN and war footage, Sonnevi goes back to the most traditional subject matter of all, death.

However, as with Nature, Death is not outside of media. In fact, like the snow, it is entirely caught up in media. It may even be synonymous with media. Nearly every mention of his dead friend seems caught up in contem-

plation of music – music they have liked, discussed, written. It is as if the music functions like the snow, a media through which he can interact with his dead friend, make connections. As he puts it at the end of one poem about his dead friend: “Now you are in the highest music” (48). Death is represented as Art.

What allows him to communicate with his dead friend is that everyone lives as part of a world, through which connections can be made. “All of us live in the great brain,” as he writes later. And: “We are part of this great art” (44). Art, media, music, snow: it is all the methods of moving through this great brain. Early on, Sonnevi compares this movement to metabolism, but when a friend gets sick with cancer, the word “metastasis” appears as a kind of echo of that analogy. The movement can be both metabolism and metastasis, both health and disease. And the movement re-occurs throughout this long book.

As I noted above, the Yale University Press book is well ramified with materials meant to show Sonnevi’s importance. And to some extent, this is needed in order to overcome many American poetry readers’ suspicion about translated texts: Are they important enough? Are they truly necessary? Or are they just a hoax?

Nonetheless, I’m not sure this monumentalizing of Sonnevi is good for the book. Rather than the stock (and stale) appeal to stature, Sonnevi’s work might benefit if it placed him in context with American and Swedish authors whose texts are animated by contiguous concerns. A lot of current Swedish poetry shows a great influence from Sonnevi’s media-saturated “simplicity”. I’m thinking primarily of OEI poets like Johan Jönson, Anna Hallberg and Martin Högström, poets who write in startling simplicity about “the coming industrial landscape” (the name of Högström’s book), saturated by media. Or he might be placed in the company of younger American poets like Richard Greenfield, or Claudia Rankine, who, like Sonnevi, are interested in exploring mediocrity.

One might draw a very direct comparison between Johan Jönson’s book *Collobert Orbital* (really, any of his books), a study of the human body trapped in the hyper-movements of global capitalism, and *Mozart’s Third Brain*. Like Sonnevi, Jönson finds both promise and horror in this movement, in fact, both movement and trapping. The difference is that Sonnevi still sees this connection as taking place in the “brain.” He’s a meditative poet, a poet for whom the lyrical, interior space, a space of “ambiguity,” an “ocean of the interior” is still what makes sense of the world and its horror, while Jönson is driven by a frantic sense of the current, a frantic sense that allows no comfortable space for contemplation. And it might perhaps be

that this contemplative interiority that makes Sonnevi comprehensible to the American literary establishment, while someone like Jönson provides more of a challenge.