

## Nordic Women, Symbiotic Poetry

### *To Catch a Life Anew: 10 Swedish Women Poets*

Translated by Eva Claeson, Sonia Akesson, Kristina Lugn, Barbro Dahlin, and Margareta Ekstrom

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*Review by Håkan Sandgren*

The small but busy publishing company Oyster River Press, based in New Hampshire, sends forth the anthology *To Catch Life Anew: 10 Swedish Women Poets*, interpreted by the writer and translator Eva Claeson. You'll have to admit this publishing is a brave move, considering the fact that Swedish Poetry is rarely seen on the shelves of American bookstores. The idea to focus on Swedish women writers is also an interesting angle. The few Swedish poets who in any respect have gained international recognition are all men—Gunnar Ekelöf, Tomas Tranströmer, and Lars Gustafsson—and all of them are deeply connected to a post-War modernist movement, profoundly in debt to French, German, and English poets. But the anthology's focal point—the women writers from a small corner of the world—is much in line with contemporary ways of defining and categorizing literature in anthologies. The gendered literature, and the provincial poetry, is here concentrated into one volume.

But why women poets? A few years ago a *Nordic Women Literary History* was published simultaneously in the Nordic countries (Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, and the Faeroe Islands). It was a very ambitious project, containing several volumes that cast light entirely on women writers. The perspective is very conscious, very polemic—in line with the English speaking example, Gilbert & Gubar's *No Man's Land*. It is a way of creating and refining a gendered, literary tradition that contains excellent, but also forgotten, women writers. The editorial work in *Nordic Women Literary History* has been made in an outright opposition against the male domination of traditional literary history, a tradition that for so long has marginalized the women. It is in line with this polemical tradition we should see *To Catch Life Anew*.

But what marks a woman writer? Hélène Cixous once encouraged women to write their lives, in a way that would give the reader a glimpse

of the experiences that characterizes a woman's life. A result of this mission could be a greater intimacy than the one you could find in male writers and more room for views from the everyday dullness and routine. The editors of the *Nordic Women Literary History* tried but didn't find an overarching theory of how women's literature differed from men's. Ia Dūbois, who is responsible for the introduction to *To Catch Life Anew*, is bolder. She states that the poems represented in the anthology are "rebellious." And, sure, they are! They implicitly question the patriarchal tradition of a generalist and metaphysical poetry by being quite down to earth, sometimes straight forward, sometimes esoteric, and deeply embedded in the language Julia Kristeva called the symbiotic.

Another side of *To Catch Life Anew* is the presence of and close relation to nature, a connection that is pervasive in Swedish poetry, at least since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the poems of the anthology, as elsewhere, the wild and the cultivated share the textual space. But a woman poet may have quite a different attitude towards the living, something you may find in the chosen poetry by Barbro Dahlin and Margareta Ekström. She, the woman, is the one who carries life and gives birth, and because of this position her relationship to nature is different from men. She understands and co-operates with nature, rather than just observing it or dominating it. When Barbro Dahlin, in "Epilogue," allows spring to be born as a child from a woman's womb, the poem becomes impregnated with female experience and a certain, gendered feeling for the natural. The poetry of Elizabet Hermodsson is also filled with references to natural phenomena—The Fog, Clouds, The Petrel (a sea bird), and The Wild Rose Bush. There exists lightness in her poems that the English translation catches very well. She touches the things with her magic hand, and lets the nature live in flight, and fleetingly, just as a painter lets the water colours gently touch the surface of the paper. Not surprisingly, a water colour painting by her is seen on the cover of the anthology.

Though once a male domain, Swedish contemporary poetry is dominated by women. Most of them write in ways inspired by the last decades development in French language and literary philosophy, in a style often lacunose and difficult. The language is used as if it were a tool, a body, and the semantic meaning is quite often not the main thing. The sounds the words make is of utmost importance, as are the phonetic associations and the symbolic correspondences. The three foremost upholders of this line of poetry, Ann Jäderlund, Birgitta Lillpers, and Gunilla Linn Persson, are unfortunately not represented in this volume, which will make it less repre-

sentative of Swedish women poetry, than it otherwise should have been.

The road Claesson takes starts in the 1960s and Sonja Åkesson's poetry of the New Simplicity, a poetry in which everyday speech and the experiences of women are ever present. Åkesson is one of Sweden's most read poets, and her ironic poses often make the reader laugh, but not without a bitter aftertaste. The poets of the New Simplicity wrote their poems in a kind of reaction against what they called the Aristocratic Modernism. This is one of the reasons why Åkesson, with great skills and much deliberateness, works in a very simple, colloquial style which makes her poetry easy to understand, without losing its strokes of darkness. She speaks from a woman's perspective, a woman who works hard in the household, who takes care of her man and her kids—nurses them, feeds them, exists for them, as in the poem "What I would like to do (have)":

I should feel like helping someone.  
That's what I should do. Babysit  
Or take care of someone's dog.  
Help some old person to the toilet.  
Oh God! I've had enough kids and the old, the whole shit  
But mostly enough of myself, of course.

This lyrical tradition is developed by Kristina Lugn, who shares the ironic tone of Åkesson. Lugn was recently appointed member of the Swedish Academy, and in her inaugural speech, which in good order dealt with her predecessor (the very cerebral novelist Lars Gyllensten), she kept herself to the questions concerning death in life, which also dominates the poems in this volume. In the Swedish literary landscape Lugn is a writer who touches you, and who engages you—but also worries the reader. Many of us also had worries of how she—this theatrical and unconventional woman—should cope with the age old ritual, as she entered the Academy. But she did it well, and her poetry is today, much due to her public persona, very popular. As Åkesson, she integrates questions concerning the meaning of life, with the common, the trivial; and her style is straight forward and bold, as in "I don't want to meet":

I don't want to meet the on-call fellow human  
I don't want to talk with the acute team or the crisis  
group.  
I want the Prince of Darkness to come

And sign my last absence excuse.

This short stanza contains the essence, I think, of Lugns poetry. In Swedish the word for the “on-call fellow human” is “jourhavande medmänniska,” an anonymous civil servant you could call if in mourning, if lonely, or just in need of chatting to someone. A typical example of how the Swedish society regulates and takes care of its citizens—in a well meaning, but sterile and impersonal way.

Another member of the Swedish Academy, Katarina Frostenson, is in the anthology represented with a number of poems. It is quite natural, when she’s probably the most important poet in Sweden today (maybe apart from Tranströmer). It is very intriguing to see how her alchemy of words is translated into a new language, and it’s fascinating how well Claeson is able to interpret Frostenson’s all but simple poetry. Frostenson is a very philosophical writer, whose way of working with the text is founded in a French tradition, stemming from Julia Kristeva and the other writers of the magazine *Tel Quel*. Understanding and communication are of secondary importance to the physique of the syllables, of the single words, their instability and their ambiguities. Frostenson’s poetry is also a very visual poetry. The words climb over the page, a bit like e e cummings or Sonia Sanchez. It is hardly possible to interpret her poetry without missing out important, non-semantic parts of it. Her poems are also generally and programmatically non-referential. The meaning of the text is not directed outwards, at the world, but inwards, to language itself. Swedish is often said to be a language that is “sung,” and the poems of Frostenson are in a way like lyrics. The phonetics of the words and sentences is of utmost importance, and the ambiguities that are a result of words connecting in uncommon ways make her poetry impossible to nail down. Let’s take a short part of the poem “My Gaze Loses its Hold” as a paradigmatic example:

Arabesque  
 Straight stretch  
 Straight stretch, arabesque  
 Meaning creeping into meaning  
 You are not here  
 You don’t exist here, no face—

In Swedish “straight stretch” is one, single, everyday word “raksträcka,” which makes the original lines shorter and more concentrated than in the English

version. It is also a very “Swedish” word, whereas “arabesque” (in Swedish “arabesk”), both in tone and in spelling is a very strange and foreign word. The meanings of the words are designating opposites, as are their phonetic and etymological value. In the Swedish language there is an almost unlimited possibility to put two single words together (compounds) and create a new word, with sometimes a very surprising, new meaning. This possibility is used by Frostenson in a way that makes her poetry deeply enthralling.

Eva Ström, a physician, author, and critic, writes a more objective kind of poetry. Ström is more than Frostenson a classical, modernist poet, who in her lines incorporates allusions on German and Swedish high modernism. Her medical background could be seen in her language, which is exact, and without sentimentality. The later poetry of Ström deals with contemporary political issues, like the war on the Balkan. The last stanza of “The paper boy had fallen asleep”, reads:

The soldiers stood at the edge of the road with their machine gun  
Some showed pity and handed out snow  
For the refugees to quench their thirst.  
Time blind they stared at the white moon.  
They saw with alarm that their uniforms had been sewn in  
1914  
And that they were turning into their own ancestors.

One critic has said, that Ström’s recent poetry signals a return of the political in contemporary Swedish literature. Her texts are no longer psychological, intimate, or experiments in language, but more committed to ideological issues. But the politics we find in her poetry is neither of a radical nor of an activist kind; it reminds me of the existential writings that dominated the Swedish poetry of the 1940s. Politics in those poems is seen as an abstract entity, whose power the single human being is unable to influence.

*To Catch Life Anew* contains other poets that I haven’t yet mentioned: The daughter of Margareta, Johanna Ekström, Elisabeth Rynell, and not least the exciting and gripping prose poems by Marie Lundquist, filled with mourning of a lost mother. Poems to remember and reread. As a Swedish poetry reader, I find *To Catch Life Anew* to be a particularly welcomed addition to the rare examples of Swedish poetry in translation. To read well known poems moulded into a new language is always captivating; the texts have acquired a new dimension, and they will never be the same again.