SWEDISH-AMERICAN POETRY

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Swedish-American poetry is hard to come by. Relatively little is preserved, and only a small portion of this is in book form. Even the books are hard to find. In many cases, perhaps most, they have been published privately or by a newspaper. Most of the Swedish American poetry exists only in clippings or copies, and we know how easily such items disappear. Some people have made significant collections during their lives, but their heirs have not understood Swedish, at least not sufficiently to appreciate the value of the clippings, so these have ended in the fire. I know of such cases. Research in Swedish American poetry has just begun.

Ernst Skarstedt has done Swedish America an invaluable service through his books on this subject. His first, Våra PENNFÄKTARE (Our Writers), came out in 1897, and PENNFÄKTARE (Writers) in 1930. In the first volume the verses of a number of poets were included, the second would have been too huge if poetry had been admitted.

Before Martin Allwood’s anthology, AMERIKA-SVENSK LYRIK genom 100 AR (American-Swedish Lyrics through 100 Years),1 I wished that I might take a year or more to go through Swedish American newspapers during the century which is Swedish America’s in order to make copies of the poems and other writings which deserve to be preserved. Even if they were not literary masterworks, but mostly reviews of collections of poetry or articles about poets written by their contemporaries, they could all cast light on the poetry of that vanished period. Therefore, when I received a

1 (Marston Hill, Mullsjö, Sweden, 1949).
letter from a professor at Augustana College who aimed to publish a Swedish American anthology, it seemed like a dream about to be fulfilled. A lively correspondence grew between us. I sent Allwood names of lesser known poets whom he might not know, also clippings of their poems and some collections. When the manuscript was ready it was sent to Stockholm to the Cooperative Society’s press, where Johannes Lindberg was chief. Guarantees existed so that the press need fear no economic loss. But the question was whether the poems were of such quality that they should be published in book form.

On Allwood’s request I wrote to Lindberg, and here might cite two paragraphs of the letter:

It certainly may be said of this poetry that the quantity is more respectable than the quality. Hundreds have written poetry for the Swedish-American press, and more than 40 have issued their products in book form. But even if this poetry cannot be compared with that of the home country, it seems that a choice of its best might be given out by a Swedish publisher. Such a book has a certain market in America, and even in Sweden should awaken some interest. After all, we Swedish Americans come from Sweden, we have our roots there. The poet here represents something of Swedish culture, and a collection such as this one has definite cultural-historical significance.

One thing is certain: many here [in the United States] would welcome a collection of the best that are sung by the rivers of Babel.

To this Lindberg answered:

Our whole attitude toward the selection of Swedish-American lyrics has been determined from the point of view that we will not issue anything which is not wholly acceptable to present-day Swedish-Americans, and is of some use in the celebration of the jubilee [1948]. As you recognize we have been in contact with persons in America who know these conditions and we shall decide the matter as soon as we have their judgment. Your viewpoints nevertheless make clear for us that Swedish
Americans do not consider this earlier production in the Swedish language as demeaning for the migratory generation, and this certainly makes the affair and the publication more favorable. We will decide the matter very shortly.

The ultimate decision was negative, and it was not the Cooperative Society press that finally published the volume. Just what authorities may have been consulted we do not know, except for Alrik Gustafson, author of the major work in English on Swedish literature. The consultants evidently considered that the poetry in the collection could not be of any honor for Swedish Americans. Economic and other considerations may also have played certain roles. It is not a matter of assigning blame for the advice and the decision. Everyone undoubtedly had in mind what was best for Swedish America. And judgment of poetry is a subjective thing. When the book was published it must be admitted that the reviews in the Swedish press gave it a low rating as literature. The entire point is that it was judged as literature rather than as an anthology of real cultural-historical significance.

One of the reviewers said that the book was at best honest rhyme-making of Olof Thunman's class. According to my opinion this was a weighty recognition. We may reflect that alongside the great poets acknowledged by Gustafson and other critics, so were there also many other poets who had significance. Oscar Stjerne is not called a great poet, but how widely accepted not to say beloved he was by the Swedish people! And a Kerstin Hed. Along with these we might place Olof Thunman; his poetry too has been read and loved by Swedes. The critics have their place, and so do the historians of literature in whose work there is room only for the truly great. They make their judgments in accordance with high principles.

We cannot be astonished, therefore, if some home-Swedes put the question: How can it be that Sweden-America with
more than a million immigrants has not produced a single truly great poet? But yet, they who talk thus do not understand conditions on the western side of the Atlantic.

I should like to pose a counter-question: How can it be that in Sweden itself during the nineteenth century no great poet stepped forth directly from the ranks of the workers or the farmers? Was it because no talent was born among them of the class of Tegnér or Fröding? Without doubt there was such. But there was no chance for such a talent to be developed, if he could not go the study-route.

In the twentieth century, however, there did come poets from the worker group. Indeed they sit in the Swedish Academy! Why? Because opportunities were opened that were lacking in the previous century. Erik Hjalmar Linder mentions this in the chapter "New Culture-bearing Class" in his volume of *Svensk Litteraturhistoria*. He names some of the labor authors and how they succeeded, and says:

Most important of all the educative and development forces that had now come into action was obviously the blossoming club- and society-life.²

He mentions how the Central Association for Popular Scientific Lectures was founded in 1902. The same year Lektor Oscar Olsson began the study circle activities. We know what importance they gained. Perhaps still more vital was it that books became available as never before. Traveling libraries were sent out to work places and to rural villages. More books were printed than before and in multiplied editions. Good books came into the hands of increasing numbers of people. Bookish culture was enhanced. And the folk high schools must not be forgotten. Their significance lay not so much in the instruction they gave as in their encouragement of young writing talent. An acquaintance went to Hola Folk High School along with Albert Viksten and he speaks of

how Viksten was one of the teachers' "white-haired boys."
In many other ways young authors got help and leadership.

Linder closes by saying: "Twenty years earlier these poor and isolated worker-sons would probably have met defeat in the struggle with their milieu." But consider the workers who emigrated to America in the 19th century. Could we expect of them that they could accomplish what the home-Swedes in the same social class could not accomplish? And consider those who came in the new century; it was in the period before World War I that most of them migrated. They left Sweden in youthful years. The cultural possibilities already within reach of adults were not offered to them.

Now it will be objected that there came immigrants with higher education, even with academic training. Yes, but in proportion to the greatness of the migration these were but few. For most, if they had inclinations as authors they did not eagerly become emigrants. If they traveled abroad it was to the "culture-lands," not to pioneer-America. Some perhaps came for a few years — a Per Hallström, a Henning Berger, and others. But they traveled to become acquainted with a milieu, to get material for their writing, and then journeyed home. They cannot be reckoned as immigrant poets. Can we help it that poets did not come to America? If talented technologists are drawn to certain centers of industry, where their talents can be realized and they can find the best opportunities, so is it only natural. If authors remain in the place where their opportunities are greatest so is this also a natural thing.

Even the labor authors were in most cases conscious already in their younger years of their calling. Artur Lundkvist left his Skåne home at seventeen and went to Stockholm to become a writer. Suppose that instead he had traveled to America. With his facility in language he would soon have learned English and perhaps have come to write in that language. Possibly he would have become a successful American author. If he had written in Swedish? Would he
then have had compensation for his productivity and been paid so that he could live from his authorship? He should rather have become dependent on the homeland Swedish newspapers and journals and on Swedish publishers to publish his books. And in such case how long would he have stayed here? America is not the place for a Swedish writer. Don't wonder then that they do not come.

This does not imply that the Swedes here are inferior to those in Sweden. The industrious and the aggressive have procured here an education that was difficult to obtain at an earlier time in Sweden. Consequently they have attained in America an economic and social position that they could not have reached in the old country. Bilingualism has been a hindrance, but not an insurmountable one, not when the problem was to get knowledge about what we call the realm of the practical life. The immigrant could after a few years avail himself of the plentiful evening schools for adults, and thus get the necessary education.

Those who were hard hit by bilingualism were the poets. Certainly it has happened that immigrants have written books in English, even belles-lettres that have had some success, but these have been novels. None has won reputation as a poet.

On my arrival I came to know people of a certain nationality who were known for their togetherness, and who succeeded in doing what the Swedes could not. Although fewer in numbers than the Swedes they had two daily newspapers. One day I was speaking about this to an old Swedish American. I was enthusiastic, especially as to the two daily papers. Why couldn't we Swedes do the same? His answer was a dash of cold water on my enthusiasm. "That togetherness," he said,

is more of a necessity than a virtue. They have difficulty learning English, many never do, and as a result they have to have a paper in their own language. It's different with us Swedes: we learn the new speech rather
quickly and so have access to the American press. In
my home we have two Swedish American papers. But
this is mostly because my wife [gumman] wants to read
the serials and short stories. Myself, I seldom look at
them.

It follows that one could have Swedish American papers or
do without them; to what injury to such papers is easy enough
to see.

I had not before thought of this matter. If it had been hard
for us to learn the speech of the new country we would have
preserved longer that of the old. Our children would have
spoken it more widely than is now the case, and perhaps
have written it. If our speech had maintained a wider use
it is probable that our poetry would have done so too, and
therefore would have been richer, better. So it would seem.
But still we are happy that we belong to a nationality who can
learn new languages, even if in some respects we lose thereby.
A medal has always two sides.

How different it would have been if we had become a
colonial people. If we had planted ourselves in Delaware
or Minnesota or some other state and there preserved our
customs and speech, had Swedish schools and institutions of
higher learning. We would have been some millions now.
And there would be no reason why we should not have a
literature as good as the Swedish or the Finland Swedish.
Carl Sandburg would in that case have been a Swedish, at
least a Swedish-language author, and he has attained inter-
national fame. But we did not become a colonial folk. We
became only individual immigrants in a foreign land with
a foreign language, we became only material for the melting
pot.

What concerns Swedish American poetry — it has fulfilled
a big service, regardless of its literary quality. It has appeared
in newspapers week after week and has been eagerly read by
people who had little other reading at hand. It has been
longed for and welcomed. It has gladdened people, been a
boon in their lives. I have all respect for the literary historians and those whose job it is to select for the anthologies the literature most worth preserving; we must accept the judgments of such experts.

But it is not only the "authorities" who read poetry! There may be others who have more plebeian tastes. And should there not be poetry that satisfies them? They will above all have poetry that "goes to the heart." In his book Carl Sandburg, Harry Golden talks of older poets compared with those of newer times. He says of the older poets, "Their command of rhyme and meter was often a childish command." But they spoke to men's feelings in a way that modern poets do not.

It was because they struck an absolutely responsive chord that their poetry had wide circulation and their audiences numbered thousands. People filled the concert halls to hear those poets; factory workers and coal miners carried their books. These people made poetry a universal joy where today it has become a specialized industry, an industry of specialists who write for each other, and then they review each other to make things even all around.3

Golden says this in connection with Sandburg's poetry. It is not an Edgar Guest's poetry that he seeks to justify. Sandburg does not rhyme, but his poetry has rhythm that carries the reader with it, and it speaks to the emotions. The modern poets ordinarily do not do this. They seek for the most part to satisfy the modern esthetic demands.

I understand full well that there are esthetes for whom modern poetry is far more enjoyable than the traditional. But how many are these? That only a couple of hundred copies of a book are sold does not indicate any overwhelming interest. I wonder if a Stjerne might not be more read and valued today, assuming that he would be picked up by journals and publishers? Someone has said that poetry is the poor

3 Harry Golden, Carl Sandburg (Cleveland, 1961), 183.
man's flowers. The modern poetry can scarcely be said to be that; it appeals most to a group of intellectuals.

It may well be said of our poetry, as I wrote to the Cooperative Society press, that it is more remarkable for its quantity than for its quality. Nevertheless it has been treasured here. And I do not believe that the countryman in Sweden is in the main different from the countryman here. The best in our poetry would be read and appreciated also by the home-Swedes if they could see it. But we must make it clear that we know our limitations, and that our poetry appears without pretensions. In our own interest we must also attempt to explain the reasons for the limitations — that is what I seek to do.

We must understand that our poetry is no addition to Swedish literature. If that were the demand it might best be hidden and forgotten. It can be only a piece of cultural history; it can only give some insights into the soul and the feelings of the emigrant. But is that not enough of a task? I hope therefore that a collection can be published.

In writings about the emigrants both poetry and poets have been neglected. This may be because this poetry has been considered to have no significance. None of the poets have attained prestige in the same degree as other countrymen. In that respect they are insignificant. But with thought to the role they played in the lives of Swedish Americans they can be judged to be important. It is true that the history of our poetry cannot be the history of a series of profound and original poets. But it could be the history of a number of poets' "battle with their milieu," to borrow words from Linder, the history of the tribulations in making way within that milieu. It is said that the history of Swedish America is still not written; so much of it that has been written concerns itself with persons of prominence. Perhaps that history might have something to say of poetry as documents of feelings, and of poets as mediators of experience. He who writes the history must be able to evaluate poetry according
to its service; he must have a fundamental knowledge and understanding of the conditions of Swedish America, and of how dependent poets were on these conditions. Best too if he has some love for the subject.

When will that day and that writer of history appear?