Nobel Proletarians

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"Those who are going to create the literature of the future and give it a high and lasting value are not products of the university but come direct from the school of life itself, from the factory and from the plough."

The quotation is from a short-lived, left-wing literary periodical which appeared in 1920, the subject is working-class writers. The prophecy was already reaching fruition and within a decade almost have been considered a platitude, for the 1930s in Sweden, at least in retrospect, seem almost totally dominated by proletarian literature. Eyvind Johnson and Harry Martinson, the two Swedes who share this year's Nobel Prize for Literature, are members of that generation.

It is not the simple existence of working-class literature that makes the Swedish situation unusual – plenty of working-class writers are to be found in English. But one has to look quite hard to find them and few of them achieved any overall prominence as *working-class* writers. The reverse is true in Sweden: in terms of bulk, quality and acceptance into the literary canon working-class writing occupies a prominent position in modern literature though the usual disadvantages of the small language conspire to make it relatively unknown outside the country. Very little has been translated into English, a little more into German and rather more again into Eastern European languages. Perhaps all the fuss that surrounds the awarding of the Nobel Prize will do something to improve the situation.

The rise of working-class literature in Sweden is, of course, essentially a 20th century phenomenon. During the 1880s only 1% of authors making their first appearance were working-class. The rest were mainly upper-middle class with a university education in the current classical mould. They were also to a great extent part-timers who found their main source of income in some other field, notably the university and the church. By the 1920s and 1930s the situation had changed and 10% of the new

authors of these decades were working-class – only a few of these had had any formal education beyond the level of the compulsory elementary school. Not that the educational opportunities open to them should be underestimated. The last quarter of the 19th century and the first decades of the present century threw up an almost bewildering array of informal educational possibilities. These were offered by a variety of popular movements ranging from political youth organisations to free church groupings. Perhaps the most important of them were the temperance movement and that uniquely Scandinavian creation the Folk High School. Both figure prominently and with appreciation in the later memoirs of many working-class writers – elementary school, on the other hand, is rarely mentioned with affection.

Eyvind Johnson and Harry Martinson are from opposite ends of Sweden. Johnson was born in 1900 in the far north, Martinson in 1904 in the southern province of Blekinge. Both had to take care of themselves from a very early age and both have risen to membership of the Swedish Academy – a fact that has disturbed some sections of Swedish opinion as the Academy is the body that awards the Nobel Prize. Awarding the prize to Swedes – let alone to its own members – has always been a politically touchy move and one has to admit that at least two of the earlier four Swedes who have won the prize are hardly of international rank. The present prize-winners certainly are.

Eyvind Johnson's father was a railway-navvy but chronically ill and incapable of supporting his family so Johnson spent most of his youth living with relations. From the age of 13 onwards he was self-supporting, working at various times as timber-floater, sawmill worker, brickmaker and much else. Between 1921 – 1923 he lived in Paris and Berlin on the meagre income he could make from sending articles to Swedish newspapers. He returned to Sweden in 1924 to publish his first book – a volume of short stories, fittingly about hunger – then back to Paris for five years. Johnson has always been among the most internationally minded of Swedish authors. As is almost inevitable with the modern European novel the names of Proust, Gide and Joyce figure among the major influences on

his novels – the earlier ones in particular. Later, he shows much of the heavy formality of Thomas Mann. But what Johnson takes is always made subservient to his own intelligence, is never more than a tool to the intellectual nature of his own creativity. His novels – many of them in historical garb – reflect the moral dilemma facing the individual in a world where politics depend on power rather than on reason. Nowhere is this more true than in two of his finest works, both of which are available in English. *Strändernas svall* 1946 (translated as *Return to Ithaca* 1952) is a re-telling of the Odyssey in which Odysseus himself has lost the action-centred character of the classical hero and become modern man, split and reflective on the nature of the violence he perpetrates: violence is inevitable, even necessary, but always humiliating. *Hans nådes tid* 1960 (*The Days of his Grace* 1968), set in Lombardy at a time when that country has just lost its independence to Charlemagne, moves into a wider political sphere; how is freedom to be preserved in the face of omnipotent despotism? Youth answers the question with rebellion and then, when that has failed, age answers it with a calculated smile, *well practised, created in inner resistence.* It is this smile – ironic, rather detached perhaps – which is at the centre of Johnson's created world. He is concerned with freedom, which he sees as reason just as the absence of freedom is unreason, but freedom for the individual or the state can only be achieved dispassionately not by an excess of emotion.

Harry Martinson's childhood was brutal. His father died when he was six and his mother immediately deserted her family and emigrated to America. For the next nine years Martinson was a parish orphan under the old poor-laws: it meant that he was auctioned off annually to the farmer willing to keep him for the year at the lowest cost to the parish – not benevolence on the farmer's part but a source of cheap labour. In 1919 he ran away to sea and remained a seaman off and on for most of the next ten years until the appearance of his first volume of verse. Martinson is arguably the finest lyric poet Sweden has produced and certainly her greatest linguistic innovator, a fact which makes his poetry appallingly difficult to translate. At times his language is too involved: symbols, associations, new formations and eccentric usages are packed so densely that they provide a

mask of profundity for relatively superficial ideas. But at his best – as a nature poet – he attains absolute exactness of external perception and description allied with the ability to become himself the spirit of the smallest and humblest object. A permanent theme of this poetry is wonder at the strength of the apparently weak, at the simple fact that plants can still grow *squeezed between grey stones in Thule.*

Martinson has one eye aimed through a microscope at the detail around him but his other eye is firmly fixed to a telescope aimed at the heavens: he is a great man for cosmic perspective. A good deal of his early poetry centred on recollections from his wandering life as a seaman. Later he developed these into a grandiose utopian philosophy of world-nomadism with the eternal tramp as the saviour of human values against the encroachment of technology. It gave birth to a good novel *Vägen till Klockrike* 1948 (translated as *The Road* 1955) in which Martinson, using traditional picaresque technique, follows a tramp through reality and romance to the conclusion that what we call evil is merely the product of everyday superficiality. A little later again, Martinson dabbled on the fringes of oriented philosophy and used it to provide an imaginative synthesis between his joy in the small and humble detail and his search for the great truth. But his greatest work is undoubtedly the verse space-epic *Aniara* which appeared in 1956 (adapted into English in 1963). Aniara is a spaceship fleeing the earth with 8000 passengers after an atomic catastrophe. Mechanical failure condemns the ship to an eternal voyage through space and during the voyage those on the ship run the whole course of human development and degeneration. Symbolically we see mankind moving away from the Earth and its warmth in an unplanned explosion of technological lunacy. In terms of scale and ambition, and in its use of the epic form, *Aniara* stands alone among post-war poetry.

Neither Martinson nor Johnson can be considered as centrally working-class writers. Unlike many of their contemporaries they have ranged far beyond their original milieu, Martinson as a traveller forward into space, Johnson backward in time. The working-class authors in Swedish literature should

not in any case be seen as a literary school - from an initial state of cohesion the individuals have followed widely different paths. They were at their most cohesive in the 1930s when many of them – Martinson and Johnson included – produced one or more autobiographical novels dealing with the difficulties of their early lives.

Martinson's contribution to the genre was a two-part novel *Nässlorna blomma* 1935 and *Vägen ut* 1936. Only the first part has been translated – *Flowering Nettle* 1936. It is a moving illustration of the survival potential of the small and weak in a world where to be a child is merely to be an unwanted object, or worse, the object on which every adult has a right to vent his rage. The child is warped by the experience, develops a superficial charm and ingratiating smile to protect itself. Martinson shows an amazing lack of bitterness towards his oppressors: his real and tragic hate is for his own childhood smile.

Eyvind Johnson's *Romanen om Olof* which appeared in four parts during the 1930s had to wait much longer for a translator. A translation of the first part of the novel came out in 1970 under the title *1914*. The scope is much wider than in Martinson's novels. Johnson sets out to paint a picture of his whole home province in the wake of the industrial exploitation of the timber reserves – one of the darker pages in Swedish social history and a period when Swede treated Swede in much the same way as colonists from the rest of Europe were treating Africans. At the same time *1914* is a *Bildungsroman* in which young Olof is seeking an identity which will be viable for tomorrow as well as today.

The desirability of the Nobel Prize in its present form is debatable, the worth of the this year's winners is not. They themselves should have the last word. Martinson:– "The first and the last thing is and will remain Man"; Johnson:– "Mankind must not be humiliated".