

Torsten Pettersson, ed. and trans. 2012. *Skapa den sol som inte finns-hundra år av finsk lyrik i tolkning*. Skellefteå: Artos & Norma Bokförlag. 303 pages. ISBN: 978-91-7217-097-1.

Finnish language poetry has not enjoyed great fame or popularity beyond its country of origin for obvious reasons, the most important being the nature of the language itself. The poetry written after the mid-nineteenth century, when Finnish poets finally started to express themselves in their native language (after the supremacy of Swedish and Latin), remains especially unknown. However, the development of Finnish poetry from the middle of the nineteenth century until Modernism, which emerged by the 1950s, correlates with Finland's formative years politically and historically. During these decades the country underwent a dramatic development from an autonomous area of Russia via the Declaration of Independence from December 1917 to a modern European state, known today for its high literacy levels, having one of the most acclaimed educational systems in the world.

Torsten Pettersson's volume significantly remedies this situation by translating 144 poems written by 18 Finnish poets, covering ca. 100 years of Finnish literary history, into Swedish. In addition, he includes information about the poets and their publication history as well as an extensive afterword, which contains original ideas about the uniqueness of Finnish poetry. Torsten Pettersson, who is a professor of literary studies at the University of Uppsala, has published, among others, nine collections of poetry and a study, *Gåtans namn. Tankens och känslans mönster hos nio finlandssvenska modernister* (2002), in which he discusses the modernist poetry of the Swedish-speaking minority in Finland—a group to which he also belongs.

Since it is a history of Finnish poetry, one might expect the poems included in this volume to be ordered chronologically; however, Pettersson has chosen to arrange the poems thematically. This turns out to be a good choice for the reader, who is able to plunge into Finnish poetry from various angles in the seven chapters of the volume. While introducing in each of these chapters poems that may have been written in different eras, Pettersson's volume succeeds in exposing the recurring topics and, moreover, the emotional states that obviously characterize the depths of the Finnish poetic soul—regardless of the period. The decision to depict the poetry thematically, however, also has a minor disadvantage, since the poems are thus separated from their historical contexts. But Pettersson's selection of poetry shows that the development of Finnish poetry during these dramatic years of Finland—which he summarizes in the afterword of the volume—was in fact unique. Compared to other European and also Swedish-speaking writers (even in Finland) who started to experiment with Modernist forms and topics, poets writing in Finnish generally depicted more

old-fashioned themes and topics in traditional form. They approached large philosophical questions about life, focusing on topics such as love, nature, sorrow, loneliness, death, and transcendence, which are all, as Pettersson points out, reminiscent of the Romantic era. He thus argues that a kind of Romanticism in the works of Finnish poets took place some 100 years later than in the works of their European colleagues.

Finnish poetry and, by extension, Finnish literature, began only in the middle of the nineteenth century with Aleksis Kivi (who also wrote the first Finnish novel, *The Seven Brothers*, in 1870) and Kaarlo Kramsu. Some of its most notable representatives appeared towards the end of the century, particularly with Eino Leino's works. This shows that in contrast to the literatures of other Nordic countries, particularly Sweden, the turn-of-the-century Finnish poets did not have a tradition against which they would revolt. Thus, they found themselves in the somewhat odd situation in which they had to cultivate their own (nationalistic) traditions and protect themselves against Swedish influences and subsequently against pressures from Russia. This defensive attitude was typical for Finnish literature even in the first part of the twentieth century so the poets' overall style and topics often remained traditional.

For his interesting and somewhat provoking claim, Pettersson looks for parallels between the Finnish poets and European Romantics. Pettersson looks at writers who were active in the early years of their lives when *Weltschmerz* and other deep emotions were significant. The amount and quality of their poetical activity diminished in the later years, often leading to poetic crises, as it happened with Wordsworth and Coleridge. Finnish poets' untimely Romantic outreach towards the ideal, which was frequently frustrated by contemporary, secular, and violent circumstances, introduced poetry that—Pettersson argues—was able to express the structure of idealism but no longer its substance. The typical features of this poetry are deep, overwhelming, and often uncontrollable emotions, which were certainly fuelled by the dramatic, often violent events in Finland's history, including the civil war in 1918 and “the winter war” during WWII. In his Afterword, where he also comments on the translation of the poems from Finnish into Swedish, Pettersson provides some examples drawn from the translations. These examples echo and reflect the historical developments of their time, but in the main body of the volume, where the translations are presented even without the year of their publication, the reader has to relate to them outside their historical contexts as purely verbal works of art.

The first chapter of the volume, “Jag lever” [I am living], includes poems that enthusiastically praise life and its richness. Although this enthusiasm is sometimes overshadowed by the knowledge of life's difficulties and limits, the awareness of subjective power surfaces in the poems written by Larin Kyösti and Katri Vala, for example. The poet appears in these poems as grateful for the gift to write poetry and looks for connections to *Mitmenschen* [fellow human beings],

while being rooted in nature and in the nation, like in the poems by P. A. Mustapää and V. A. Koskenniemi.

The second chapter, “Rastlös är jag i denna värld” [I am restless in this world], includes poems of increasing restlessness and doubt. Preserving hope and enthusiasm in a world that provides little security is relatively difficult. But is it not just a question of being alien in the world since one can be alien even to oneself, as Uuno Kailas tells in his poem “Ein främmande man” [A strange man] or Kaarlo Sarkia in “I spegeln” [In the mirror]. But as Saima Harmaja shows in her poem “En lycklig kväll” [A happy evening], moments of happiness are to be found in the inner world of the poet, which may metaphorically transform the stars in the winter sky to blossoming roses. Among the poems of this chapter there is thus a growing awareness of the poet’s calling, which comes up particularly in Aaro Hellaakoski’s hilarious “Gäddans Sång” [The pike’s song] and in Eino Leino’s “Sångens barn” [The song’s child].

If there are glimpses of hope in these poems, the following chapter, “Din hårda ömhet” [Your hard fate], includes poems about the desire to love, which turns into “drömsyn” [dream image] (P. Mustapää) and loneliness. In Yrjö Jylhä’s “Bröllopsdans” [The marriage dance], the poet is attending the wedding of his beloved with another man. L. Onerva’s “Kärlekens sorg” [The love’s unhappiness] tells of a love affair between two people who were not meant for each other, while Saima Harmaja writes about a state when love is over in “När du har gått” [When you have gone]. However, there are also poems that describe the poet’s magical gifts to transform the life of those who are unhappy, like V. A. Koskenniemi’s beautiful “Jag sjunger stjärnor i din kväll” [I sing stars into your evening].

The following chapter, “Jag ser mörket och sjunger” [I see darkness and sing], which includes poem sequences written by V. A. Koskenniemi and Eino Leino, continues this theme. Koskenniemi and Leino, who were the most popular poets in the 1920s, are in many ways contrasting figures in Finnish literary history: Koskenniemi was a specialist in German literature, particularly Goethe, who later was accused of Nazi sympathies; in contrast, Leino was a journalist, playwright, and bohemian. For this chapter, Petterson has translated Koskenniemi’s “Elegier” [Elegies], which is a sequence of poems including reflections about the poet’s destiny and aesthetics. Eino Leino’s extensive poem included in the chapter is his legendary “Leende Apollo” [A smiling Apollo], in which the poet makes an appeal to humanity. Even today this poem is one of the most beloved Finnish poems, and it is recited on every New Year’s celebration on the Finnish Broadcasting Company at midnight. Written at the end the nineteenth century, when divisions in Finland (and in Europe) were deep, the poem mediates a message of universal love, solidarity, and ethics.

Ond är ingen människa
men en människa kan vara svag.

Det finns något gott i varje hjärta
 fast de kanske är dolt i dag.
 Ingen som gråter kann vara elak
 och godhet kann ett leende bära.
 Det människor känner med djupa känslor
 Är också vår Herre nära ...
 (120)

[There is no bad person in this world
 although a person may be weak.
 There is something good in the heart of every person
 even though it may be hidden from the light of day.
 Somebody who cries may not be evil
 and there may be something good in every smile.
 Showing that such person has deep emotions
 and remains close to our God ...]

The fifth chapter, “Jag söker min ro” [I am looking for my peace], includes poems in which the poet muses on his/her place in a sombre world, seen merely as a background for the poetic art. In the poems of Juhani Siljo, Katri Vala, and Aaro Hellaakoski, for instance, the poet meditates on the fate of poetry in the world, which only rarely gives one moments of satisfaction or fulfillment. This feeling of displacement originated from Aleksis Kivi’s “Lyckoland” [A place of happiness], written in 1866, which depicts an island with fairy-tale beings who stay young, innocent, and happy. For Kivi, the founder of Finnish literature, who died forgotten and mentally ill, it is only in such utopia that happiness may prevail, while the real world lacks happiness or even hope.

Thus, there are only desire and nostalgia left, which are presented in the next chapter of the volume, “Allt mer skall jag avstå” [I am distancing myself even more]. Once more, Aleksis Kivi expressed this Weltschmerz in his “Mitt hjärtas sang” [My heart’s song], as did Saima Harmaja in her poem “Kära Död” [Dear death]. Harmaja suffered from tuberculosis and passed away in her mid 20s. There is little religious consolation left in these poems in which the end of life appears natural, and sometimes even desired.

More transcendental features appear in the final chapter of the volume, “Jag anar evigheten” [I am imagining the eternity], in which the poet finds him/herself distanced from the world and its sorrows, reaching tranquility and peace. Explicit religious tones of this perspective show up often in the poems of female poets, in Katri Vala’s “Andante religiosa” [Religious Andante], in Elina Vaara’s “Ur Uppenbarelsernas bok” [From the book of Revelations], and in Helvi Hämäläinen’s “Den stora döde I-IV” [The great death I-IV].

Pettersson’s volume of Finnish poems, most of which were translated into Swedish for the first time, depicts a mental landscape that is certainly different

from contemporary outlooks on the world but one that is still recognizable. Deep emotions concerning love, loneliness, alienation, and passing away still belong to the present day, although they may be forgotten in our more mechanized life in which all needs and desires appear to have been satisfied. Petterson's valuable volume expands the number of those who have access to this little known Northern poetry. This poetry possesses unique qualities, which may be particularly interesting as representing the perspective of a minor, even an ultra minor area of world literature.

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