

Anderson, Arthur A. 2013. *Soft: Dust of Our Being*. Winnipeg: McNally Robinson. 215 pages. ISBN: 9781927533635.

To be honest, I did not expect much from this collection of Swedish poetry, translated on commission by the poet's family. I certainly did not expect one of the most enjoyable poetry reading experiences I have had in a long time. As the editor's introduction tells us, Arthur Antonius Anderson was born in 1894 in Malmberget in the northernmost reaches of Sweden. Educated as a forester, he immigrated to Manitoba in 1924 to make a better life. Despite the disability of an amputated left hand, he made a career working for the Swedish American Line. And somewhere, somehow, Anderson also became a man of letters. Some of the memories of his family included in the volume allude to a large library, and I would dearly love to know which Swedish books were there. I think I can hazard a guess at a few of them.

An almost certain bet would be Esaias Tegnér's *Frithiofs saga* (1825), which was quite popular among the Swedish immigrant population and was issued in a richly illustrated edition as well as another glossed for classroom use by the Augustana Book Concern. From Tegnér's classic, Anderson would have learned how to include Nordic mythological references seamlessly into poetry, but, more importantly, how to mimic the alliterative forms of Old Norse verse. Here is a sample from his poem "Crescendo":

Vänliga vidilar viska visor om vaknad vår.
Hör, hur i hult och i hagar gryningskoralen går!
Stark som en storm det sjuder, livet som fångslat låg.
Fri över fält och fjardar vällar sig vardets våg.
(30)

Friendly wind gusts whisper melodies of awakened spring.
Hear, how in grove and pasture dawn's choral sound!
Strong as a storm it roils, the life that fettered lay.
Free over field and coast, gushes the waters' wave.
(31)

I wanted to read this poem out loud again and again, and, in fact, did to the few hapless Swedish speakers who crossed my threshold while I was reading the collection. All poems are presented in Swedish with a facing English translation by Ellen Boryen, but the translation is not up to the task of recreating Anderson's verbal virtuosity. In the translator's notes, Boryen writes, "I had decided from the start that I would drop the poetical metre in favour of preserving the spirit of the words" (13). This is a bit of an excuse, because doing justice to Anderson's

metres and alliteration would require the most skilled of poets. A lot is lost in these translations, but it would be worth it for Anderson's descendants to learn Swedish so they could appreciate the talent of their ancestor.

Here is another sample of the Old Norse mimicry from "Sylvesternatt":

Stäm dina strängar
i sprittande sånger,
Gläd dig åt glädjen
i glammande lag!
Innan du slumrar
Stum under stenen,
Drick dig till dådkraft
Och njut av din dag!
(200)

Tune up your strings
in vibrating tunes,
be happy for joy
in noisy teams!
Before you slumber
mute under the rock,
drink to your deeds
and rejoice in your days.
(201)

Frithiof could not have done it better. The literary detective in me thought she saw further proof of Tegnér's legacy in the use of the unusual word "mjältsjukan" (44), which means "spleen" or "melancholy," but has been mistranslated here as "hypochondriac" (45). "Mjältsjukan" is the title of a famous poem by Tegnér in which he describes the onset of his own bout with mental illness.

Anderson's descendants also recalled that he had a talent for languages, and this collection testifies that he had an extremely sensitive ear for the sound of language. Another poet who came to mind when reading some poems is Gustaf Fröding, who possessed the same gift and wrote some darkly ironic role poems as well as sketches of rural life with more than a measure of dark humour. Such a tone is seen in "Mister Olson," a poem about a patriarch of the Swedish colony who seems to run all the lodge and board meetings:

När han smällar sin klubba i bordet:
"Nästa speaker ska' fatta sig kort",
är det rent så att man tappar bort
all sin visdom och sväljer ner ordet.
(82)

When he slams his gavel on the table:
 “The next speaker shall be brief”,
 It is like one loses all one’s wisdom and swallows the word.
 (83)

This is witty and it rhymes. Note the English word “speaker” that sneaks into the Swedish. Anderson has an ear for foibles of immigrant language. “Mr. Shoholme,” about a crusty old miser, is written in particularly colourful dialect:

Di clämer Mäster Shoholme var en utstuderad rackare,
 som inte brydde sig ett dyft on andras ve å väl,
 att han var mean och krokig som en korkskruv, å en stackare
 som för en vattenvälling kunde sälja bort sin själ.
 (88)

They claim Mr. Shoholme was a clever scoundrel,
 who didn’t care an iota about other’s woe or well,
 that he was mean and crooked as a cork screw, and a wretch
 who could, for a watered down gruel, sell his soul.
 (89)

This is not Anderson’s own voice, but a role. The dialect suggests a person who is not as well-to-do as Mr. Shoholme and enjoys pointing out the perversities of someone who does not enjoy their wealth. This poem, too, is pretty funny. Anderson is quite good at delivering punch lines in the final stanza. If the original poem trips lightly like a sprightly acrobat, the translation limps along clumsily and fails to give a sense of Anderson’s artistry.

Apparently, Anderson collected stories from Swedish immigrants in the area, but this material was never published. His poetry does tell stories of characters who might have populated the frontiers of Manitoba. A particularly enjoyable poem is “Big Swede,” in which a poetic narrator, who sits with a friend at the bar, lets the talkative Swede take over his own tale. I will quote just enough here to include a rare couplet in English, to give non-Swedish speakers a hint of Anderson’s verbal playfulness:

då kanske ni förstår den tröst, son ligger i en sup,
 när stigen glider utför emot mörka avgrunds djup,
 och tvivlets järnklo griper om ens sinne.
 -En gång var jag väl också ung och kände liksom ni,
 och tyckte vägen sträckte sig mot höjden, ljus och fri,
 och hjärtat klappade av fröjd därinne.

But ...could I help that I grew weak, and felt a little blue,

And, hell, when everything goes wrong, what can a feller do?
(106)

then you might understand the comfort of a drink,
when the path glides downhill toward a dark, bottomless pit,
and the iron grip of doubt grabs your mind.
-Once I was young and felt like you,
and thought the road reached for the heights, bright and free,
and the heart beat of joy inside.

But ...could I help that I grew weak, and felt a little blue,
And, hell, when everything goes wrong, what can a feller do?
(107)

Another well told poetic tale is “Lena på backen,” which describes an eccentric, crazy old woman who terrifies the neighbourhood children with her outbursts, but then we are told the tale of the young, lovely woman she once was, who married a poor man only to lose him at sea, and that sorrow has caused her madness. One poem describes a lovely Ojibwa maiden who abruptly is then described as fallen into prostitution. Anderson does not fall prey to overly romanticizing the life of the frontier, and he is at his best in these narrative character sketches. The theme of nostalgia for the homeland (Sweden) does arise, but the separation is irreversible. Even those who do return are strangers in a place they hardly recognize. There is also the occasional critique of how heavily the new land values money and how both greed and poverty imperil the soul.

One last poet that comes to mind when reading Arthur A. Anderson is Dan Andersson, who died tragically four years before Arthur A. Anderson immigrated to Canada, and is known as a proletarian poet with a background not wholly unlike our Anderson. A number of Dan Andersson’s poems have been set to music and enjoy popularity in Sweden even to this day. One of these is “Tiggaren från Luossa” (1917) [The Beggar from Luossa] which relates a speech given by that beggar beside a camp fire. That poem sprang to mind as I read “En gammal tramp” [An old tramp], about an old tramp who reflects upon his life from a hospital bed. Oddly enough, I was even able to sing “En gammal tramp” to the tune of “Tiggaren från Luossa.” *Stoft* was originally published in 1934, and thus Anderson could not have known any of the musical versions of this poem, much less the popular one that came out in the early 1970s after Arthur Anderson’s death. Apparently Arthur A. Anderson was an eager participant in the Swedish Male Voice Choir, and it occurred to me that if the group wanted to pay homage to their old director, it would be possible to borrow the tune of “Tiggaren från Luossa” and perform Arthur’s text instead. Was Arthur Anderson familiar with Dan Andersson’s poetry? One would need to take a look at his bookshelves to know for certain.

In short, Arthur Antonius Anderson was a very gifted poet, and I have placed him in some rather exalted company. The local content of his well-crafted verses is what makes him an original. I think he deserves some serious scholarly attention. Regrettably, the translation only allows glimpses of Anderson's talent. If you know any Swedish at all, you should thoroughly enjoy this entertaining and well-written poetry.

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