

The image of the tree lies at the heart of Karin Boye's vision of life. It is strongly linked to the female element in life, that of birth and organic growth. Leo Kall's wife, once she has the courage to speak openly, asks if a new world of mothers could not come into being, whether or not they were men or woman, and whether or not they had given birth to children. A "police eye" monitors every move made by citizens of the state, but what distresses Kall far more are his wife's eyes. For whereas the State is predictable in its mechanical repression and familiar in its soullessness, he senses that his wife's eyes are the windows of a soul with which he has no communication. The mystery of the human being escapes and frightens him. His growing inkling of the existence of an inner life is brought out with psychological finesse in his confrontation with his colleague Rissen, whom he initially hates precisely because Rissen in his vulnerability and openness represents what Kall both fears and deep down inside him longs for.

In her essay *Språket bortom logiken* Karin Boye stresses the role of the irrational and unconscious in human life and art, and speaks of 'den underjordiska betydelsevärlden i ett diktverk, det hemliga och personliga språket innanför det logiska'.¹⁸ Her poetic diction came increasingly to make use of images derived from the subconscious and dreams—an example of which is "Min hud är full av fjärilar" in *För trädets skull*, where superficial sensations seen as butterflies are juxtaposed against the pain of captive eagles confined within the poet's veins and marrow. Her best-loved poem with the general reading public is "Ja visst gör det ont" in *För trädets skull*, which has the most crystalline and accessible imagery. It is about the fear of growing, of the new and unknown—all marvellously translated into the pain felt by buds before they burst, the trembling of glittering drops on a twig before they fall.

Karin Boye committed suicide in April 1941. She left behind an unfinished cantata entitled *De sju dödssynderna*. Before God's throne stand the Prosecutor and the mortal sins Sloth, Lust and Pride. The Prosecutor urges the ultimate penalty for human sin, and choirs alternate the cry 'Förinta oss!' with 'Förbarma dig!' The sacred tone of these invocations is matched by the beauty of the defence pleas. Lust speaks of a primal creative experience before law and order:

*Här, i den enda och yttersta handlingen
kasta vi jagets nio budar,
stiger med slutna ögon i källan,
nakna som foster och gudar
--- (230)*

Once more we come very close to Almqvist's Manichean paradox, which haunted Karin Boye's life and is immortalised in her poetry.

Gunnar Ekelöf (1907-1968)

by Laurie Thompson

Gunnar Ekelöf is widely regarded as one of Sweden's greatest twentieth century poets. Always a passionate individualist, he defies categorisation—his stance as an outsider is not only the inevitable result of his being an innovator, perpetually extending the limits of poetic expression and plumbing the depths of man's being in search of the nature of reality: his

isolation is intentionally sought, he refuses to conform, resists being organised or classified, insists on going his own way even though it may not be the obvious or easy one. Paradoxes and contrasts run through his works—indeed it is a common-place of Ekelöf criticism to refer to him as 'motsatsernas man'—but all his books have a theme: as Erik Lindegren put it: 'Han skriver inte så mycket dikter som komponerar diktsamlingar'.¹⁹ *Helbeten* is a key word for Ekelöf who, true to his life-long interest in music and Eastern philosophy, probes beneath and beyond the superficial in an attempt to find the link between all things, between past, present and future, life and death, body and soul. Most of his poetry is far from easy to understand; moreover, he is one of Sweden's most learned poets and incorporates into many poems references to and quotations from other literature in the allusive style usually associated with T.S. Eliot. However, few poets are so rewarding of detailed study.

Bengt Gunnar Ekelöf was born in 1907 in Stockholm. His childhood was disturbed and unhappy; several of the trends in Ekelöf's work can be traced back to his feelings of rejection and isolation in his early years. His well-to-do father contracted syphilis and died in 1916 after a lengthy period of insanity; even before this tragedy his mother had seemed incapable of giving him normal, tender love and the coolness of their relationship continued even after Gunnar had left home on passing his school-leaving examination in 1926. He became increasingly interested in Oriental mysticism and even considered emigrating to India: he studied at the School of Oriental Studies in London, and read Persian and Sanskrit in Uppsala, although illness and restlessness made him give up without taking any degree examinations. Ekelöf's interest then turned to music and he studied in Paris at the end of the 1920s, intending to become a musician. 'Musiken är det som givit mig det mesta och bästa', he wrote many years later;²⁰ but instead of becoming a musician, he grew fascinated by French painting and poetry, especially Surrealist writers such as Desnos and Breton.

Ekelöf had written some poetry a few years earlier, mainly poetic prose, which had never been published until he included them as "Skärvor av en diktsamling" in his *Dikter 1 - 3* (1949). As a result of his experiences in France, however, the poet's taste became more Modernistic: his first published collection of poetry, entitled *sent på jorden* (1932), was advertised as Sweden's first Surrealistic poetry. Reluctant as ever to be categorised, Ekelöf declined to accept the label "Surrealist"; nevertheless, in spite of his claim that 'jag arbetade aldrig surrealistiskt',²¹ the description seems accurate to most readers. Images are linked in striking but unexpected combinations and create a dream-like atmosphere reminiscent of paintings by Salvador Dali; it is as if the poet's subconscious were addressing the reader direct, missing out the normal, conventional logic of speech:

*bjälp mig att söka min egen snäcka som försvunnit i
oändlighetens hav och det stora obestämda som jag
älskar blint som ett barn för hoppet om livets pärla
[. . .]
trädena klär av sig stjärnorna börjar falla
det är sent på jorden
("kosmisk sömngångare")*

Ekelöf indicated that *sent på jorden* was influenced greatly by Stravinsky—he would play records of *The Rite of Spring* repeatedly while writing—and called the collection 'en självmordsbok'.²² The final poem, "apoteos", opens with the much-quoted line 'ge mig gift att dö eller drömmar att leva' and ends with a wish to dissolve into the absolute, the last line 'till intet' being followed by the symbol for infinity. The suicide reference seems to hark back

to the Nirvana wish of Oriental mysticism, although there are also illustrations in the book of the Surrealistic trend of wishing to destroy violently all established conventions. One of the best examples is "sonatform denaturerad prosa" in which Ekelöf vents his desire to smash the conventions of language:

*krossa bokstävlarna mellan tänderna gäspa vokaler,
elden brinner i helvete kräkas och spotta nu eller aldrig
jag och svindel du eller aldrig svindel nu eller aldrig
vi börjar om (H171)*

As the title suggests, the poem is constructed in accordance with the rules of sonata form in music although individual "notes" are disjointed and linked polyphonically, even discordantly, rather than harmoniously; the rhythms also create a persistent, drumming effect which tends to benumb the senses and combines with the words to eradicate the distinction between "jag" and "han hon det".

Dedikation (1934) is prefaced by a quotation from the French Surrealist Rimbaud: 'Jag säger: man måste vara siare, man måste göra sig till siare'. The desire to annihilate reality in the previous book is now replaced by a positive hope for the future: 'En lång, regnig afton kände jag inom mig hur den nya människan längtade att födas' ("Betraktelse"). The links with Swedish Romanticism are affirmed in a series of elegies dedicated to and in the spirit of Stagnelius, and a favourite theme of Ekelöf's is frequently sounded, the continuing connection between past and present. *Dedikation* was followed two years later by *Sorgen och stjärnan*, in which the Romantic trends are even more pronounced (cf. "Sommarnatten"). Many of the poems are descriptions of nature in calm and controlled verse, the mood generally being wistful, even melancholic. The poet is isolated, lonely and contemplative.

Ekelöf continued with his "outsider" stance in the title poem of his next book, *Köp den blindes sång* (1938). The poet symbolically adopts the yellow and black armband worn on the Continent by blind persons, thus renouncing the political insignnia of the activists preparing for the imminent World War II: "De seende, som svindlas/och svindlar och luras och litår,/må pryda sin arm med vita,/svarta och bruna bindlar . . ./Köp den blindes sång!" The trend towards simpler language and simpler poetic style is continued and there are several nature poems that could easily have appeared in the previous book. However, the theme of blindness and darkness running through *Köp den blindes sång* refers to the gloomy state of world events. 'Här är det mörkt och tomt/i framtidens land' he writes in "Elegier I"; but the opening of the final poem, "Coda", indicates Ekelöf's faith in the future: 'Allt har sin tid, så även detta mörker'. He may not be sure about the nature of reality, but he can assert that 'den allena/som tjänar livets sak, skall överleva'.

Färjesång (1941) is a powerful book, full of animated argument culminating in what appears to be the attainment of a philosophical standpoint which satisfies the poet: 'allt som var outsägligt och fjärran är outsägligt och nära' ("Eufori"). A succession of paradoxes runs through the poems, a key motif being variations on the dialectic theme of thesis-antithesis-synthesis. Ekelöf's answer to the question 'what is reality, what is truth?' is the individualistic outsider's solution:

*Liv är kontrasternas möte,
liv är ingendera parten.
Liv är varken dag eller natt
men gryning och skymning.
Liv är varken ett ont eller ett gott,
det är mälden mellan stenarna.
Liv är inte drakens och riddarens kamp,
det är jungfrun.
("Tag och skriv" - 4) ²³*

It is also the solution of a poet steeped in Oriental mysticism: 'En människa är aldrig homogen:/Hon är sitt första och sitt andra,/på en gång! Inte i tur och ordning'.

Ekelöf considered *Färjesång* to be a break-through as far as his own attitudes and achievements were concerned, but his break-through with the reading public and critics came with his next work, *Non serviam* (1945). The title echoes Satan's refusal to serve and hence his expulsion from heaven, also the attitude of James Joyce's Stephen Dedalus (first referred to specifically in Chapter 3 of *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*); it is an affirmation of Ekelöf's individualistic, anarchistic stance. His impatience with the paternalistic, over-organised side of modern Swedish society is expressed in the title poem ('Jag är en främling i detta land / (. . .) / Här, i de långa, välfödda stundernas / trånga ombonade Sverige / där allting är stängt för drag . . . är det mig kallt') (H179), and he demonstrates his cynicism at the expense of "Folkhemmet" in the satirical poem "Till de folkhemsket". The horrors of war are evocatively expressed in "Jarrama" and were also the starting point for the deeply disturbing poem "Samothrake", ²⁴ a haunting vision concerning death and the meaning of human life. The finest poem in the book is probably "Absentia animi" in which Ekelöf continues the metaphysical and mystical meditations characteristic of his previous work. In his search for Abraxas (or Abrasax), an ancient name for the highest being, the poet delves into his own self to find something beyond time and space which is the essence of all existence which, in line with mystical tradition, he calls simply 'någonting annat':

*O långt långt bort
i det som är bortom
finns någonting nära!
O djupt nere i mig
i det som är nära
finns någonting bortom
någonting bortomnära
i det som är bitomfjärran
någonting varken eller
i det som är antingen eller (H184)*

The plays on words and rhythmical repetitions create a trance-like atmosphere, suggesting parallels with Indian music, until the words fall into an apparently meaningless jumble; and

the poem ends by returning to its beginning, closing with the words 'om hösten'. Ekelöf took that line as the title of his next book, *Om hösten* (1951), which contains poems written over a number of years, including sketches of earlier poems and preliminary workings of themes to be treated again later. The collection begins and ends with poems about dreams called "En verklighet (drömd)" and "En dröm (verklig)" to stress the motif of contrasts and paradoxes that runs through the book. In "Röster under jorden" the poet investigates the nature of life and death, of individual existence and the passage of time, using as a key image the fossilised remains of prehistoric birds.

Strountes (1955) refers to an Almqvist quotation stressing the almost insuperable difficulty of writing whimsical trifles ('strunt'). The poems abound in wit, plays on words and cross-references to other literature: as the poet declares in "När man kommit så långt": 'När man kommit så långt som jag i meningslöshet / är vart ord åter intressant'. Frequently the playfulness is not as nonsensical as it seems, as is hinted in "Ex Ponto": 'Det är inte konstverket man gör / Det är sig själv / Och man måste alltid börja från grunden / Åter och åter börja från grunden'. *Opus incertum* (1957) and *En natt i Otočac* (1961) are similar in kind to *Strountes*—in the afterword to *En natt i Otočac* Ekelöf commented: 'Jag skulle ha kunnat kalla denna bok *Opus incertum II* (eller rent av *Strountes n:r 2*) eftersom den tillhör samma antiestetiska, bitvis antipoetiska linje'. In "Poetik" he claims that formal perfection is:

... sökandet efter ett meningslöst
i det meningsfulla
och omvänt
och allt vad jag så konstfullt söker dikta
är kontrastvis någonting konstlöst
och hela fyllnaden tom.
Vad jag jar skrivit
är skrivet mellan raderna.

Otočac is a town in Yugoslavia, but in the afterword referred to above Ekelöf indicated that it can be interpreted as Hell; in the paradoxical fashion typical of him, he seeks Heaven in Hell. What he has written is 'written between the lines': similarly the elusive *helheten* he is searching for may be found among disparate, chaotic things. He is too much of an anarchist ever to believe he will find it, but it is essential to conduct the search even so. 'De som lever för en stor sak är lyckliga', he writes in "Poesi i sak", 'De som söker denna enda stora sak i ett otal saker / i mångfalden / han blir utnött och trött som jag'.

In 1960 Ekelöf had published a remarkable long poem on which he had been working for more than twenty years: *En Mölna-Elegi*. Several excerpts of the Elegy had been published previously, notably the first third of the finished poem in *BLM* in 1946: a note explained that it was 'en dikt om tidens och tidsupplevelsens relativitet, kanske också en art av "levnadsstämning"'. A figure is standing on Mölna jetty (a place on Lidingö near Stockholm) in late September or early October watching the sun set over the water. An apple and a drop of water fall to the ground and the lake respectively, and the poem refers to the noise they make: the sounds are heard both near the beginning and near the end of the poem, and it is stressed that they are the same sounds we hear; in other words, the whole work takes place in a very short space of time. By employing a complicated technique of allusion and quotation, however, Ekelöf is able to compress into that very short space of time the cultural experience of centuries.

Nevertheless, the starting point of the poem is personal. The figure on the jetty is Ekelöf himself, and the chain of memories which flash through his consciousness includes several of the poet's relatives and ancestors. A key quotation is a line from Edith Södergran, one of Ekelöf's favourite poets: 'Ett flyktigt ögonblick stal min framtid' (Södergran actually wrote 'ett nyckfullt ögonblick'), and many other quotations illustrate Ekelöf's preference—James Joyce, for instance, Rimbaud, Swedenborg, Ibn el-Arabi, and a number of references to Bellman (Ekelöf was particularly fond of the eighteenth century). Most startling, however, is the middle section of the poem where the left-hand page is taken up by vulgar Latin and Greek quotations, most of them authentic graffiti from the walls of ancient Italy and many of them unashamedly obscene. The right-hand page is in Swedish and, broadly speaking, the verse echoes the spirit of the Latin with a "dirty ditty" and descriptions of rape and abortion. Some authentic drawings, chosen by Ekelöf himself, illustrate the text, which is sometimes in dramatic form and has marginal comments, usually a key-word setting the tone of the section.

By stressing the parallels and connections, Ekelöf is trying to show the essential similarity of people and events at different periods of time as well as pursuing his mystical search for the unifying factor of life, the familiar theme from earlier works. The stress on sex in *En Mölna-Elegi* seems to be an acknowledgement of Freud's psychoanalytical theories and the poet's assessment of his own nature. Another motif is that of the four elements, earth, air, fire and water, especially the last two; many memories are triggered off by a section marked "Böljesång" which some critics see as a high-point of lyricism in Ekelöf's poetry:

Vindsus och vågstänk
Vägsus och vindstänk
Vågor och dessa skiftande
klockklangsviftande
vindar — närmare, fjärrare . . .

In the last section of the poem, after the sexual violence, the water-poetry is echoed in terms of fire before reverting back to water to signify the return of the poem to its starting point.

Generally speaking, critics were impressed by *En Mölna-Elegi* although there was a feeling of disappointment with the final section which, it was considered, did not measure up to the promise of the earlier parts. Moreover, it was felt that the Latin and Greek graffiti did not merge with the Swedish poem as easily and naturally as they might: they tend to be adornments rather than constituent parts of the poem as a whole. Understandably, there was complete agreement about the difficulty of interpreting the work: no doubt it will be many years before light is thrown on all its obscurities and the full extent of its treasures revealed.²⁵

In 1962 Ekelöf published a revised edition of *sent på jorden* in a volume which also contained *En natt på horisonten* (the latter collection having the explanatory parenthesis "1930-1932"). In both cases, the poet was returning to his beginnings, wrestling once more with the problems that had concerned him in the early 1930s and solving them with the wisdom acquired in thirty years of writing poetry. There were some alterations and additions, but many of the poems were left in their original—and hence definitive—state.

Having completed that circle, Ekelöf was ready to proceed to his last and what is generally considered to be his greatest work, a trilogy consisting of *Dīwān över Fursten av Emgiön* (1965), *Sagan om Fatumeh* (1966) and *Vägvisare till underjorden* (1967). Like all Ekelöf's

works the *Diwān* trilogy is carefully composed as a whole. In his notes to *Vägvisare till underjorden*, the poet explains that although this part was published last, it was conceived as what he calls *mittvalvet* of the trilogy—his choice of words stresses the architectural construction, and a drawing at the end of *Vägvisaren* shows how that book itself was planned architecturally. The middle work is symmetrically balanced, and the first and third parts of the trilogy can be seen as counterbalancing each other: the basic components of the “outer” books are two series of 29 poems, and in connection with *Sagan om Fatumeh* Ekelöf explained that they correspond to a “naẓm”, a string of beads, and a “tesbiḥ”, a rosary. Ekelöf’s preoccupation with Oriental mysticism is clear in the form as well as the content of his *Diwān* trilogy.

The material for each of the three books is based on authentic myths and historical happenings pertaining to the Byzantine Empire in the Middle Ages: *Diwān över Fursten av Emgiön* refers to an eleventh-century epic romance describing the capture and sufferings of Digenis Acrifas, *Sagan om Fatumeh* tells the tale of an Arab girl in the fourteenth century who deteriorates from a position as a courtesan and the beloved of a prince to wretched existence as a whore, while *Vägvisaren till underjorden* contains a less unified selection of thoughts and dreams and features a meeting between a Novice nun and Satan in a Byzantine palace situated in Yugoslavia. It will be obvious that to understand the trilogy properly, the average reader needs a battery of notes and explanations; Ekelöf provides some at the end of each volume, but in addition to the historical, mythological and linguistic complications there is also the fact that the poet refers to or quotes from a large number of other literary works—indeed, he frequently quotes from his own earlier poems.

Nevertheless, one can read the *Diwān* trilogy in ignorance of many of the subtleties and be fascinated by the love poems, the sufferings and erotic adventures of Fatumeh (whose name incorporates the Latin word for Fate), the torture and religious search of the Prince. Familiar Ekelöf themes and symbols recur, notably the *jungfru* (cf. the quotation from “Tag och skriv” above), whose symbolic significance hovers between an erotic ideal, the Virgin Mary, a cosmic mother-figure and the mystical ‘någonting annat’ which formed the core of Ekelöf’s creed. The other great theme is that of time which, as was shown by *En Mölna-Elegi*, the poet did not see as a mere linear process. The symmetrical form of the trilogy and the network of references to different epochs illustrate the concept; some of its implications are perhaps best expressed in the concluding poem of *Vägvisare till underjorden*, the last part of the trilogy to be written:

*Ensam i tysta natten trivs jag bäst
Ensam med vägguret, denna maskin för icke-tid
Vad vet väl en metronom om musik, om takt
om den är konstruerad att mäta. Dess ansikte
är blankt och uttryckslöst som en främmande gudabilds
Det gör mig medveten om relativiteternas oförenlighet
Liv kan inte mätas med död, musik inte med taktslag*²⁶

Gunnar Ekelöf received many prizes and honorary awards in the last ten years of his life, and was elected a member of the Swedish Academy in 1958. He died in 1968 after a long and painful illness, suffering from cancer of the throat: *Partitur. Efterlämnade dikter* (1969) contains some moving poems from this last period. Perhaps the most appropriate epitaph is a quotation from *Strountes*:

*Mot helheten, ständigt mot helheten
går min väg
O mina kringkastade lemmar!
Hur längtar ni inte till era fästen
till helheten, till en annan helhet!*