

Ekelöf's first volume, *Late on Earth*, appeared in 1932, giving the decade one of its most important books, one characterized by anarchic individualism and surrealist vision. It still stands very high in Ekelöf's literary production. The world of *Late on Earth* is both very late and very early. It is the rarified and explosive atmosphere of the soul. It is the id at the point of detonation. The influences of Rimbaud, Eluard, and Breton combine to form this poetry. Sometimes it is the physical grotesqueness of surrealist art:

Lips of eyes close about seeds of eyes to kiss the
mouth of darkness.
The uttered glances of days burst into silent flowers.

But mere chain reactions of free association do not interest Ekelöf. Surrealism is not, for him, a kind of marinism, but a mode of vision, a way of picturing reality in all its unreality and dislocation. He is most startling when, in the words of Wordsworth, he summons "a certain coloring of the imagination whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect," here the blank and frightening vistas of surrealism. Ekelöf can capture the terror of such commonplaces as hearth and park. Here is the home setting of the introductory poem in *Late on Earth*:

Flowers sleep in the window and the lamp glares light
and the window stares blankly into the darkness outside,
the pictures exhibit their entrusted contents spiritlessly,

but there is the grim secrecy of Dali-like space in a later poem, "Gobelin":

I saw a grey ruin in a verduring park
where people wandered hand in hand
a crumbling facade with nothing behind
only heaven and clouds, the murmuring trees.
And staring ahead with wide-open eyes
lovers walked about as if supporting one another.
And the spring was never so young as by the ruin
and the autumn never lay so whirlingly deserted.
And the sky never looked so blood-red at evening
as when one saw it through the gaping windows.
And many who had never heard the sound of their voices
Heard them for the first time in the echo under the arch.

Today Ekelöf rejects surrealism as the school it became under its rulemaker, André Breton.² But he accepts its function as the mirror of a shattered, fragmentary world. And he appreciates its shock therapy. What he preserves of it is something much closer to Kafka—

² See Ekelöf's statement in a symposium, "Har Surrealismen spelat up sin roll?" *Prisma*, I (1948), 57-58.

the razor outlines and focused authenticity of the inner world. But moments of association and moments of vision are not enough. Poetry has to have its dialectic line to appeal to the rational mind.

II

Ekelöf's progress toward a more rational poetry has been accompanied by a retreat from self, involving examination, struggle, and rejection. So romanticism, like a splinter, works its way toward the skin and can be removed. If *Late on Earth* is an important poetic statement it is also, as Ekelöf termed it, a "suicide book." The next three volumes constitute a search for values. *Dedication* (1934) contains its share of prophecy and an unusually luxuriant imagery that is the property of traditional romanticism. "Fe," for example:

She is in the glade and in the rosiness of dawn, her body
is soft as stillness, her mouth is soft as silence . . .
She is life and blood, and red-mouthed flowers drink drops
of dew from her glass-clear fingers now brushing the
grass . . . she moves with all things, gives herself to
all, is in all's embrace—by night when dreams mate,
by day when birds fly . . .
The trace of her winged heels is yet visible on the path of
morning, there in the soft earth at the brooklet's
ringing silver foot . . .

Ekelöf soon eschews this tracery for the leaner, more sinuous verse of *Sorrow and Stars* (1936), a book of sober self-probing in which we can, from our present vantage point, recognize melancholy self-indulgence as a necessary stage in the search for a positive philosophy. In this sense the third volume, *Buy the Blind Man's Song* (1938), is also transitional. It is very uneven in quality but does, as the title suggests, mark a new humanity in Ekelöf's vision. The poet becomes, as Rabbe Enckell has noted, "an apostle for the poor in spirit" via a poetry of new and transparent simplicity, almost too songlike for the texture of its argument.³ And yet it prepares the way for the real poetic stature of *Ferry Song* (1941) and *Non Serviam* (1945), in which Ekelöf finally accomplishes the rejection of self. "I abandon myself," he writes, "like the last rat a sinking ship." He does what Henri Michaux merely hopes to do in the latter's "Clown":

One day
One day soon, perhaps,
One day I shall tear loose the anchor that holds
my ship far from the sea.
With the sort of courage it takes to be nothing and
nothing but nothing.⁴

³ "Det omvända perspektivet: en studie i Gunnar Ekelöf's lyrik," *Prisma*, III (1950), 25.

⁴ Tr. Malcolm Cowley, *New Republic* (January 29, 1945), 156.

Life has its meaning in meaninglessness, Ekelöf's poetry reiterates. Not a very satisfactory philosophy certainly, but one remote from "our contemporary defeatism," the poet tells us in the postscript to *Ferry Song*. "What I aimed at," Ekelöf continues, "was an extension of the democratic attitude toward every form of totalitarian narcosis, also against every kind of easily purchased feeling of security and assurance. We must experience a kind of *eleusis* to live." But just what philosophic pattern can one discover beneath the surface of things?

III

Ekelöf's mature poetry is fundamentally a strife of opposites on the battlefield of the ego. If its rhythms derive from the Eliot of the *Quartets* (Ekelöf has himself translated "East Coker"), its dialectic is neo-Hegelian. Ekelöf is not merely susceptible to "dualism's temptations"; his poetry is a pattern of opposites:

Life is a meeting of contrasts
 nor one nor the other
 Life is neither day nor night
 but the grey of dawn and dusk
 Life is neither good nor evil,
 It is the moss between two stones.
 Life is neither St. George nor the dragon
 but the maiden.
 And no one shall come to me with the dragon's appetite
 and malice
 And no one shall come with the knight's nobility
 (the fairy tales lie so beautifully!)
 And no one shall come with the maiden's trust and hope,
 because the battle lasts forever
 and that which gives life its meaning
 is not the dragon
 nor the knight
 but always the maiden.

This struggle of opposites pervades Ekelöf's poetry: "odd-even," "black-white," "inner-outer," "life-death." Generally, however, symbols group themselves into triads such as the "knight-dragon-maiden" one, though the third or resolving member is not always discernible. Sometimes dualisms merely cancel out: "The trouble with idealism is materialism, and vice-versa." But usually a third and higher symbol results, as in "Categories":

There on the third side of life,
 there is no black, nor grey, nor white,
 But of the three are mixed unnumbered values,
 Beyond all truths and lies.

But what is this ultimate beyond all truths and lies? In *Ferry Song* it was the maiden, symbolic of beauty; in *Non Serviam* Ekelöf is less sure. It is "something else." The "something else" may be the "unnumbered values" or the "maiden," the third or resolving factor in the dialectic triad, the new stage in self-rationalization. Still, Ekelöf is an esoteric poet and the only rescue lies for him in his concept of beauty, which flashes symbolically through his poetry and is perhaps best concentrated in the very simple figure of "Take and Write":

The beauty I have sought was the springboard's quiver
 The wisdom I believed in was the diver's fear.
 but he who awaits atonement remains unatoned.
 Who wants salvation is already doomed.
 Denial? No, the deepest faith.

But the "deepest faith" creates no happy landscapes, no compelling optimism, if we can accept Ekelöf's replica of reality in "Absentia Animi," the final poem of *Non Serviam*:

In autumn
 In autumn when one bids farewell
 in autumn when all gates stand open
 toward meaningless meadows
 where unreal toadstools rot
 and waterfilled wheel tracks are on the way to
 nowhere, and a snail is on the way
 a ragged butterfly is on the way
 to nothing, like a stripped rose,
 the least and ugliest, and the dragonflies, those
 stupid devils
 destruction bent, crazy in evening's lamplight
 and the lamp itself, murmuring, languishing
 in the quiet sea of light, thought's polar sea
 in long billows
 quiet seething foam
 of series divided from series
 from nothing through nothing to nothing
 phrase, counterphrase, paraphrase, phrase
 (like the sound of a sewing machine)
 And the spiders spin their nets in the silent night
 meaninglessly
 Unreal. Meaningless.
 In autumn

In recent poems, Ekelöf seems to be engaged in an obscure kind of spiritual ascent, partly by means of Hegelian progression, but more recently by stair and spiral symbolism which may or may not be an inheritance from Eliot and Yeats. What matters is that Ekelöf requires the spiritual ascent and one that interestingly resembles the upward struggles of these two Anglo-Saxon poets.