

## Harry Martinson: Reflections in Life and Work

### **I. Introduction**

Harry Martinson lived a life that influenced his work in several ways. His difficult childhood led to a period of exploration, both of the world and of himself. Martinson developed a closeness to nature that would accompany him throughout his lifetime, and over the years he refined and mastered an exquisite ability to describe it to the world. The learned Martinson also followed current events closely, and much of his later writings dealt with coming to terms with mankind's new dominance over technology and the implications it would have on culture, society, and the future. This essay explores the relationship that Martinson's life had on his work, through the many stages of his storied life.

### **II. A Difficult, Formative Childhood**

Martinson's childhood was difficult to say the least, and it is a period of his life that he frequently reflected upon and influenced his later beliefs. He was born in the province of Blekinge of southern Sweden in 1904 to Martin Olofsson, who often caused trouble while drinking, and a mother who was not able to manage the responsibilities that come with raising seven children. His father separated from his mother a year after Martinson was born and found work in Oregon, America. He still sent money back to Sweden, and returned in 1908 but his problems resumed and he died of tuberculosis two years later.<sup>1</sup> With the family business failing and debt increasing, Martinson's mother left her children to the care of her half-sister and fled to America, carrying an illegitimate child as well. Soon, Martinson and his siblings became 'children of the parish' and were given to foster homes across the province. For five years, he was shuffled to different farms and homes with varying conditions. Some were tolerable, others were wretched. His largely autobiographical work, *Nässlorna blomma* published in 1935 ("Flowering Nettle"), begins with a short poem that describes his experience:

I was small in the listening days.  
At late harvests toothless mouths told  
of leprous marsh-spot in the seed and  
the bitter bloom of ergot on the rye.  
I grew cold at my childhood hearth.

*Translation, Stephen Klas<sup>2</sup>*

The 'listening days' refers to when he was a small child, who according to the expectations at the time were supposed to be quiet and not speak unless spoken to first. The reader gets a sense of stagnation and gloom, with the 'toothless mouths' of Martinson's caretakers speaking of diseased crops while he finds no warmth by the fireplace. During this time Martinson felt a deep longing for his mother, who sporadically would send him letters, promising to send him a ticket to America.<sup>1</sup> No ticket ever came. The sense of abandonment that grew in Martinson due to the actions of his mother would have long-term effects on

his view of life and himself. The ‘nettles’ that the title refers to are the irritating flowering weeds that would torment Martinson while he worked at the foster farm. The uncomfortable home environment motivated Martinson to seek solace elsewhere, out in the world. He found that at school where he could escape to faraway places with books, maps, and articles. He excelled at his lessons and the first sparks of his interest in science were ignited through the magazine *Illustra*.<sup>2</sup> Martinson writes in *Nässlorna blomma* that school was “a world of light ruling the dark places.”<sup>3</sup> The feeling of empowerment that schooling likely imparted a marked change in his outlook in life. In the autobiographical follow-up to *Nässlorna blomma*, *Vägen Ut* (The Way Out), we find the protagonist nearing the end of his childhood life on the farm and the tone is more hopeful and optimistic.<sup>1</sup> The gloom that pervades the former is replaced by a more active and forward-looking message. At this time, perhaps motivated to join his mother in America, Martinson entered his adolescent stage by setting off to explore the world with sails.

### III. Nomadic Adventures

At the age of 16, Harry Martinson became a sailor and for seven years was able to explore the world. Through serving on 19 ships, he visited the American southeast, the European coast, South America, Africa, India, and China.<sup>4</sup> During this time, Martinson developed his lifelong awareness of nature and the diverse beauty one could find in it. He also became familiar with Eastern philosophy, and elements of it can be found in his later writings. In 1927 he arrived back in Sweden, afflicted with tuberculosis as a result of his work as a stoker on the naval ships. He was a vagrant and took short term labor jobs, but it was here that he also began to write poetry. He also fell in love with a woman named Helga Johansson and moved to her farm in central Sweden, marrying two years later.<sup>2</sup> His first collection of poetry, *Spökskepp* (“Ghost Ship”) was centered around experiences at sea and as a sailor. His work here showed a deft command of language unhindered from previous era conventions. Two years later, with the publication of *Nomad*, Martinson had secured his place among the great working-class modernist poets propelling Swedish literature into the next era. This group of poets, known as the ‘Fem Unga’ (after a published anthology of the same name), included contemporaries of Martinson such as Artur Lundkvist, Erik Asklund, and Gustav Sandgren.<sup>4</sup> They were known as ‘proletariat’ poets because of their backgrounds and their conscious decision to free the poetic form from old conventions and to use it to reflect reality and even promote social change. As Ulf Larsson writes in a paper for the Nobel Prize foundation, “the intention of [their] poetry was not to provide enjoyment and unreflective calm, but rather to free humanity and bring it closer to real life.”<sup>2</sup> Their modernist style is characterized by precise observations of the natural world and their surrounding environment coupled with imaginative metaphors and vivid imagery. Harry Martinson in particular excelled at this, and his 1934 work *Natur* (Nature) showcased this style, as seen in ‘The Visions’:

With fright in their eyes  
the soldiers of salvation beheld  
from the helmeted observatory tower: the heavenly harps;  
the swaying, titanic nebulae  
and their chaotic strings of gaseous gold.

Far off in the boundless crystal of places beyond time  
where thought in fright  
can plunge everlasting through millennia  
stirred the gaslike golden bowers of the harps  
effervescing in Sagittarius.

*Translation, Stephen Klass<sup>2</sup>*

This poem begins with eyes and ends with galaxies. The reader is treated to compelling metaphors such as astronomers being ‘soldiers of salvation’ and the awe and humbleness one feels when viewing the heavens, which are beautifully yet precisely described. Scientific jargon is used, such as ‘gaseous’, alongside evocative phrases such as ‘golden bowers of the harps’ to describe what one sees through the telescope. Strong, hard images of ‘soldiers’ and ‘helmeted’ are contrasted with delicateness with ‘heavenly’ and ‘swaying’ connotative words. The subject matter of the poem is also characteristic of the modernist style, with a general approval of the new technological age and how it can be a tool to help mankind.<sup>2</sup> While one can see some influence this perspective had on Martinson, he was more wary of man’s increasing reliance on technology than his peers. The coming dark period would temporarily halt him and his peers in their efforts to bring Swedish literature into a new age, as the rest of Europe people were bracing for the outbreak of war.

#### **IV. Reaching Outwards and Looking Inwards**

Professor Ulf Larsson writes that Martinson was well versed in the current events of the time, showcasing a remarkable feat of being competent in not just literature and philosophy, but in science and politics as well. Larsson says “he hated all dictatorships and all oppression – Nazism as well as Communism.”<sup>2</sup> When Russia invaded Finland in 1939, he and fellow author Eyvind Johnson (with whom Martinson received his Nobel Prize) went around Sweden drumming up opposition to the occupation. A year later he went to the front, but returned largely disillusioned. For the next two decades, Harry Martinson both looked inwards and reached outwards. He re-visited his vagabond past, with the thoughtful *Vägen till Klockerike*, which included both social criticism and with the descriptions of the vagabond life a return once again to nature, as the protagonist Bolle says:

“So I went, and all that summer I tramped  
round the country, heard the birds sing,  
bathed in quiet streams and lakes and  
roamed through glens and valleys where  
the grass was dewy and clean. Clouds  
drifted, winds moved in the woods,  
flowers bowed and gleamed,  
bumble-bees buzzed in the clover, girls  
sang in the hay-fields.”

- *Vägen till Klockerike*

One of Martinson's lasting legacies would be his masterful art of capturing the elemental and seemingly intangible feelings of the natural world. Martinson called it 'thinking out in the meadow.'<sup>5</sup> His thoughts did not merely dwell in the meadow, but also soared into the heavens above. At a time when rocketry was still in its V-2 infant stages, Martinson had the foresight to see beyond. Heavily influenced by the dropping of the atom bombs against Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 and by the detonation of the world's first hydrogen bomb in 1953, Martinson revealed the most remarkable work of his life: *Aniara*.<sup>6</sup> An epic poem consisting of 103 songs (the first 23 of which were published three years earlier in *Cikada*), this masterpiece tells the story of the spaceship Aniara as it flees the nuclear war ravaged Earth with 8,000 beings to start a new life on the planet Mars. On its way however, the Aniara strays off course and begins an endless, agonizingly slow journey into the lonely vastness of space. Brita Green comments that "the epic narrative can be read as a coming to terms with the modern technocratic culture that has alienated man from the norms of life prescribed for him on the planet Earth."<sup>7</sup> *Aniara* was a reflection and a warning by Martinson on the direction that the world was heading towards, and urged people to widen their perspectives. In the later period of his life, science more and more made its way to the forefront of Martinson's poems. Martinson said that the theories of Paul Dirac and Albert Einstein influenced him in parts of *Aniara*. Seven years before his death, Martinson published *Dikter om ljus och mörker* ("Poems of Light and Darkness"). This collection of poems finds Martinson bringing the talent found in his nature poems to the scientific realm, and the sub-microscopic world being explored by the contemporary sciences at the time. A famous poem from this collection is *The Electrons* :

"With their round dance the electrons spin  
chrysalises of that which abides,  
the inmost cocoons  
which do not open of their own accord  
but are that which abides.

There it is not a matter of hatching out.  
There it is a matter of tending and protecting  
the metamorphoses of the inmost  
deeper-down swaying,  
the innermost playing of women in dance."

*Translation, Stephen Klass*<sup>8</sup>

Martinson also wrote a breathtaking beautiful poem about the complex nature of light, called "The Inner Light", and this poem is included below due to its length. One of his critiques of the modernizing world, about automobile culture, was not received well by the public and coupled with other factors Martinson began to slip into depression. In 1974, he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature for writings 'that catch the dewdrop and reflect the cosmos', a lovely description for Martinson's work. This did little to relieve him of his troubles, because there was some controversy of the Swedish Academy awarding the prize to two of its own members. In 1978, Martinson inflicted significant injuries to himself and died. A posthumous collection of poems titled *Längs ekots stigar* was published with more philosophical and deep writings.

## **V. Conclusion**

Harry Martinson's life is a prime example of the opportunity that the Swedish culture offers. From difficult beginnings abandoned by his mother and left as a foster child to exploring the world physically and mentally to finally winning the Nobel Prize, Martinson's life exemplifies what is achieved when one follows one's heart. From escaping the farm to exploring the seas, or fighting for a cause to warning of the future, Martinson refused to fully conform to society. This, perhaps, gave him the flexibility and perspective to help evolve Swedish literature to the next level with invigorating insights that peered into the bird's eye and reached out to the nebula's swirls. A man of extraordinary breadth of knowledge and experience, Harry Martinson will forever be remembered as one of the greats in Swedish literature whose life was reflected in his work.

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Below is an incredibly rich and imaginative poem written about the nature of light. I found it incredible the beauty Martinson gives to what is normally dry, technical language.

### **The inner light**

In the inmost of the smallest of all spaces  
runs a mute and constant play of color, inaccessible to eyes.  
It is the light shut in that once in the moment of creation  
was born inward and abode there, going on,  
once it had broken up into the smallest of spectra  
in keeping with prismatic law  
at frequencies that by the sighted would be called colors  
if they encountered eyes able to see.  
It moved in periods  
unimaginably small for time and space  
but still with time and space enough for the least of the small.  
In fact it found it had ample room and time.  
It moved in cycles of nanoseconds and microspaces  
from white light and the colors of the spectrum and back to white light.  
A kind of breathing for light.

The photons breathed and pulsated with one another,  
alternating signs and levels.  
So the light kept going in spectral balance  
from dense light to split  
and back to dense light and split,  
in spectral cycles infinitely repeated.

It was like a play of fans,  
in keeping with the same law that holds for rainbows,  
but with spread and folded fans  
alternating with one another  
in keeping with the law of light inscribed in them.  
It was the light when it dances enclosed  
when it is not traveling abroad and seen.  
It belongs to the nature of light  
that it can be shut in  
and still not die out in its movement  
that it preserves itself thus in the darkness  
as thought, intent and aptitude,  
that it remembers its changes  
and performs its dance, its interplay.  
With this art the light keeps together  
the innumerable swarms of matter  
and sings with light's spectral wings  
the endless song in honor of the fullness of the world.

By Harry Martinson  
From *Dikter om ljus och mörker*, 1971  
Translated by Stephen Klass

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