
After a hiatus which lasted far too long, readers and students of Gunnar Ekelöf’s work have been regaled over the past half a decade with a series of works that enhance our understanding of and access to the writings of this most important twentieth-century writer. In 1989 Carl Olov Sommar came out with both the first biography of the Swedish poet and essayist and with an edition of the author’s letters (see WLT 64:1, pp. 62–64). In 1992 Paul Åström published his massive, meticulously researched handbook Gunnar Ekelöf och antiken (Gunnar Ekelöf and Antiquity), a book which for the first time documented in comprehensive fashion Ekelöf’s important, defining relationship with classical antiquity. And beginning in 1991 the poet and Stockholm University professor Reidar Ekner has published in succession a critical collected edition of Ekelöf’s work in eight volumes (of which only seven are reviewed here).

Indeed, no one is more qualified than Ekner to undertake this monumental task, one in some ways at least not dissimilar to John Landquist’s one-man Strindberg edition of 1912–20. As editorial assistant and friend of Ekelöf, Ekner participated in the editing of such important works as Opus iner Libertum (1959), Valfrälsningskraper (1960), and the posthumously published essay collection Lägga peerience (1969). As Ekner points out in the introduction to the first volume, producing a critical edition of a writer like Ekelöf poses particular difficulties, if only because of the sheer number of manuscripts, many of them of the shorter variety (poems, essays, reviews, cultural articles, and drafts upon drafts). As a result, the cataloguing by Ekner of Ekelöf’s literary remains, most of it deposited in the Uppsala University Library, had to proceed simultaneously with the preparations needed for this edition—work which presumably took years.

Ekner’s purpose with this collected edition is simple, yet at the same time ridiculously difficult to achieve: to present “the whole Ekelöf”—that is, not just the poet—in a critically acceptable edition established according to the best text-critical principles, while at the same time attempting the dangerous tightrope dance of catering to the needs and interests of both the general public and specialists. Ekner has thus consciously avoided producing an edition of the variorum type. At the same time he has purposely avoided the use of a detailed scholarly-note apparatus, limiting himself instead to explaining only the most crucial and esoteric items (items such as Ekelöf’s use in the “Lautrec” essay of the French expression charge en connection with Lautrec’s portrait-charge or caricature of Oscar Wilde). In establishing the text, Ekner has been guided by one basic principle: to compare all versions of the text—in other words, the first printed version, subsequent revised versions, and finally Ekelöf’s own proof annotations or marginal corrections to existing printed versions in order to arrive at a reconstruction based on editorial judgment of Ekelöf’s “final version.”

Once again the comparison with Strindberg editions is illuminating, since Ekelöf, unlike Strindberg, had full access to and an interest in the printed versions, and his final versions in Ekner’s view must be regarded as the definitive ones. Whether there is such a thing as a definitive Ekelöf text is a matter of debate altogether, insofar as Ekelöf, like Valéry, always regarded his work, published or not, as “work in progress” and was therefore in the annoying habit of revising even published versions which most readers or editors would like to regard as “final.” The myth of the definitive work will continue to trouble the reader of Ekner’s edition, since many of the variant readings Ekner has chosen, based on a careful study of Ekelöf’s revisions, strike us as curiously unfelicitous vis-à-vis the original, standard printed version with which we are accustomed. And then one may ask: why is Ekelöf’s final version necessarily the acceptable one, as Ekner assumes? Is not the first printed version at least equally valid? Why could the author’s later corrections not have been placed in the notes, with the standard first versions (minus corrections) being retained as the authoritative text? The question in the end, though, is perhaps not so much one of Ekner’s competence or incompetence but rather one of Ekelöf’s esthetics and of how we are to reconcile the latter’s notion of the work process as telos with the fiction of the finished work of art, a fiction that is the very precondition of any belief in an “authoritative edition.”

Ekner has for the most part meticulously yet not cumbersomely noted all changes in the “final” text vis-à-vis the standard printed version(s), thus ensuring that the edition “can serve as the basis for future Ekelöf editions, for example selections, translations, new editions of individual works, etc.” I can attest to the fact that Ekner has already achieved his purpose at least as far as this particular reviewer is concerned, since this edition of the Skrifter has been used as the edition of reference for a forthcoming translation of selected essays by Ekelöf. At the risk of seeming to demand superhuman editorial infallibility, however, one can note some minor inconsistencies and inadequacies in the editing and in the notation of the differences between Ekner’s version and the standard original.

An example is the first paragraph of Ekelöf’s piece of “petite prose,” “En bugn historia” (A Bugz Story), where Ekner has made several changes from the original without noting them. Neither has Ekner been completely consistent in correcting Ekelöf’s own misspellings or the printer’s corruptions of the past: in some cases they have been eliminated, in others not (the spelling of Marcel Duchamp’s name with a concluding -s in the essay “From Dadaism to Surrealism” is only one example).

Ekelöf’s many-sidedness has all too frequently been ignored by readers and critics who insist on the dominant position of his poetry, but, as Ekelöf himself states in a passage cited by Ekner, “poetry is a by-product, a small part of a writer’s activity.” Ekner has therefore done readers a great service by bringing together for the first time in one place all the major published and unpublished works of the author; his revolutionary early poetry, his grand poetry collections of the 1940s, his nonsense “Stroumpf” verse, his grotesques (spanning his entire ca-

The most significant new aspect of this edition is the inclusion of the unpublished poems in volume 3 which are genetically associated with the Divian trilogy. Here the ed-
itor has, rather artificially in my view, reconstructed two new groupings of poetry, "Diwan 2" and "Fatumeh 2," taking his cue from the author’s own assertion that after the publication of the trilogy he had enough material left over for two extra volumes. Certainly Ekner lays no claims to having uncovered the definitive grouping of this supplementary material, and of course he has done us a great favor by the very fact that he has published this new material, much of it of a high caliber; but one has to be skeptical about such attempts to follow the convolutions of Ekelöf’s brain and to reconstruct two such hypothetical posthumous works. One has to be even more skeptical about the editor’s artificial grouping of essays under the title “Tredje given” (The Third Deal) in volume 7. Such a grouping is justified in the editor’s view by the fact that many of the essays, articles, and reviews that could find no room in the author’s two essay collections Blandade kort (Shuffled Cards) and Lägga patience (Play Solitaire) therefore deserved to find a place in a third essay collection, “in awareness of the fact that the third essay book of this type can scarcely be followed by a fourth.” Why not? one might ask. Such editorial nonchalance hardly seems understandable if contrasted with the obviously enormously painstaking effort Ekner has otherwise put into this edition.

Ekner has been exceptionally meticulous with regard to the typography, layout, and general physical appearance of this edition. Likewise, he has justifiably enhanced the edition with all the essential drawings from the original edition of En Mōna-Elegi and in volume 4 with the author’s own drawings and caricatures. He conveniently cross-references the Ekelöf texts referred to in his notes to the entries listed in his Ekelöf bibliography of 1970 by using the same numbering system employed in the latter work. A concluding eighth volume or Tankesamling, containing Ekelöf’s self-commentaries and autobiographical writings, was to have appeared in the spring of 1993. Despite the abovementioned beauty blemishes and the reservations of this reviewer, the present edition of the Skrifter is a major achievement, and Ekner deserves to be congratulated.

Erik Thygesen
St. Olaf College