

■Gunnar Ekelöf. *Skrifter*. Ed. and comm. by Reidar Ekner. 3 vols. Stockholm: Bonniers, 1991. Pp., Vol. 1: 285; Vol. 2: 222; Vol. 3: 307.

When he died in 1968, Gunnar Ekelöf left behind a body of poetry that made him one of northern Europe's most powerful and probing lyric voices of this century. Ekelöf's poetry plumbed the depths of human consciousness, and it influenced, with its humor, mysticism, and searing imagery and sound patterns, at least three generations of Scandinavian authors. In the quarter of a century since his death, Ekelöf's reputation, rather than fading as the legends of major authors so often do, has continued to grow.

In a labor of love and an editor's nightmare, Reidar Ekner has taken on the challenge of organizing and assembling both the body of Ekelöf's published works and the boxes of notebooks and papers accumulated by Ekelöf over the years ("Hans handskriftliga kvarlåtenskap omfattar närmare 10,000 blad, brev oräknade" [*Skrifter* 1, 10]. "The handwritten material left behind includes nearly 10,000 pages, letters not included.") Even more daunting, the notebooks and papers are often undated, and/or written in different years, so that the same notebook may have drafts from a number of different periods. Ingrid Ekelöf—the poet's wife, comrade, and in the final months of his life, personal secretary and editor—donated this collection to the manuscripts collection of the Uppsala University library where it became the Ekelöf archive.

As Ekelöf's close friend and as compiler of *Gunnar Ekelöf: En bibliografi* (1970), Reidar Ekner is obviously the person to organize this material. Logically and conveniently, Ekner employs throughout the *Skrifter* the numerical system and categories created by him for the bibliography. During the period in which he assembled *Skrifter*, Ekner continued to expand the bibliography, and the new edition, which should be an invaluable aid to scholars, will be published in the near future (*Skrifter* 1, 15).

In these first three of a planned eight volumes, the editor has issued a central portion of Ekelöf's oeuvre, the poetry that he wrote almost continually for five decades. The *Skrifter* are not meant to be a "complete works" nor a variorum edition, and some readers may quarrel with this decision. However, the entire collection will include virtually all of Ekelöf's published and unpublished creative writing. Ekner makes his goal for the edition clear from the beginning.

*Det Skrifter syftar till är att ge läsarna en kritiskt vetenskapligt acceptabel edition, där varje rad etablerats enligt textkritiska principer, dvs. har kontrollerats mot manuskript och existerande upplagor, och där senare korrigeringar av författaren har tagits tillvara.* (13)

(The intent of the *Writings* is to give readers a critical scholarly acceptable edition, where every line has been established according to critical and textual principles, that is to say, has been checked against manuscripts and existing editions, and where later corrections by the author have been utilized.)

In essence, Ekner wants to give his readers as nearly definitive an edition as possible, without, however, providing the structure and framework of a variorum edition. He has made one slightly controversial choice in his editing, and I will discuss that later. First, it must be said straightforwardly that this is a beautiful edition. Ekner has assembled it with painstaking care, and, although he has avoided extensive commentary, he has provided in the notes either Ekelöf's or his own comments in a sparse and insightful fashion.

The major importance of these three volumes to the general public is that they offer all of Ekelöf's poetry from beginning to end; no "selections," no volumes or poems left out. One can sit down and follow the almost dizzying transition from the young Ekelöf to the mature poet. *Skrifter* 1: *Dikter 1927–1951* (*Writings* 1: *Poetry 1927–1951*) moves from the famous seemingly spontaneous stream-of-conscious and unconscious writing of *Sent på jorden* (1932, *Late on the Earth*) to the middle years of Ekelöf's masterful development of technique and personal voice in *Non serviam* (1945) and *Om hösten* (1951, *In autumn*). *Skrifter* 1 also includes the extraordinary poetry of *Färjesång* (1941, *Ferry Song*)—in which he published "Tag och skriv" ("Take and write") and "Eufori" ("Euphoria"). The two post-World War II volumes *Non serviam* and *Om hösten* contain some of Ekelöf's most powerful poetry, for instance, "Samothrake" and the magnificent "Absentia animi." Ekner describes these years as circumscribed by Ekelöf's "strävan att närma poesin till en musik av romantisk-symfonisk karaktär" ("striving to move poetry toward a music of romantic-symphonic character" (*Skrifter* 2, 7)).

*Skrifter* 2: *Dikter 1955–1962* flows from *Strountes* (1955, *Nonsense*) to *En natt vid horisonten* (1962, *A Night on the Horizon*). In these volumes Ekelöf offered the startling variety of poetry that would open up new paths for younger Swedish poets of the '50s and '60s. In *Strountes*, according to Ekner, Ekelöf reveals himself to be "en uppsluppen och skämtsam, ironisk och fränt kritisk, till och med grotesk och anstötlig

poet" (*Skrifter* 2, 7) [an exhilarating and joking, ironic and pungently critical, even grotesque and offensive poet]. This almost absurdist quality gives volume 2 a unique tone, at once dark and light, comic and serious, which continues through *En Mølne Elegi* (1960; *A Mølne Elegy*, 1984) and *En Natt vid Horisonten*.

Throughout all three volumes, Ekner has labored with typesets, spacing, and placement of lines on the page to present the poetry in as powerful and yet as consistent a fashion as possible. This meticulous care has exceptional effect in *Skrifter* 2 because it includes the drawings from the original publication of *En Mølne Elegi*, a poem that becomes even more vital in this collection, perhaps because of Ekner's elegant presentation of it, perhaps because the quixotic linguistic playfulness of Ekelöf's writing during these years comes through in this long highly personal poem.

A scholar or a graduate student currently immersed in Ekelöf's work could profit greatly from the notes and references provided by Ekner, but anyone can and (in a depressing world of violence, pollution, and commercialism) *should* enjoy sitting down with this poetry and Ekner's precise commentary. The volumes offer the reader the joy of glancing occasionally in the notes to check meanings of titles, esoteric references, or indications of where other parts of the poem appeared, although some of this will be even clearer in Ekner's forthcoming bibliography. In his spiral world of literary resonance and repetition, Ekelöf fed off of himself as well as other authors, and he continually reused and revised old notes and poems. This continuity creates part of the sense of wholeness that one has in Ekelöf's writing, an awareness that certain problems change, disappear, then reappear throughout one's lifetime.

In the third volume, *Skrifter* 3: *Dikter 1965–1968*, Ekelöf's ongoing poetic self-creation and revision confronts Ekner with his most complex editorial challenges. The collections of poems in the first two volumes of *Skrifter* were for the most part corrected and polished by Ekelöf himself, since he had the opportunity to revise and republish them over the years, and only a few additional changes had to be made by Ekner. *Skrifter* 3 contains the *Diwàn* trilogy, the inspiring final three volumes of poetry that crowned Ekelöf's career: *Diwàn över Fursten av Emgión* (1965, *Divan over the Prince of Emgión*), *Sagan om Fatumeh* (1966, *The Tale of Fatumeh*); *Vägvisare till underjorden* (1967, *Guide to the Underworld*, 1980). This trilogy unquestionably established him as a poet of international standing and as one of Sweden's greatest poets.

In this volume, Ekner has done an extraordinary amount of work. He has published revisions of old poems, found some exquisite new poems, and offered to the reader the possibility of extending the original three

volumes to five on the basis of poems and fragments left behind by Ekelöf, either in manuscript form or dictated directly to his wife, Ingrid, during his final cancer-ridden months. This unpublished material from the 1965–68 period presented the editor with some of his most difficult challenges.

Ekner made the decision, as he indicated in the first volume, to include Ekelöf's final revisions throughout *Skrifter*. Although most of the changes in this collection are minimal—and in the notes Ekner indicates exactly where he has made a change—it still surprises the reader to discover revisions of poems that appeared in supposedly definitive versions in the elegant and inspiring original volumes. (To be honest, however, few readers will notice the revisions without looking at Ekner's notes.) For instance, Ekelöf revised some words and sentences in his copy of the published version of *Vägvisare till underjorden*, a volume whose beauty most of us would hesitate to touch. One can always question how definitive a published poem is, but historically critics have often questioned the ability or the necessity of poets rewriting their own poetry after it has appeared in print. Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, for instance, stands as a prime example of a volume by a poet who could not stop revising; the early 1855 edition, rather than the many revised later editions, is usually considered best.

In Ekelöf's case, I would not dare to second-guess Ekner's view that Ekelöf even in his final months was critically acute. But if one were to quibble with anything about this wonderful collection, it would be in terms of the inclusion of some of the late revisions made by Ekelöf, not because the revisions seem inferior, but because they change what we have for more than two decades considered to be definitive and compelling poems. One should point out, however, that Ekner, as a devoted and brilliant editor, as a friend, and as a poet himself, undoubtedly felt it his duty to give the poet the final word.

In sum, these volumes represent a truly major accomplishment by Reidar Ekner and a welcome gathering of Ekelöf's poetry into a single series. To discuss the new poems that Ekner has published as well as his suggestion for reconfiguring the *Diwàn* series from three into five would require a much longer article. The conclusion here can only be that the three volumes of *Skrifter* painstakingly and skillfully edited by Reidar Ekner bring together the entire body of Gunnar Ekelöf's extraordinary poetry in a beautifully presented series. We owe the editor and the publisher a profound debt of gratitude; as for the poet, he can still stun us with the bitter beauty of his poetry.

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