

# On Great 19<sup>th</sup> Century Swedish Poets

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**Abstract** The most prominent poets in the two golden ages of Swedish poetry in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century are presented. Those are Esaias Tegnér (1782 – 1846) and Erik Johan Stagnelius (1793 – 1823) from the romantic era (1809 – 1830), characterized by dualism and an inward turn, enhancing the subject. Tegnér's poetic strength is his metaphors, combining dissonant linguistic areas. In “Spleen”, the metaphors give a striking image of the suffering of depression. Stagnelius' poems are masterpieces. They mediate an extremely dualistic apprehension of life and reality; our life is but a misery of unfulfilled desire. But these desires are painted in such sensuous colours, and formed in such enchanting verses, that the image of misery is overtaken by the artistic beauty. The second golden age, ca. 1889 – 1915, the national romantic era, is characterized by a farewell to the old, pre-industrial Sweden, and by a praise of literature's ability to effect joy and beauty. The finest poets of this era were Verner von Heidenstam (1859 – 1940), Gustaf Fröding (1860 – 1911) and Erik Axel Karlfeldt (1864 – 1931). Von Heidenstam is at his best in short, almost aphoristic poems. Here he formulates, in melodic verses, everlasting wisdom about man's earthly being, the dignity and marvel of man and the beauty of earth. Fröding is of a more melancholic temper, but his verses are often thought of as the epitome of traditional verse in Sweden. They are masterpieces, almost all of them, expressing in singing, rhythmic stanzas, the joy and the misery of man, very often the misery of the weak, the sensitive and suppressed. Karlfeldt, the last of the three masters, also creates poetry of formal excellence; his rhymes and rhythms are brilliant. His poems are complex, partly on account of his use of rare words, partly on account of his affinity with symbolism.

**Key words** Swedish poetry from the 19<sup>th</sup> century; Tegnér; Stagnelius; Heidenstam; Fröding; Karlfeldt

Swedish poetry is probably of world class. But since its qualities seldom — as with all poetry — can cross language boundaries, it is not very well-known beyond these. The music of the verses, the original and stunning metaphors in the stanzas, are bound to stay within the confines of the Swedish language. This essay however, is an attempt so mediate some of its charms, mainly focusing on five great Swedish poets from the 19<sup>th</sup> century — Esaias Tegnér, Erik Johan Stagnelius, Gustaf Fröding, Verner von Heidenstam and Erik Axel Karlfeldt. This quintet represents two of the golden ages in

Swedish poetry — the two first, Tegnér and Stagnelius, belongs to the so called romantic era (1809 - 1830), from the beginning of the century, the three mentioned thereafter, Fröding, Heidenstam and Karlfeldt belongs to the so called national romantic era, from the close of the century (ca. 1889 - 1915)

The first golden age, the Romantic era, is but a facet of the great Romantic movement in Europe, mainly stemming from the important Romantic movement in Germany, characterized by its philosophical turn, above all its enhancing of the qualities in the human mind, giving priority to the mind's ability to form the apprehension of the world. Simply put, the dichotomy subject-object, or mind-reality, was to a great extent thought of as either dominated by the subject construing this reality through language and imagination (German "Einbildungskraft"), or as a dialectic between this mind and the reality. Secondly, the world was thought of as twofold, dualistic: the ordinary, everyday world was a mere bleak reflection of a higher one — this was sometimes conceived of in religious terms, sometimes in more abstract, philosophical terms — the realm of the spirit. These ideas — combined with the breaking up from the ancient rules of poetry — gave an immense weight to the poet and his poems: these were thought of as stemming from a higher sphere, or giving insights into man's innermost, deepest life, or man's destiny. The poet was more or less equal to the prophet and the priest.

The breaking up from the ancient rules of poetry, meant that great creative energies was liberated, and in some cases — only a few, to be sure — this liberation produced splendid poems. Esaias Tegnér (1782 - 1846) is one of Sweden's great metaphor-makers; in his brilliant, luminous metaphors one can detect a truly imaginative talent, sometimes reminding one of Shakespeare's.

Tegnér was at first professor in Greek at Lund University, then (1824) he was appointed bishop in Växjö, both in the southern part of Sweden. He was gifted with a sharp intellect and witty, this sometimes bordering on maliciousness, but also endowed with a turbulent emotional life, resulting in the end in psychic disorder, on the verge on mental illness. Though he was an excellent teacher, a competent administrator and a very efficient bishop, he nevertheless once confessed "I really only lived when I sang" ["Egentligt levde jag blott då jag kvad"]. He wrote poems about the ecstasy felt when entering the poet's winged chariot, and he managed to convey something of the mightiness and the uncanniness of the empty space before time had entered our world in the poem "The Fire" ["Elden"] from 1805 (The spelling here and in all the quotations in Swedish has been modernized):

Eternity, like a snake in coils,  
laying brooding with black wings  
on worlds not yet begotten.  
The tent of space was not put up,  
for time had not begun to leap,  
and its watch was still.<sup>1</sup>

Evigheten, lik en orm i ringar,  
låg och ruvade med svarta vingar  
uppå världar, icke ännu till.  
Rymdens tält låg ouppspänt. För tiden  
var ej ännu någon stund förliden,  
och dess ur stod still. (Tegnér 13)

Tegnér's most famous poem, still read in Sweden today, is a poem about a deep depression, probably written around 1825, "Spleen" ["Mjältsjukan"]. All the things

Tegnér had hitherto enjoyed and cherished — poetry, memory, hope, reality itself — had suddenly become sullied, had withered, had been changed into something strange and almost literally depressing. In expressive and striking metaphors Tegnér manages to mediate the psychic pain that is depression, verging on suicide:

Then rose a dismal goblin, and the fellow  
Set fast into my heart his sudden teeth –  
And lo, that instant, all was bleak and hollow,  
The sun and all the stars went out forthwith;  
My happy view lay darkling, autumn-yellow,  
Each stalk was bent, each thicket dull in death.  
All vigor in my frozen senses died,  
And courage withered there, and joy beside.

For me what message in that leaden, muddy  
Reality, spread lifeless to my view?  
How Hope was faded, ah, the apple-ruddy!  
How Memory clouded, ah, the peacock-blue!  
And Verse itself! Its tightrope-walking study,  
Its somersaults, have palled upon me too –  
They do not satisfy, these tricks and patter  
Skimmed off the surface of impassive matter.  
[---]

A vivid mark, by God' s own finger written —  
Why had I paid no heed to it before?  
A stench goes through our life, of something rotten  
That taints our spring and summer to the core.  
That stench is of the grave, ' tis sure and ceratin,  
The grave' s walled up and marble guards the door,  
But oh! corruption rots the living spirit,  
Goes everywhere, the watch cannot secure it.

What of the night, thou watchman – nearly over?  
How much is left? or will it have no end?  
The moon, half-eaten, glides and glides forever,  
The sad-eyed stars wend on and never wend;  
My pulse ticks on with all its youthful fervor  
But Anguish drives the swifter second-hand,  
And draws each pulsebeat long with endless hurt —  
O my consumed, my leeched and bloodless heart!  
(*Swedish Book Review* 102)

Då steg en mjältsjuk svartalf opp, och plötsligt  
bet sig den svarte vid mitt hjärta fast:  
och se, på en gång allt blev tomt och ödsligt,  
och sol och stjärnor mörknade i hast:  
mitt landskap, nyss så glatt, låg mörkt och höstligt,  
var lund blev, var blomsterstängel brast.  
All livskraft dog i mitt förfusna sinne,  
allt mod, all glädje visnade därinne.

Vad vill mig verkligheten med sin döda,  
sin stumma massa, tryckande och rå?  
Hur hoppet bleknat, ack det rosenröda!  
Hur minnet mulnat, ack det himmelsblå!  
Och själva dikten! Dess lindansarmöda  
dess luftsprång har jag sett mig mätt uppå.  
Dess gyckelbilder tillfredsställa ingen  
lösskummade från ytan utav tingen.

Ett läsligt märke av Guds finger skrivet  
Vi gav jag förr ej på den skylten akt?  
Det går en liklukt genom mänskolivet,  
förgiftar vårens luft och sommarns prakt.  
Den lukten är ur graven, det är givet:  
grav muras till, och marmorn stalls på vakt.  
Men ack, förruttelse är livets anda,  
stängs ej av vakt, är över allt tillhanda.

Säg mig, du väktare, vad natten lider?  
Tar det då aldrig något slut därpå?  
Halvätne månen skrider jämt och skrider,  
gråtögda stjärnor gå alltjämt och gå.  
Min puls slår fort som i min ungdoms tider,  
men plågans stunder hinner han ej slå.  
Hur lång, hur ändlös är vart pulsslags smärta!  
O mitt förtärda, mitt förblödda hjärta!  
(*Gustafsson Svensk dikt* 281 – 282)

Tegnér's equal, nay, his superior as a poet, was the enigmatic Erik Johan Stagnelius (1793 – 1823). Son of a vicar, later bishop, he grew up on the small island in the Baltic, Öland, in a beautiful, idyllic landscape, now and then casting a shimmering glimpse on the dark images in his poems. In the beautiful poem “Necken” [“Näcken”] (probably from his last years) Stagnelius gives a picture of the spirit of the water, “Necken”, placed in a serene setting, in a calm and beauteous evening, fragrant and glimmering. Though he sings the most beautiful songs, the “Necken” is condemned, is disowned by God, says the child, listening to his songs:

Golden clouds at eve are glancing;  
 Elves upon the heath are dancing,  
 And the leave-crowned Necken ever  
 Rings his harps in the silver river.

Lo! a lad where trees are sighing,  
 In the violet's vapor lying,  
 Hears the sound the waters weave in  
 Night, and calls through quiet even;

"Poor old minstrel, wherefore chanting?  
 Will not sorrows cease their haunting?  
 Though thou field and wood enliven  
 Still by God thou art not forgiven.

Paradise's moonlit shadows,  
 Eden's flower-crowned meadows  
 Angels high, whose light enfold them -  
 Will thine eyes no more behold them?"

Tears the old man's face are laving;  
 Down he dives in the waters waving,  
 While his harp grows still and never  
 Sings again in the silver river.

(Peterson 83)

Kvällens gullmoln fästet kranas  
 älvorna på ängen dansa,  
 och den bladbekrönta näcken  
 gigan rör i silverbäcken.

Liten pilt bland strandens pilar  
 i violens ånga vilar,  
 klangen hör från källans vatten,  
 ropar i den stilla natten;

"Arma gubbe! Varför spela?  
 Kan det smärtorna fördela?  
 Fritt du skog och mark må liva,  
 skall Guds barn dock aldrig bliva!

Paradisets människensätter,  
 Edens blomsterkrönte slätter,  
 ljusets änglar i det höga -  
 aldrig skådar dem ditt öga."

Tårar gubbens anlet skölja,  
 ned han dykar i sin bölja.  
 Gigan tystnar. Aldrig näcken  
 spelar mer i silverbäcken.

(Gustafsson *Svensk dikt* 327 - 328)

The music (the rhythm, the melody) of this poem is impossible to convey in a translation, likewise the exquisite metaphors and images. Though Stagnelius mastered the prosodic elements of the Swedish language, and managed to form these fine metaphors, he is never syntactically convoluted, his sentences are simple and clear.

He was an ardent student of theology and philosophy, and was extremely well read in the so called gnostic theology, a Christian heretic movement from c. AD 100 - 300. Here he found figures and narratives of a strange and colourful character that he used in his poems, likewise he there found an apprehension of the world that obviously fitted him; the romantic dualism was here sharpened to its extreme. Our daily life is but a life of misery, disappointments, trials and suffering, our task is to liberate us from the fetters of desire. The paradox is that no Swedish poet before or after Stagnelius has created such luminous, sensuous pictures of the temptations, beauties of this world, as he has. Even death, the annihilation, he depicts, in his most famous poem, "To Putrefaction" ["Till Förruttnelsen"], as a sensual experience, a sexual intercourse. In this poem he makes mastery use of the old Amor - Mors (Love - Death) motif, he expands the sensual aspects of the motif, by concentrating on the double meaning of the grave, it is both a couch and the last lair:

Putrefaction, hasten, Oh beloved bride,  
 to ready our lonely lover's couch!  
 By the world rejected, by God set aside  
 thou art my only hope, I vouch.  
 Quick! our chamber now adorn

Förruttnelse, hasta, o älskade brud,  
 att bädda vårt ensliga läger!  
 Förskjuten av världen, förskjuten av Gud  
 blott dig till förhoppning jag äger  
 Fort, smycka vår kammars

– on bier of somber decorations  
the sighing lover to your dwelling shall go.  
Quick! Prepare the bridal bed  
– soon springtime's gift of new carnations  
shall over her grow.

Caress in thy womb my body, which years!  
In thine embraces smother my pain!  
My thoughts and my feelings dissolve into worms,  
of my burning heart let but ashes remain!  
Rich art thou, o maid! – in dowry dost give  
the vast, the verdurous earth to me.  
Up here do I suffer, but happy shall live  
down there with thee.

To stifling, enchanting realms of desire  
black-velvet pages lead bridegroom and bride.  
Our nuptial hymn chiming bells will attire  
and curtains of green will both of us hide.  
When out on the oceans tempests prevail,  
when terrors will not bloodied earth release,  
when battles are raging, in slumber we'll sail  
in aureate peace.  
(Gustafsson *Forays* 35)

– på svartklädda bären  
den suckande älskarn din boning skall nå.  
Fort, tillred vår brudsäng.  
med nejlikor våren  
skall henne beså.

Slut ömt i ditt sköte min smäktande kropp!  
Förkväv i ditt famntag min smärta.  
I maskar lös tanken och känslorna opp,  
i aska mitt brinnande hjärta!  
Rik är du, o flicka! – i hemgift du giver  
den stora, den grönskande jorden åt mig.  
Jag plågas häruppe, men lycklig jag bliver  
därnere hos dig.

Till vällustens ljuva, förtrollande kvalm  
oss svartklädda brudsvänner följa.  
Vår bröllopsång ringes av klockornas malm  
och gröna gardiner oss dölja.  
När stormarna ute på världshavet råda,  
när fasor den blodade jorden bebo,  
när fejderna rasa, vi slumra dock båda  
i gyllene ro.  
(Gustafsson *Svensk dikt* 314 – 315)

Stagnelius died young, only 30 years of age, and we know little about his life and experiences, the things we think we know of him, are deduced from his poems. But though he lived isolated and poor, he was, after his death, immediately acknowledged as the great poet he was, and his poems were published 1824 – 26, by a friend of him, and with the help of his father. Now he is one of the greatest Swedish poets.

The years between this golden age and the next one, the national romantic era, of the years ca. 1889 – 1914, did not see such great poets as Tegnér and Stagnelius, though there were two, Viktor Rydberg (1828 – 1895) and Carl Snoilsky (1841 – 1903), both of whom wrote some very fine poems. Rydberg continued the romantic line, actually being the last of the Swedish Romantic poets; Snoilsky was an extremely skillful poet, mastering the difficult sonnet.

But the next generation of Swedish poets, of whom the three masters were Verner von Heidenstam (1859 – 1940), Gustaf Fröding (1860 – 1911) and Erik Axel Karlfeldt (1864 – 1931), was to form an incredible time of poetic prosperity. The common denominator of this generation was regionalism, bred by an acute awareness of the deep changes Sweden was experiencing when now, during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, entering the industrial era. This experience fostered a strong sense of something vanishing forever, namely the old Sweden, the strong cultural identities of different regions in the then mainly agricultural old society. The three poets developed different attitudes towards the rapid changes, but they all conveyed a strong sense for times gone by, for the traditions — artistic, historical or ethnic, i. e. the culture of the peasants. In Sweden the peasants were not to a small degree a compara-

tively powerful and important social class.

This generation also reacted towards the then reigning realism in literature — this generation sensed that beauty, fantasy and joy was part of literature's commission, its task not only being that of showing and discussing social problems and political issues, such as deep social injustices, women's slavery or lack of democracy. The most manifest anti-realist poet was von Heidenstam, a born aristocrat, who in 1889 published a pamphlet, "Renaissance" ["Renässans"], aiming at — as he saw it — realism's tediousness, its lack of beauty and joy. His finest poems are the shorter ones, mainly published in *New Poems* [*Nya dikter*] from 1915. Here von Heidenstam's talent for the aphoristic form and the wisdom of the aphorism is displayed, as in the following poem, about man, about humanness:

<p>Marvel above all marvels, High, unfathomable great marvel! The wolf's chasm was not your home, Nor the dark sea's abyss. You were born to wander In the golden play of man Brother, sister, thou who still Walk your way on starry earth Short is life's journey and night is falling, Still, be content and filled with mirth! Fight on the day of struggle, play on the day of rest! [ . . . ] And when your white head sinks, Praise the marvel, that you were born A human, godlike, Marvel above all marvels!<sup>2</sup></p>	<p>Under över alla under, höga, outgrundligt stora! Ulvens klyfta blev ej ditt hem, ej det mörka havets djup. Född blev du att vandra i den gyllene människoleken. Broder, syster du som än går din färd på jordens stjärna, kort är livets väg och kvällen snar, blid och glatt förnöjsam ändå var. Strid på stridens dag och lek på vilans!  och när vitt ditt huvud sjunker, prisa undret, att du föddes människogestaltad, gudalik, undret över alla under!</p> <p style="text-align: right;">(Gustafsson <i>Svensk dikt</i> 465)</p>
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All the poets in this generation wrote poems about nature, about nature's gift to man: here man could find peace, beauty and comfort. In the poem "The Hour of Paradise" ["Paradisets timma"], von Heidenstam gives a picture of nature as it presents itself in the summer (which is very short in Sweden) and very early in the morning, when no one is awake — except the poet — this is the hour of paradise, the hour of earth's creation:

<p>Oh, meadow! Let flower's chalices glimmer Around the fairy's light-winged heel! Oh, hour of paradise! Pour dew into our souls! Still birds are singing and rejoicing Around the sounds, bright at dawn As clear as the first of days When time began to leap.<sup>3</sup></p>	<p>Du äng, lät kalkar glimma kring älvans lätta hä! Du paradisets timma, din dagg gjut i vår själ! än jublar fågelsången kring gryningsljusa sund så klar som första gången i tidens första stund.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">(Gustafsson <i>Svensk dikt</i> 465)</p>
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Nature was also a dominant theme in Gustaf Fröding's poems — he is, together with

Stagnelius, probably the most skillful poet in the Swedish language, handling language's all aspects — its words, its prosody, its syntax — with an unequalled skill in the strict forms of traditional poetry. He was the son of a foundry proprietor, the foundry and the country estate situated in the western part of Sweden, in a beautiful province, filled with lakes, mountains, rivers and forests. In the poem “A lovely day” [“Vackert väder”], published in his first collection of poems, *Guitar and Accordion* [*Guitarr och dragharmonika*] from 1891, this nature forms the background to the story in the poem, a story about an unsuccessful courting:

A clear sky above the lake,  
all basks in summer's heat,  
and Haga's farm bell calling out  
at one o' clock its strident beat.  
The church at Brunnskog stood there bright,  
a farmer's bride, so fresh and white.  
Above the birches on the Berga height  
much like the hat-veil on a lovely lady  
a cloud was floating light.  
[.....]  
Like long-ships fully dressed there swam  
Lake Vermeln' s holms in turn  
the spruce' s song across the prow,  
across the thwart the alder's sough,  
and pine-trees' sighs across the stern.  
(Fröding *The Selected Poems* 25 – 26)

Klar låg himlen över viken,  
solen stekte hett,  
och vid Haga ringde Hagas  
gälla vällingklocka ett.  
Brunnskogs kyrka stod och lyste  
Som en bondbrud, grann och ny.  
Över björkarne vid Berga  
som ett hattflor på en herrgårdsfröken  
svävade en sky.  
[.....]  
och som högtidsklädda långskepp  
summo Värmeln's holmar fram,  
över stäven susa granar,  
alar susa över toft  
tallar över akterstam.  
(Fröding *Samlade dikter* 114 – 115)

Gustaf Fröding' s mother, Emilia, was a very gifted woman, and her son obviously inherited her talent for writing verses. But from her and also from his father, Fröding also inherited a melancholy temper, which led to periods of depression, even psychic disorder. The times, the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, were hard on his family, the economy of the estate and the foundry was constantly worsening, partly on account of an economic depression, partly on account of the father's inability to handle the economic crisis. So Fröding experienced himself, his family and his class as remnants from times past. In the poem “A gazelle” [“En ghasel”] (also from the first collection) Fröding expresses his sense of being outside a normal life, the ordinary way of life — this feeling he formed in the very rigid stanza of the Persian gazelle, where one word or one phrase is repeated in the end of each verse:

I am looking at the world out through the bars,  
I can't, I do not want to leave the bars,  
it is so good to see how life goes round,  
see its waves come surging 'gainst the bars,  
so madly gay and tempting is the sound  
when laughs and song come floating through the bars.  
[---]  
There is a crowd of boats and happy steamers,  
and brassy music and romantic dreamers.  
Yes, lots of happy people stroll out there,

Jag står och ser på världen genom gallret;  
jag kan, jag vill ej slita mig från gallret,  
det är så skönt att se, hur livet sjuder  
och kastar höga böljor upp mot gallret,  
så smärtsamt glatt och lockande det ljuder,  
när skratt och sånger komma genom gallret.  
[---]  
Det vimlar båtar där och ångare  
med hornmusik och muntra sångare  
och glada människor i tusental,

and talk and breathe the lovely morning air.  
I must get out, I must, I want to play  
a drink of life, if only for a day –  
don't let me suffocate behind the bars!

In vain, in vain the hateful bars I shake,  
the unforgiving, steely hard old bars.  
They will not stretch, they will not give or break,  
for there, inside myself, the bars are wrought,  
and only when I break, the bars will break.  
(Fröding *The Selected Poems* 32 – 33)

som draga ut till fest i berg och dal;  
jag vill, jag vill, jag skall, jag måste ut  
och dricka liv, om blott för en minut,  
jag vill ej långsamt kvävas bakom gallret!

Förgäves skall jag böja, skall jag rista  
det gamla, obevekligt hårda gallret  
- det vill ej tänja sig, det vill ej brista,  
ty i mig själv är smitt och nitat gallret,  
och först när själv jag krossas, krossas gallret.  
(Gustafsson *Svensk dikt* 478)

Fröding always had an eye for the weak and gentle, people that are very sensitive and easily hurt, people that are exploited by the mighty – he wrote poems about poor, suppressed people, about men being sweated in the foundry, about young women being victims to prejudice and envy – in the poem, “Sigh, sigh, willows!” [“Säv, säv, susa!”] in *New Poems* [*Nya dikter*] from 1894, about a young girl that drowned herself, probably on account of her giving birth to a so called illegitimate child, fruit of a forbidden love, he expresses his pity for her fate in beautiful, melodic stanzas, formed after a mediaeval poem, where the melodic and laconic expressions reign:

Sing, willows, sing,  
the billows are rolling,  
tell me where Inga  
young maiden is strolling!

She cried like a wingbroken bird,  
when she sank in the lake.  
It was when spring was about to awake.

They bore her grudge at Vesterbylid.  
She had a great sorrow indeed.

They bore her a grudge for land and for gold,  
they hated her love, it was young and bold.

They pricked an eyeball with thorn,  
they stained a lily's dew with scorn.

So sing, yes sing your sad song,  
your rippling little billows,  
Sing, billows, sing,  
Sigh, sigh, willows!  
(Fröding *The Selected Poems* 45 – 46)

Säv, säv, susa,  
våg, våg, slå,  
I sägen mig var Ingalill  
den unga mände gå?

Hon skrek som en vingskjuten and,  
när hon sjönk i sjön.  
Det var när sista vår stod grön.

De voro henne gramse vid östanålid  
det tog hon sig så illa vid.

De voro henne gramse för gods och gull  
och för hennes unga kärleks skull.

De stucko en ögonsten med tag,  
de kastade smuts i en liljas dagg.

Så sjungen, sjungen sorgsång,  
I sorgsna vågor små,  
säv, säv, susa,  
våg, våg, slå!  
(Gustafsson *Svensk dikt* 484)

The last poet of the three masters, Erik Axel Karlfeldt, also came from the rural parts of Sweden, from the famous province of Dalecarlia, characterized by a very strong and colourful cultural tradition of the peasants. The feudal system never came to this part of Sweden, hence there are no aristocratic families or estates in this province



(and the regions north of it). But Karlfeldt, stemming from these strong-willed and self-confident Dalecarlian peasants, also conceived of himself, like Fröding, as a stranger in life, an outcast even. This was due to his father once being sentenced for embezzlement, and on account of this, being forced to abandon his estate. The young Karlfeldt experienced this as, which it de facto was, a social catastrophe, and also affecting him, not only economically. But as a poet he took revenge, and ended up as not only a member of the Swedish Academy, but also as its influential Secretary. His poems are, as are von Heidenstam's and Fröding's, extremely formally skillful, and also, on account of his frequent use of old Swedish words, words from the old culture of the Dalecarlian peasants, very difficult to translate. His great themes are love and death, steeped in old forms and in the old language. His rhymes are probably the most intricate in the traditional Swedish poetry, his sense of the rhythm is equal to Fröding's, and his metaphors equal those of Tegnér's.

He was the youngest of the three, and while Fröding died already in 1911, and von Heidenstam published his last work already in 1915, Karlfeldt continued to publish during the years after the Great War (1914 - 18). His last collection of poems, *The Horn of Autumn* [*Hösthorn*] from 1927, contains his most loved poem, still read, truly a masterpiece, called "The Winter Organ" ["Vinterorgel"]. It is a long poem, and on the surface it depicts the winter entering our world. Karlfeldt tells this story in the form of a great metaphor, namely the winter is building an organ, and the landscape, the forests are transferred into a huge, mighty organ. The poem begins with a vision of autumn, when everything is dark and threatening, and here Karlfeldt conceives of autumn's landscape as a temple, whose vaults are dark and low, and he addresses this autumn in form of an apostrophe to the first of November, a day always called All Saint's Day [Allhelgonadagen], the day of death and darkness:

Your temple is dark and your vault is low, Day of All Saints!	Ditt tempel är mörkt och lågt är dess valv, Allhelgonadag!
There summer's hymn dies down as a tremble Of tolling bells.	Där slocknar sommarens hymn som ett skalv av klämtande slag.
And her mantle tears the blackened sky, And pallied rags of the groves flies away And night chants of all that is dead	Sin mantel river den svarta sky, och lundarnas bleknade trasor fly, och natten mässar om allt som är dött,
All flesh, all hay! <sup>4</sup> allt hö, allt kött.	(Gustafsson <i>Svensk dikt</i> 526)

Here Karlfeldt is close to symbolism, that European tradition that develops the idea of the symbol — stemming from the Romantic movement — especially symbols from nature. The symbol is, due to this tradition, able to express a multitude of meanings, the symbol can assemble different aspects of a hidden truth, impossible to express in ordinary words — only the symbol can accomplish this. The symbol in this poem is of course the organ, built by the winter, and played by a great organ-player, an enigmatic figure in the poem, an artist, a musician, once producing a wonderful tone from the stars above:

Once in a while when dawn is watching	det susar ibland intill gryningens väkt,
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a whistling from star's breath can be heard,  
 one tone alone, one clear as glass  
 a wonderful one.<sup>5</sup>

som stjärnornas lugna andedräkt,  
 en enda ton, en glasigt klar,  
 och underbar. (Gustafsson *Svensk dikt* 528)

This poem and this collection of poems from 1927, forms the end of this golden age in Swedish poetry — and also, one can say, the end of traditional, metric poetry. This age, and also its predecessor, the Romantic age, has given to the Swedish culture a heritage worth preserving, and for certain, the quality of these two golden ages, has played an important role since, setting standards for generations to come. In a dialectical manner, these two golden ages also have given the modernist poets a high standard to revolt against, hence inciting them to surpass the great masters. Thus, the Swedish Modernist lyric is, possibly and partly due to this contest between generations, also of a very high quality. Last, but not least, these masters rendered the poet's task and figure a very prestigious position in Swedish culture.

## Notes

1 – 5. These are the author's translations.

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