

A Review on *Chickweed Wintergreen*

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Posthumously published *Chickweed Wintergreen* is the most recent publication of Nobel Prize winner Harry Martinson (1904 – 1978). Elected to the Swedish Academy in 1949, Martinson wrote four novels, six volumes of essays and nine collections of poems. His books are autobiographical, reflecting his upbringing, travels, and interest in science and social questions. His poetry is known for its close observation of the natural world as well as its intense awareness of cosmic distances in time and space.

In his introduction to *Chickweed Wintergreen*, Staffan Söderblom emphasises that Martinson interpreted not only the unknown but also the “intimately familiar”, using a poetic language that was regarded at the time as new (10).¹ The poems published in *Chickweed Wintergreen* are taken from eleven collections, published between 1929 and 1973; a number of posthumously published poems are also included.

The poems based on Martinson’s experience of life on the oceans are packed with concrete details that enable the reader to visualise the scene without prior experience. “The Albatross” is a case in point. Here, Martinson describes the albatross as he waits for his mate: “You waited for days, then she came When the jubilation of breeding had faded/— you storm birds/dived away, sorrowfully screeching, ravenously/ back out into the mists of the world” (22).

Martinson also wrote poems about nature. These are set in a pre-industrial peasant landscape that is sparsely populated but replete with the sounds of nature, bird-song and the humming of insects. There is often an invisible, even threatening presence that is not embodied. The poem “Home Village” is an excellent example (31). Here, gardens are alive with earthworms and “columbine still grows” (31). Smoke rises from cottages; the village is filled with peace. Underneath the surface, however, lurks a “silent lie”: “A lie one would willingly hang on to, a lie/ for which one would trample down all evil truths” (31).

The poems published after 1945 have a more speculative quality that reflects Martinson’s interest in contemporary science and classical Chinese Taoist philosophy. Life is enigmatic, which is mirrored in reflections of something that remains invisible to the human eye. The poem from which the collection takes its name is an excellent example: “Never luxuriates./ Yet manages, sparingly/ and neatly in the moss./ The flowers are delicate/ but know nothing of the sweet pliancy/ you would foist on summer./ The determination of the fragile/ is no less than that of the oak” (78). The contrast between “luxuriates” and “manages” and between “fragility” and “determination” heightens the mystery. These processes are invisible and yet are observed by

the poet.

Chickweed Wintergreen contains an extract from the epic *Aniara*, considered to be Martinson's most original production. Consisting of 103 "songs", it tells the story of humans who cannot cope with or must hide from their fate. Humanity is homeless. Song 13, for example, contains the following verse: "If only we could turn, go back to base/ now that we have discovered what our ship/ in essence is: a tiny bubble locked/ in glass, in glass of God's own spirit locked" (98). The song goes on to explain that the bubble moves "interminably slowly" to a new position; *Aniara* is situated "in interminable space/ abyss within abyss where light – years plunge/ around the bubble" (99).

After *Aniara*, Martinson's poems describe loss, impoverished nature, shame, abandonment and degradation. In "The Last Load", for example, the old woman is isolated in the field that has been robbed of its wheat: "The last harvest had creaked home./ The fields lay stubby and chill./ An old woman straggled after, distressed/ by all that had no chance of staying" (146).

Chickweed Wintergreen is a commendable collection. The result of a project initiated by some of the foremost Martinson scholars in Sweden, it makes available to English – language readers a range of poems that have not previously been translated into English. While Martinson's prose has been translated into a number of languages, his poems have appeared only sporadically in English. *Chickweed Wintergreen* redresses this deficiency.

Note

1. All the quotations in this article are from Harry Martinson, *Chickweed Wintergreen*, Trans. Robin Fulton Tasset, Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books, 2010.

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