

A Review on *Outside the Calendar*

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Outside the Calendar is Kjell Espmark's latest collection of poetry, featuring poems in Swedish and English from the 1968 collection *Voices in Public* to the present. Poet, novelist, literary historian and Member of the Swedish Academy since 1981, Espmark has published novels and books of criticism as well as poetry. His earliest poetry (from the late 1950s) is a form of lyrical story-telling, often in "I" form (the "I" is observed from a distance). The poems with which *Outside the Calendar* begins are characterised by a social and political orientation in which context is the prime controller of language. The focus is on Sweden, domestic suffering and the building of the welfare state. "Made in Sweden" is a case in point, which opens with the following two stanzas: "Morning. Grey. Eternal winter./ Keep still, boy, and let me reach./ The milk will soon freeze in its glass./ Sh! Not so loud! / The eyes of neighbours glare from the wallpaper./ A ten-storey conversation/ through walls and floors./ The toilets roar like mighty accordions/ in this peasant village balanced on end" (18).¹

The poems from the 1980s (*The Secret Meal*, 1982) widen the perspective to incorporate Europe and the world as a whole. Darker in tone than the earlier poems, they are critical of civilisation, which stifles mankind. "A book to burn", for example, contains the following lines: "How I miss you, my friends, prepared/ to refute all that I wrote, suffering/ the same impatience, the same anger as myself./ Instead of you I get eternity:/ one of the false, affirmative signs./ Yes, I wanted it! But within my want/ I wanted to undo all conclusions" (61).

Outside the Calendar also contains poems from two volumes published in the 1990s: *Route Tournante* (1992) and *The Other Life* (1998). These are pictures of loss as well as making a new start in life. "The Other Life", for example, begins with the haunting lines "As if standing beside a burned out car/ and seeing one's body crumpled over the wheel" (94). The final stanza concludes with "The wind turns/ beyond what is still smouldering/ and the eyes learn that smoke can sting:/ the life I didn't choose/ has suddenly chosen me./ And I am unwritten./ Write me" (95).

The poems from *The Living Have No Graves* (2002) were written while Espmark was grieving for his deceased wife. They come from the mouth of a lost wife who, like the other dead people who emerge in the poems, refuses to be silenced. In the poem "Hold me tight so I do not flee", for example, the "I" of the poem recognises that words are the only thing that can bind the couple together: "Only your words,/ only

a language that knows me,/ knows every thought and fear,/ can seize my straying soul by the hand/ and drag me back into what exists” (109).

The final twenty poems in *Outside the Calendar* are selected from *Lend Me Your Voice* (2007). *Outside the Calendar* bears witness to Espmark’s conviction that the poet and the commentator are united. Sweden, Europe, civilisation, death, memory and the power of language are the fitting subjects of a poet. What awaits us in the future, as demonstrated in the last poem, “Before Sinking on to the Bench”, is as uncertain as the haze in which the poet is sitting on the bench overlooking the strait. It behoves us to pay attention to the signs around us; they are like the abandoned heron at the water’s edge that stays only for a short moment — and will soon be forever “outside the calendar”.

Outside the Calendar is a fine tribute to Espmark’s long and distinguished career as a poet and critic. Published in April 2012, it provides invaluable insights into the nature of poetry and the relations of the poet with his environment.

Note

1. All the quotations in this article are from Kjell Espmark, *Outside the Calendar*, Trans. Robin Fulton Michigan: Marick Press, 2012.

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