

other waves on the seashore

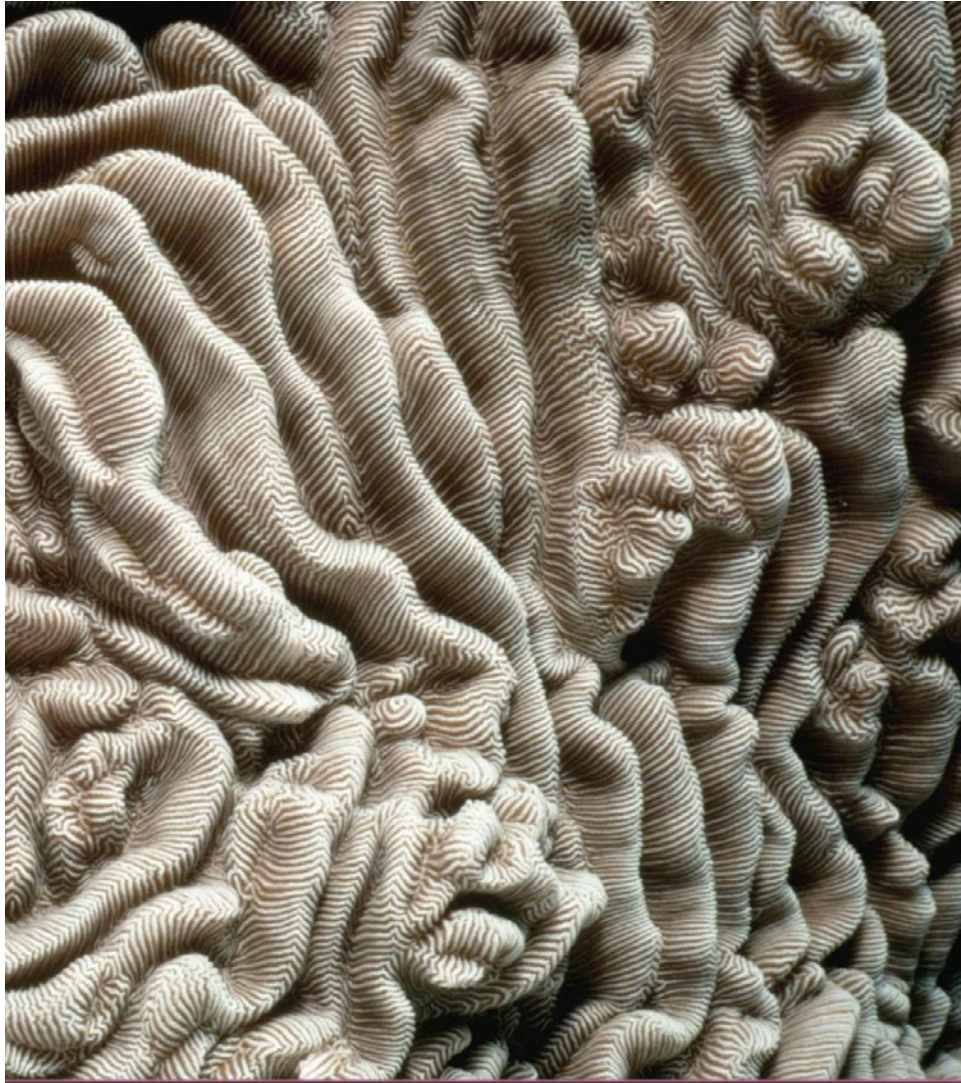
two new translations of swedish poetry

reviewed by Nicholas Birns

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HYPERION

On the future of aesthetics



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two new translations of swedish poetry

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göran sonnevi, mozart's third brain. tr, rika lesser, 2009
petter lindgren, farawaystan. tr, lars ahlström, 2010

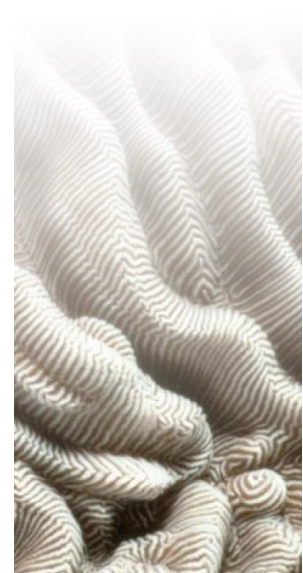
At the beginning of *Mozart's Third Brain*, Göran Sonnevi (born 1939) distinguishes himself from both extreme Heracliteanism—everything changes—and extreme Parmenideanism—everything is part of the One. In truth, not even Heraclitus or Parmenides in their waking lives could have held to their articulated extremes, and so stepping back from either verge is not only tenable but unavoidable. But what distinguishes Sonnevi is that he does not seek a sensible center, a comfortable immersion in the mid-range of experience: he insists on seeking out all possible points of connection even though both continual change and an underlying identity must be constant refrains.

Sonnevi is an unusual poet in that he is at once gnomic, introspective, and political. The beginning of section XXXIX of *Mozart's Third Brain* can serve as a suitable example:

“

Snow fell upon the darkness Upon the two
 Who walked up Allhallows Hill in Lund
 In December, 1958 He didn't believe it was true

Nor was it, except for
 A moment, outside of time The world
 closed its huge eye, whose inside was binding stars
 Then sleep came and pain The world is strange
 The world is strange, an alien place So-
 Cieties are warped, shot apart Nothing
 can be predicted. The future is the surging
 Of other waves on the seashore Winter (50)



Memory and detail are mingling with a kind of lyric breach. The moment out of time is suspended, promising a graspable transcendence but not one in any orderly continuity with the immanent. The monosyllabic authority of “And then sleep came and pain The world is strange” is offset and earned by the dizzying incorporation of data and experience in the rest of the passage. And not only the layering of present and past but the introduction of explicitly social speculation amid this moment of inward memory sets the tone for Sonnevi’s poetic method, in which public and private come to know each other intimately. The very hyphenation of “So-/cieties” in Lesser’s translation hints at the splayed nature of how the social manifests itself in Sonnevi’s poem. The social is not only ingrained within the poetic weave, but it is made clear there is no redemptive vision of society; indeed, the poem is very much about the tearings-apart of a social frame in which Sonnevi himself implicitly once trusted.

Sonnevi is like Ashbery in being at once diaristic, receptive, and capacious, but with Ashbery whatever diaristic referents exist are sealed off from our comprehension, while the pace of Ashbery’s recounting is quick, often jaunty; Sonnevi is at once more accessible and slower, though certainly not lugubrious. Nor is Ashbery remotely as political as Sonnevi is, although again in Ashbery the politics may be very covert. Yet the comparison with Ashbery comes to mind not just because Sonnevi similarly combines an difficult intimacy with an ambitious intellectual platform, but because this book’s translation into English by Rika Lesser, a distinguished American poet, makes it far more part of ‘American poetry’ than would occur if the translator was not somebody so present in and conscious of the American poetry scene. The lack of periods and the reliance this places on blank spaces and other forms of punctuation are also reminiscent of Ammons, although no form of punctuation assumes the signature role the colon does for Ammons. Not to say, though, that the translation assimilates the poem; quite the contrary, as not only Sonnevi’s sensibility but his primary references are intensely Swedish, and one of the poem’s major motifs is a complex, utterly non-reductive resistance to globalization.

It is often said that Sonnevi’s poetry is difficult, that he is learned in multiple disciplines, from many branches of science to music and politics, and that he shares both his knowledge and his investigations into that knowledge generously with the reader. This is all true, yet to go into reading *Mozart’s Third Brain* with this sort of caveat will mislead the reader, because what we are immediately confronted by—what stands to disconcert us most as readers of poetry—is an intense series of meditations on the crises and tragedies in the news in the mid-1990s, Rwanda, Bosnia, Somalia, episodes of “immeasurable” (78) pain for whom, the poem indicates, those who live should feel not just a vague collective guilt but a personal responsibility. Sonnevi has been a political poet from the 1960s, but the aftermath of the Soviet collapse made the political aspect of his work more all-pervasive and accentuated

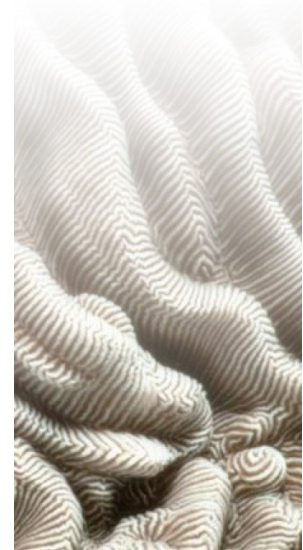


a mode of diaristic notation somewhere between passionate polemic and meditative grumbling.

But is this just editorializing on the issues of the day? Musings that might have been fructifying for the poet's creative process but should be purged from the final product? The New Critics of the 1950s would have certainly thought so, but even today's critic, used to all sorts of expository and political material, has to wonder whether not just the subjects talked about but the way in which they are talked about are journalistic, untrammled. I would say the answer is ultimately no, that they are cognitive poetic art of what Coleridge termed the "finite-infinite" aspect of the historical. But undeniably the question above is one readers ask themselves before they can fully enter the poem.

This is made even more complex by Lesser's indication that *Mozart's Third Brain* is in a sense the anteportal to *Oceanen*, Sonnevi's 2005 work, which contains responses to 9/11 and its aftermath in much the same mode as the responses to Bosnia et al. in the earlier book. (Lesser, though, does translate a passage dealing immediately with 9/11 in the introduction.) This becomes intriguing because, as Lesser says she will not translate *Oceanen*, it most likely will not be translated in the foreseeable future, as who else but Lesser could translate Sonnevi? For the English-speaking reader, *Oceanen* is the unmanifested completion, the catastrophic sequel on which we are on the other side in the way that, as we shall see in a bit, we are on the other side of much of the meta-affective experience Sonnevi summons in the earlier poem. In a sense the ready adaptability of the discursive-speculative punditry of *Mozart's Third Brain* to *Oceanen* provides a far more clairvoyant and continuous view of the relation of the 1990s and 2000s than historical events, or how the conventional wisdom imagined them, ever could. Yet one desperately does not want to overemphasize the political references in Sonnevi's work, as they are felt to be—perhaps by both author and reader—embarrassing, as if they are there not out of rage, grudge, or bias but because art simply demanded them.

Given this awareness, why are the political referents there, what do they mean? A guess is that this is provided by the fact that, although Bosnia is labeled the "low-grade" (52) genocide by Sonnevi in relation to Rwanda, he concentrates on it more, and surely this interest in the European crisis has to do with the implications of the collapse of the Soviet Union, which albeit highly distantly (remembering that Yugoslavia was only briefly part of the Soviet bloc) precipitated the Bosnian crisis, Sonnevi was 50 in 1989, and it can be argued that Bosnia for his generation represented not just a crisis of the left—its very possibility dependent on a unipolar world where the United States predominated and the Soviet union had fissured—but a midlife crisis, particularly when the poem is studded with the deaths of slightly older contemporaries, and the purest lyric moments in the book are those occasioned by elegies to these figures. With each death, an optimistic view of



history as a quest towards social justice recedes further into the past—“Who speaks now for the lowest? And in which language?” (132) Death is an interruption of the natural order, and parallels the new world realities with their announcement of strange new dispatches, as witness section XLV, the smallest unit of *Mozart’s Third Brain*, here given in its entirety:

“ Now Kore no longer wants
To return to the earth
In the cycle of vegetation, you say (57)

What this means is not that Kore (Persephone) refuses to go down to the underworld as her mandated cyclical sojourn, but that the entire order of surface and depth, light and dark, presence and absence is ruptured by a more radical catastrophe, as Kore no longer has the strength even to alternate between daylight and doom. The cycle was dolorous but also exuberant in its shuffling of light and dark; now the contrast no longer matters. (And the entire idea is attributed to a second-person other; it is not an experience asserted but an opinion overheard.) One assumes that, in Lesser’s translation, the phrase “imagined community” (used with respect to Hades, 64) is intended to bear resonance of Benedict Anderson’s phrase, whether or not it did in the original Swedish, (“imaginary community” is used on 96, so one does not know whether the ‘imagined’ is accidental or a reference to Anderson later varied by another usage). Anderson’s book was also generated by the implosion of Communism into contending nationalisms, and this linkage to the unsustainability of Kore’s cyclical journey point to what is, from the poems’ point of view, some sort of unexpected annulling disaster. Other invocations of Greek myth and tragedy also point to some fundamental alteration of what had been assumed at the beginning of section XCVI. The famous First Stasimon of *Antigone* is not so much inverted by Sonnevi—the original Greek word Sophocles uses is *deinon*, which can mean terrible as much as it can noble to mighty—but has its valence switched to one side:

“ Much is monstrous But nothing is
More monstrous than man Laws being broken through, their
sounds,
Their rhythms toward eternity, their fractal interference forms,
In the format of expanding fans, trees (116)

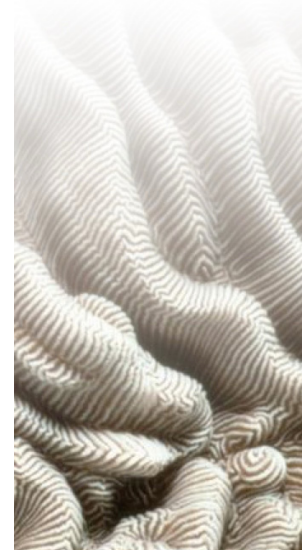
Importantly, as the syntax trails on, the tone becomes less pessimistic, as



proliferation at least airs out monstrosity. But this passage, with its revels of *Antigone*, tallies with a far more original statement, in fact a question: ‘When did Antigone become genocidal; Creon always was’ (69): if, as in Hegel’s formulation, Antigone stood for individualism, Creon for the order of the state, it is assumed the latter will be self-interested and destructive, but now even the former is. Again a contrast has been disrupted, and instead of a conflict of light and dark there are only two alternate monstrosities. In the past, we relied on art, on eloquence, on personal distinction, to distinguish those worth supporting from those worth fearing. In Sonnevi’s world, that sturdy ground of Romantic individualism is imperiled.

Part, though certainly not all, of this surprising Antigone-horror is generated by looking inward. In a recounted discussion with a friend Lesser identifies as the world-renowned poet Tomas Tranströmer, Sonnevi recounts the failures of the Communist regime in Vietnam, then admits the modern left in the West was partially to blame: “we, too, are the barbarians” (122-3). In a poem about the brain, so many complexities come in here, beyond the political. Tranströmer suffered a stroke in 1990 and is now aphasic, unable to speak, though retaining his mental faculties; Tranströmer nods when Sonnevi discusses composers or politics, but makes no audible reply, assents, but does not engage. Tranströmer’s presence in the poem as a kind of silent, vibrant brain complicates the implied authorial posture of Sonnevi. It also somewhat makes Tranströmer an arrogate for the reader—as he listens to and responds to Sonnevi’s political and artistic musings—and this gives the reader something to live up to, we have to rise not just to the level of listening to Sonnevi but that of emulating Tranströmer as auditor—which might account for how challenging, beyond the mere density of its referential material, the poem, in its enunciation, is.

These intricacies in Sonnevi’s authorial posture mean that it is too easy to make the poem’s 1990s political commentary into a plaint against 1990s-style globalization. Sonnevi somewhat shame-facedly takes an overtly “public stand” (97) in the battle over “the European brain.” Sonnevi opposed Sweden’s entering into the European Union (which Sweden eventually did). While even ‘liberals’ were advocating this as a means of greater interconnection and hybridism, Sonnevi not only took a public stand in itself but does so within his poem, forcing readers to confront the issue, whatever their feelings or whatever the relevance of the subject to them. And not only does Sonnevi aver that he is not anti-Europe as such, but he is clearly not anti-“universal empire” (142), or even “empire,” a word that he uses several times, seeming to reference the Soviet Union, although the post-1989 United States was often said to be an empire. Yet empire in Sonnevi is not just global hegemony but also the cognitive connections between people, the continuum of sensoriness and consciousness, that through which “diffuse power” (51) can radiate. Are there good or bad collectivities in Sonnevi? And how does the individual, if



such a concept survives the corruption of Antigone and the wearying of Kore, deal with these connections?

His poem's deep engagement with music, and with the figure of Mozart, is key to how its mode of cognition advances beyond the categories it inherits. This is not a poem about the new cognitive science or about the connections between mathematics and music, or why Mozart's brain was so special and creative and how we can emulate it. As Rosanna Warren states in her foreword, the very idea "third brain" evokes the familiar left brain/right brain dichotomy of cognitive science, the rational and creative sides of an artistic psyche, but seeks neither to privilege one side nor, again, to posit a wanly synthetic thirdness. The idea of the third has been present in Sonnevi's poetry for a while; in the previous volume of Sonnevi poems translated by Lesser, *A Child Is Not A Knife*, Sonnevi, in "Dyrön 1981," muses, "A Third Term must epistle it cannot exist in language." Its very existence is contradictory. Similarly, the third brain is not the unification of opposites but "excluded" (128), symptomatized by "constant alternation." The third Brain is not so much a faculty that cannot be put into words—that would be the Second brain, 'resounding' (128; both resounding in the conventional sense and re-sounding) with 'music'—but a faculty we cannot imagine. Sonnevi loves Mozart as much as anyone—his reaction to the string quintet in G minor is so strong that, despite all the warnings we have received about 'imitative form,' I gained a lot by reading the poem in conjunction with various recordings of this piece. But his Mozart is not the consoling Mozart, the Mozart whose magic exempts him from the usual artistic stresses and shortcomings, the "collective Mozart" (54) that is "an absurdity, a falsification," but a combinatorial Mozart, one whose range of notes and permutations of sounds reveal "The greater memory...the interior,/ where all substances exist, actual or virtual./ in greater or Lesser degrees of perfection." (48). This plenum, though, is not an organic or expressive unity. Infinite combination does not assume a closed totality or even an asymptotic convergence on comprehensiveness. The "brain's plurality" (7) has its contacts "ever increasing, constantly growing" and this "irrevocably alters" the "simple structures of language." Sonnevi quotes Parmenides to the effect that unity cannot include both everything and the explicit articulation of the One; minus this explicit articulation, there is always one less ingredient there than there should be for the purposes of 'totality.' Plurality entails a constant shift that can be assumed to be the sum of all the world's parts yet never, determinately, adds up to anything. Furthermore, that "(n)othing is unaltered in a brain" (31) means that cognition can take into account life experience, whether the political headlines or the personal losses of departed friends that Sonnevi chronicles in the poem.

So "Mozart's Third Brain" as a concept is ultimately not predicable in the poem; it is not what the poem evokes, nor even what it desires, but what is on the other side of its desires. Nor is Mozart, much as Sonnevi appreciates his work,



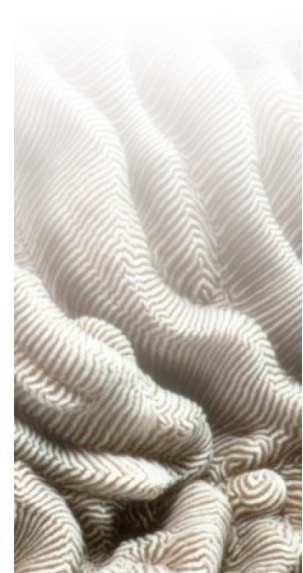
a totemic hero, a “collective” figure that, whatever the best intentions of those who lionize him, can, at best, be “marginally evil” (54). Sonnevi shows he is less interested in Mozart’s melodic aspects than his challenging techniques by dwelling on Bartók’s ascent towards an “immense plateau” (6) residing in the underworld of paradoxes, and leading on to citing avant-garde twentieth-century composers such as Andrzej Panufnik and Girolamo Scelsi, though his mention of Billie Holiday, as well as more melodic modern composers such as Silvestre Revueltas, also shows he is not simply an Adorno-style cultural mandarin. Furthermore, the complex, meditative Mozart that Sonnevi summons is mirrored by a dark Mozart, a harlequin Mozart, a rogue Mozart, a Mozart who “Stalin, too, loved” (132), a Mozart that the literary reader does not want to digest and cannot digest. So Sonnevi does his best to foil the readers’ expectations of being about to say a highbrow version of “oh, how cute” with respect to the idea of Mozart’s third brain; he prevents us from substituting a make-our-child-even-brighter cognitive-science paradigm that parades the appearance of complexity in order to evade its darker reality. Sonnevi is ruthless with himself in the poem, ruthless with the demands of his own production; he is similarly ruthless with the reader, he will not let us escape into an easier version of what we more lazily might like the poem to be.

Sonnevi challenges us because he thinks we are capable of being challenged. He prizes the democratic individual, able to love, to mourn, to make autonomous decisions, to have feelings not just constitute a nexus of appetitive wishes but be the bowstring to the cognitive instrument of life’s perception. The world of the mid-1990s did not present only distressing data but also the inspirational changeover to a multiracial South Africa and the election of Nelson Mandela. Sonnevi does not just draw uplifting lessons, though, but stresses how these events underscored what is truly valuable about an autonomous, responsible individual:



Democracy’s secret in free, general elections with secret ballots
There, too, is music’s concealment, its inaccessibility, eye to eye (68)

So often it is said—by both democracy’s opponents and supporters—that the public orientation of democracy precludes the secret, that concealment, and, most likely inwardness can only exist where there is suppression or something short of full discursive ventilation. By focusing on the secrecy of the ballot box and aligning it with music’s sinuous avoidance of exposure to the discerning gaze, Sonnevi calls attention to a reserve that is not fetishistic, an obliquity that is the art of a complicated self-aware individuality not a by-product of a retreat



into ideology or fantasy. Even the patterning of the lines indicate this kind of secrecy; the space between ‘secret’ and ‘in’ is blank, open, but also unfilled; it is both apparent and mysterious: a secret but a blank, democratic one rather than a substantive, authoritarian version. For all the poem’s somberness, its sense of being at an impossible end of time, there is some hope, “Not in vain do you give me your rose” (98), the narrator addresses an absent female, somewhat as in Eugenio Montale’s *Clizia* poems, and, similarly, there is some ruptured, secreted, yet available hope visible to the reader of Sonnevi’s agile, darkly virtuosic, infinitely concerned meditation.

Petter Lindgren (born 1965) is a Swedish poet of a younger generation than Sonnevi’s, but more fundamentally of a different disposition. Whereas Sonnevi works within an open, fragmentary structure above which hovers an unmistakable lyric purity, distended but with which the poet is in continuous contact, Lindgren starts with the short imagistic lyric and, retaining its lineaments, imbues it with detritus—“silver-coloured dragonflies” (15), “drinking glasses” (35). Lindgren writes as a journalist for *Aftonbladet*, one of the most popular of the Stockholm daily newspapers, and his poetry has the quality—not at all to be scanted—of an easy give-and-take with the world that comes from many sources but which can often particularly run in tandem with an ability to write good expository prose. But Lindgren is not a referential poet; if one had to place him in any genealogy, it would be a Surrealist one, as his poems continually assert the wacky underside of the ordinary seen even in realistic and elegiac details, such as in “Southward: A Railway Crossing” (part of the sequence “A Slower Kind of Ink,”):



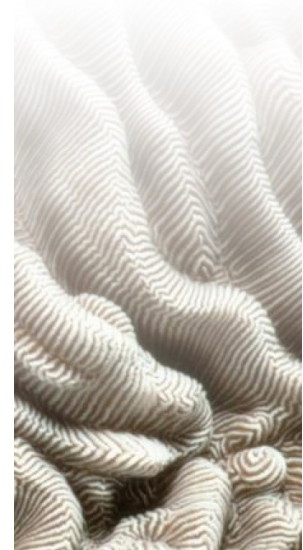
“

The clouds that then passed over the landscape
Are now peeling off in the city’s art museum
Around the old gateposts poppies grow (38)

The interchange between art and reality is seamless, but the import is at once to make reality less solid and more valuable than it might be without Lindgren’s, again, basically though idiosyncratically Surrealist prism. With Lindgren, one can relax a bit and return to understanding the meaning of a specific poem, not the very kind of meaning to which the poem aspires as is at stake in Sonnevi. Translation issues also arise; whereas Lesser is an American who knows Swedish well, Lars Ahlström is a Swede best known for translating difficult Anglophone authors such as Gerald Murnane into Swedish. Rare is the translator who has excelled at working both into and out of a language. Ahlström’s challenge is particularly great in that Lindgren’s effect (unlike

Sonnevi's) depends very much on the individual word, and even more because so much of Lindgren's technique depends on upending our expected ideas of lyric diction. Despite these differences, there are commonalities between Sonnevi and Lindgren, though one has no idea whether these are due to coincidence, milieu, or influence, whether avowed or unavowed. "Persephone" (11) is mentioned as the proper name of an 81 year old, a symbolic inversion of a name that even in descent is associated with youth and elasticity. The very title *Farawaystan* also echoes Sonnevi's concern with the redefinition of the global in the wake of the Soviet collapse, as the prevalence of "-stan" as a suffix became much more ubiquitous after the independence of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, etc. Ahlström supplies this gloss: "Farawaystan refers to the Donald Duck by Carl Barks that we saw in Sweden during the 60s and 70s." So there is a sense of childhood whimsy converging with adult reality. One could argue that Sweden, as one of the few truly neutral nations in the Cold War, has its equilibrium upset by the end of this period more than the main combatants, whose identity depended less on their opponent roles than Sweden's did on its neutral one. This is what some of the rhetoric otherness in Sonnevi pertains to; in Lindgren, it is more of a purely mental state, at times one of memory and desire, at others a half-burlesque nightmare where dark if preposterous manipulators direct the fates of objects and people. At times these take on more specific contours, as in poems 11 and 12 of the sequence "Portrait of The Dead Owner of a Small Boat," where environmental extremity is used as a metaphor of a limit-situation, of somebody attempting, if not succeeding, to evade external control. The poetry here is not just in one mode; prose poem and lyric, self-reflexive conjuring—the name "Lindgren" is at one point explicitly evoked—mingled with the palpable if acrid detail: "here and there a taste of zinc, like old mailboxes" (39).

In one of the most personal, elegiac passages in *Mozart's Third Brain*, Sonnevi declares that "(t)he future is the surging/ of other waves on the seashore." We know that the future will come and how it will arrive, but we do not know what it will be: its shape, its force, its affect. Lindgren's collection ends with a prose poem on waves, with the conceit that all waves are sent by members of a bureaucracy, of increasingly diminishing rank as the waves proceed. Sonnevi's vision of flux and Lindgren's comic paranoia are drastically opposite in purport, but both are responses to unpredictability, searches for patterns that are not redemptive, consolatory or perhaps even positive. Sonnevi is a poet of more magnitude than Lindgren, but this willingness to ask the ontologically tough questions, to not settle for platitudes, to abide provocatively in the infinite space between Heraclitean change and Parmenidean unity, is a notable trait in these two outstanding translations from the Swedish.





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