

## Nils Ferlin

The ragged vagrant with a happy song on his lips, the merry buffoon with a bitter pain in his heart, the clown who does all the antics demanded by the audience — Nils Ferlin has much in common with these well-known types. He can call himself "God's minstrel," "a small and feeble artist", and, like his predecessor François Villon, "the vagabond of poetry."

Nils Ferlin was born in Karlstad, and grew up in Filipstad in the Swedish province of Värmland — a province of fairy-tales, humor, and dashing cavaliers — which had also witnessed the births of Gustaf Fröding and Selma Lagerlöf. It has been said of Lagerlöf's gloriously talented, but wholly depraved hero Gösta Berling, that he is more Russian than Swedish, and this could also be said about Nils Ferlin. He could shift suddenly from deep depression to exuberant *joie de vivre*. He could swing by his arms through a window with the pavement several stories below, or do a cossack dance on a tabletop in a pub — and shortly thereafter sink into a state of melancholy, or write a poem about death. *The ballads of a death-dancer* is the deeply ambiguous title of his first book of poetry (1930).

This complicated emotional makeup, this feeling of intoxication with life, combined with a feeling of its utter brevity, also seems to be a Swedish trait. It has been called a "roseate sorrow" with reference to Carl Michael Bellman, who, in one of his ballads, juxtaposes pneumonia and the springtime of life. Similar utterances may be found in the writings of Fröding, the most beloved Swedish poet in the period between Bellman and Ferlin.

Sweden has become known as the paradise of social welfare, but materially poor as he was, Ferlin did not feel that he unquestionably belonged in this "People's Home." He was a dissident and anarchist from beginning to end. In his native city he was looked upon as a ruffian. When he had finished high school he went to sea, and took varying jobs both in Sweden and abroad. He earned his living as a lyricist and actor with a traveling theatre group before he settled down in Stockholm in the 1930's. There he starved along with the Bohemian journalists and writers in the Klara section, and sold a poem now and then. When his breakthrough as a poet finally came, he could live in a peaceful corner of the Roslagen archipelago outside Stockholm, in a place ironically named Penningby (Moneytown).

The poems of Nils Ferlin are apparently simple — indeed, he had begun his poetic journey as an author of vaudeville hits and popular songs. "I sold songs to the people who needed amusing, and may God forgive me some words I've been using" he wrote apologetically in "A waltz melody". But with this simplicity Ferlin added something new to Swedish poetry, while at the same time identifying with a trend that dominated all of Europe in the 1920's. It became the decade of poetic *Sachlichkeit*, idyls and intimism. His seemingly commonplace words were

charged with deep feeling — and irony. Here, too, we find the complex attitude to life that is deeply characteristic of the author. He was a seeker, and, like "The eccentric Lord of Midnight Hill", he was convinced that "everything is nothing." He longed for the land of death although he knew that he would not find any of the landscape he loved there. He felt concern and commiseration for those who were poorest and most mistreated by life, while at the same time feeling that "the stars cared not whether someone was born or dead."

He characterized himself as a porcupine, which points its quills at the world around him in order to be left alone — although he actually longed for human companionship.

All in all, Nils Ferlin meets us as a human being who is close to all of us, and concerns all of us. His biting satire is aimed at boasting about material progress and false welfare ideals.

"Evolution" (*Barfotabarn*, 1933) is one of his shortest and harshest condemnations of the wrong direction of industrial civilization:

The stone  
the fire  
and the angle-worm:  
three steps  
to Rockefeller.

After his first steps on the road to "culture" — the use of stone implements and fire — man soon learned how to exploit others. The angleworm is a symbol of the exploitation that leads to an industrialized society, where oil has been an important source of power, and Rockefeller one of the magnates of capitalism.

This humble poet was, in fact, a St. Francis of poetry, who sought consolation in the breeze, the fragrance of the flowers, and among the birds of the sky. It is a strange irony that this poet, who vented his scorn on ostentation and worldly pomp, is now himself a statue both in his home city of Filipstad, and in Stockholm, the capital of Sweden, where he once lived as a hobo and Bohemian.

— Helmer Lång

# Four poems by Nils Ferlin

Astray ~ Vilse  
Goggles ~ Goggles  
May I offer you some flowers ~ Får jag lämna några blommor  
Not even the little grey bird ~ Inte ens en grå liten fågel

## Astray

The sun is setting, the moon appears.  
Dreams have led you astray.  
Dreams from lily of the valley years  
Led you so far astray.  
Paths on moors where the thistles bruise  
Now you must tread with tattered shoes.  
Dreams from lily of the valley years  
Led you so far astray.

Translation: Thord Fredenholm and Martin S. Allwood

## Goggles

No, Madam, you are wrong;  
Not snobbishness at all  
Led me to buy my glasses  
— you clever little soul!

But whiteness in the night hours  
And yellowness of day  
Brought sagging shadows to my eyes  
Together with their play.

And so I bought these horn-rimmed things,  
So prominent to view,  
— Out of respect alone, Madam,  
for summer and for you.

Translation by Jeffery Mortensson

## May I offer you some flowers

May I offer you some flowers, a few roses in your care?  
And you must not be so downcast, my dear,  
For these roses I have brought you from a royal garden fair.  
It takes a sword to approach them there so near.

And one of them is white, and the other one is red,  
But the third one is my best gift, my dear.  
It cannot blossom now, for the giver must be dead.  
That rose is strange and wondrous, my dear.  
It cannot blossom now, for the giver must be dead.  
It shall blossom very long then, my dear.

Translation by Kerstin Hane and Martin S. Allwood

## Not even the little grey bird

Not even the little grey bird  
That sings among green leaves  
Will be there in the life hereafter,  
And for this my heart grieves.

Not even the little grey bird,  
Nor the birch standing white and spare: —  
Yet, this loveliest day of the summer  
I have longed to be there.

Translation: J. M. Nosworthy