



**Le avanguardie
dei Paesi nordici
nel contesto europeo
del primo Novecento**

**a cura di /edited by
Anna Maria Segala
Paolo Marelli
Davide Finco**

**The Nordic Avant-gardes
in the European Context
of the Early 20th Century**

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The Nordic Avant-gardes in the European Context
of the Early 20th Century

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Anna Maria Segala, Paolo Marelli, Davide Finco

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Massimo Ciaravolo

Harry Martinson's Prose Nomadism.
A Comparative Reading of *Resor utan mål, Kap Farväl!*,
and *Vägen till Klockrike*

Harry Martinson is more often recognized as one of the great poets of Swedish modernism, or a particularly lyrical writer at most. It is a positive assessment that implies however the risk of a genre-specific reduction. Lars Ulvenstam, the author of the first monograph on Martinson, defines his novel *Vägen till Klockrike* (1948, *The Road to Klockrike*)¹ as not really a novel, but rather a collection of lyrical-philosophical stories, with neither a plot or a character development (1950, p. 210). According to Kjell Espmark, Martinson's status as a «master» and his translatability into other cultures rest primarily on his nature poetry, as well as on his first autobiographical novel *Nässlorna blommar* (1935, *Flowering Nettle*), and on parts of his late cosmic verse epic *Aniara* (1956) (Espmark 1999, p. 206; Espmark 2005, pp. 177-192). Staffan Söderblom claims that Martinson is a poet even when he writes his best prose; consequently, his novels are not real novels but rhapsodic tales (Söderblom 2002, pp. 41-42, 87, 109, 233-234).

Here I would like to focus on what still seems to be an underrated aspect of Martinson's work, and also express and motivate my preference for it. I argue that Martinson is a great modernist even as a «nomadic» prose writer. I see nomadism as an aspect of the writer's biography but also, and beyond that, as his intellectual stance and literary strategy. Martinson was nomadic, since his life experience, especially as a child and a young man, included constant migration, escape, travel, and even real nomadism as a tramp, but above all because he was able to translate this personal experience into a dynamic, not strictly chronological, non-linear and freer kind of prose; a prose capable (as Martinson's poetry is equally capable) of creating unconventional images and associations, but also a linguistic material that blurs traditional distinc-

¹ *The Road* in English translation (Martinson 1955).

tions between fictional narrative, autobiography, travelogue, poetry, essay and social reportage (cf. Linder 1967, p. 745, Holm 1974, p. 66). Martinson's shorter or longer prose – his stories and novels – are therefore impure, dialogical and polyphonic narratives in a valuable, Bakhtinian sense: open and capable of moulding different elements and perspectives into one artistic prose form, encompassing an image of the protagonist's self as well as an image of the manifold, contradictory world around it (Bakhtin 1992, p. 259-422).

Such qualities are particularly strong in Martinson's autobiographical travel stories gathered in *Resor utan mål* (1932, Journeys without a Goal) and *Kap Farväl!* (1933, Cape Farewell!),² based on the writer's experience as a sailor and a stoker on the seven seas from 1920, when he was sixteen, to the late 1920s.³ Martinson's nomadic prose returns, with a different mood, in *Vägen till Klockrike* which, in spite of being a later work, depicts a historically earlier form of vagabond life, the tradition of Scandinavian tramps in rural areas. In this essay I will try to connect the earlier books with the later novel, and consider Martinson's descriptions of and reflections on the possibilities of nomadism as a way of life, an intellectual stance and a poetics.

Resor utan mål and *Kap Farväl!* (Martinson 1999) contain stories written in the first person, depicting the condition of a stoker on the overseas cargo boats during the interwar years, a young Swedish man who can also act, according to the various situations, as a sailor in the harbours, a flâneur in the big cities, and occasionally a wanderer, a worker or a tramp in South America. The protagonist and narrator is thus able to take up different roles and perspectives; a healthy instability which gives him a multiplicity of viewpoints, but is made consistent by his hope of becoming a «world nomad» (*världsnomad*), for him the definition of the future intellectual.

The stories do not proceed from one point to another, but offer different entrances and exits; they are tentative, explorative and – to bor-

² *Cape Farewell* in English translation (Martinson 1934).

³ Sending the manuscript of *Resor utan mål* to his publisher Karl Otto Bonnier on 29 June 1932, Martinson defined the book as «dels en reseskildring, dels livsskildring, ingjutet i ett sätt som är min prosaform» (Martinson 2004: 126; «partly a travel description, partly a life description, moulded in a way that is my prose form»). Translations are mine if not mentioned otherwise.

row a term used by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari – rhizomatic, in the sense of non-linear and non-chronological, without a clear centre or hierarchy, whereby each part can be connected with other parts by way of associations, returns and repetitions (Deleuze, Guattari 1980, pp. 9-37). The amazing, manifold beauty of the world is embraced by Martinson's open, fluid dynamism, which determines the modernistic mood, theme and programme of his stories, as well as their form.

The practices that Deleuze and Guattari call «nomadism» and «de-territorialization» (1980, pp. 34-36, 434-527) offer, in Martinson's travel books, opportunities for ethical and psychic growth. As the narrator observes, the fact that sailors experience three or four different cultures each month, makes individual, static viewpoints necessarily plural and unstable (Martinson 1999, p. 68). In particular, the text in *Resor utan mål* and *Kap Farväl!* is erratic and open in the sense that, without ever becoming contradictory, it encompasses a consciously ambivalent attitude towards modernity, intertwining moments of euphoric visions of future possibilities, especially for the intensification and acceleration of psychic life, with other moments of concerned social critique, and with the problematic perception of a world that is, still after World War I, mainly driven by a relentless quest for profit, exploitation of man by man, and blind faith in linear, material progress, defined as a «stupid ingenjörreligion» (Martinson 1999, p. 257; «stupid religion of machinery» in Martinson 1934, p. 159).

Moreover, the narrator is aware that his nomadic existence is ultimately determined by capitalism, which exploits him as a worker. From the point of view of shipping, capitalism is indeed problematically depicted in the stories as the greatest nomad of all, with labour and workplaces at its disposal on a globalized scale.⁴ It seems as if it is precisely the dreary awareness of post-war chaos and of the criminal appetites of capitalism that produces, by way of reaction, the individual's energetic and vitalistic move towards an open, possible vision of the future. Linguistic inven-

⁴ Cf. Larsson 2004, p. 7 with reference to Martinson. What Rosi Braidotti writes about our present time in her *Nomadic Theory* applies also to Martinson's experience in the interwar period: «[...] advanced capitalism is the great nomad par excellence in that it is propelled by the mobility of goods, data, and finances for the sake of profit and commodification. This profit-oriented, perverse nomadism translates into socioeconomic terms in the so-called flexibility of the working force» (Braidotti 2011, p. 17 and, similarly, pp. 25-26).

tions, openness, joyful curiosity, the confident dream of the world as possibility, and the work of daydreaming counterbalance the pessimism originating from a historically and socially keen eye. In other words, the vision of a «line of escape»⁵ from the present state of things is a driving force in *Resor utan mål* and *Kap Farväl!*, but it is never escapist or naïf.

Martinson's language in his programme of world nomadism conveys an inimitable avant-garde flavour, and although it is more evocative than factual, its hope of liberation from bourgeois shallowness, psychic constraints, repression, monolithic and linear thinking through a form of intellectual internationalism cannot be misunderstood. Martinson speaks – after the world catastrophe caused by imperialism and nationalism – of a «wandering religion» and a «worldwide social task of our feet», imagining a dynamic cooperation and organization for the human race, so that everyone can become a «healthy nomad», a «spiritually and motionally universal individual» (Martinson 1999, pp. 10-11).

Why are these journeys «without a goal»? Söderblom gives an answer which I, again, find reductive. We know that Martinson's mother abandoned him and his siblings in rural Sweden when they were children, in order to emigrate to the United States. Söderblom explains that Harry probably wrote her a wire on his arrival in New York as a sailor in order to meet her, but since she never answered, his journey became meaningless in terms of a goal (Söderblom 2002, pp. 52-54, 56). This biographical bias implies a simplification and underestimation of literary quality. Martinson's «journeys without a goal» indicate, on the contrary, a valuable formal and structural principle of his stories (Holm 1974, pp. 115-117), in addition, an ethical idea of vitalistic becoming, which in Swedish interwar literature has been memorably expressed by Karin Boye's short poem *I rörelse* (Boye 1927, p. 66, In Motion).⁶

Deleuze and Guattari see the rhizome as a structure always in the making, in the middle, in between, whereby questions such as «where are you going to?» and «where are you coming from?» are useless (1980,

⁵ «Line of escape» (*ligne de fuite*) is another concept frequently employed by Deleuze and Guattari in *Mille plateaux* (1980).

⁶ Martinson and Boye were close friends. Like several other Swedish colleagues, Martinson was shocked by Boye's suicide in April 1941, and interpreted it in the light of the distressing historical times they were going through, with totalitarianism and a new world war. See Martinson's letter to Ebbe Linde, written on the day of Boye's funeral (Martinson 2004, pp. 269-272) and cf. Espmark 2005, pp. 24, 164.

p. 36). The Scottish-French writer Kenneth White, who refers to Deleuze's philosophy, but also finds significant inspiration in Martinson's *Voyages sans but* (*Resor utan mål* in French translation, 1974), observes likewise that the nomadic movement does not follow a linear logic, with a beginning, a middle, and an end; everything is «middle» (White 1987, pp. 12, 40-46). We are not something given once and for ever, but continuously become something, even thanks to those «powers of affirmation» which make us move beyond our own sorrow, and meet the manifold world and others in a vital practice of exchange (Braidotti 2011, pp. 20-22, 288-298).

Autobiographical flashbacks, even concerning Martinson's most painful experience – being abandoned, and hungering for female, motherly warmth – are, to be sure, not omitted in his stories. But the conclusive signature in *Kap Farväl!* shows that the narrator refuses to be reduced to his destiny as an abandoned child, and that the most intense pain can give him the courage to become something else. The end of the two travel books affirms a faith in steady and constant change, represented by the benevolent trade wind (*passad*), which will recur as a powerful, cosmic symbol in Martinson's later works:

Vårt ideal skulle vara icke stiltjen, som kan göra själva havet till ett kärr; och inte orkanen, men den stora, starka *passaden*, väldig, full av lust, frisk och levande: en evig och ständig vädring.

Så säger jag, en stark förlorad son, som stod upp och vägrade att vara förlorad. (Martinson 1999, p. 293; italics in the original)

Our ideal should not be the calm, which can turn the very ocean to a stagnant pool, nor the hurricane, but the mighty *trade-wind*, fresh, life-giving and unfailing.

So say I, a lost son who stood up and refused to be lost [...]. (Martinson 1934, pp. 205-206)

As mentioned before, Martinson is aware that the ships he works on have become floating factories in the age of high capitalism – or, as he writes, «distanssmedjor och sjömilfabriker» (Martinson 1999, p. 45; «distance smithies and nautical mile factories»), which also compels him to consider his nomadic euphoria in a more sober light.⁷ A chal-

⁷ Deleuze and Guattari consider the sea as the foremost open, «smooth» space (*espace*

lenge remains however for the modern subject, that of trying to be «worthy of what happens to us» (Braidotti 2011, pp. 291-294), i.e. a subject and not simply a passive victim of the social processes.

Walking through the city of Antwerp, the protagonist sees a revolver made of gold and silver in a shop-window, whereby he understands that profit and war remain the driving forces in our world. His answer to this low factuality is, again, visionary, programmatic and poetical; he refers namely to the need for a long-term, patient pedagogy «under the whistling of trees in a thousand open air schools», as well as to the need for deeper self-analysis and self-knowledge, in order to introduce «nomadic life», «the great, worldwide task of communications» (Martinson 1999, p. 28).

Although Martinson never adores machines, he also thinks, as in the story *S/S Poljana*, that modern communication and technological means can contribute positively to the nomadic times to come; as a matter of fact, Martinson does not at all demonize machines, at least not here, not yet. He looks for what he calls a geosophy, something that can preserve and promote the species, but also «intensify» the human psyche. Twentieth-century modernity offers in this respect unsuspected resources for our psycho-biological evolution, and the narrator concludes that civilization can be a device *at our disposal*, for the sake of introducing a planetary, fecund nomadism (Martinson 1999, p. 74; cf. Espmark 2005, pp. 151 sqq.).⁸

Martinson's emphasis on human responsibility and choice shows that his provisional acceptance of technology is not acritical, and quite far from either the fervid and progressive homage to modern machines to be found in his friend and colleague Artur Lundkvist's work⁹ or the blind glorification of machines and war (ultimately of fascist violence)

lisse), in opposition to constricted, «striated» space (*espace strié*), but observe also that the sea was the first space to be made «striated» through fixed routes and given directions (1980, pp. 449-450, 481).

⁸ Braidotti's idea in *Nomadic Theory* is near Martinson's on this point (Braidotti 2011, pp. 76-77), as she speaks of a «process of negotiations and constructive dialogue with the technocratic cultures of our days» (Braidotti 2011, p. 122).

⁹ See for instance Lundkvist's manifesto poem *Vi måste lära de nya melodierna* (We Must Learn the New Melodies) in the collection *Spart stad* (Black City) (Lundkvist 1930, p. 14), or Lundkvist's short essay on Martinson in the magazine *Spektrum* (Lundkvist 1932).

we find in Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's futurism (cf. Holm 1974, pp. 45-77).

Martinson's early nomadism as a deterritorialized, movable mode of perception is found in every passage of *Resor utan mål* and *Kap Farväl!* and in every aspect of the tangible world he depicts. An example is his description of the Indian cress, a flower called *krasse* in Swedish. It is found in the story *Buenos Aires* in *Resor utan mål*. The narrator, while his ship is laid up in the Argentine capital, sees the flowers grown by the captain in boxes on the roof of his cabin. The narrator is proud of them, because he himself brought the fertile earth on board when the ship was in Paranagua, Brazil. Of course the Indian cress comes originally from India, but the captain has gotten the seeds at a garden in Odense, Denmark, from a beautiful (and motherly) woman (Martinson 1999, pp. 93-94). In nomadic fashion, at least three continents take part in this single manifestation, connecting different people and elements in a life-giving exchange.

Some scholars have shown a tendency to underrate the meaning of «nomadism» in Martinson's oeuvre, or rather, they have been sceptical about it as utopia, theory, philosophy (cf. Linder 1967, pp. 745-746; Söderblom 2002, p. 56; Espmark 2005, pp. 29-35). On the other hand, Ingvar Holm's analysis shows how central the figures of the nomad and the vagabond were in social reality, Martinson's biography and modernistic art (Holm 1974, pp. 78-122; Holm 1999). In addition, we should not forget the aesthetic relevance of manifestos in modernistic and avant-garde movements. Martinson's «world nomad» is part of a manifesto strategy, and it is noteworthy that this concept engages three main contemporary Swedish writers such as Artur Lundkvist, Ivar Lo-Johansson and Eyvind Johnson in a serious discussion about its possible meanings. The discussion took place in the sixth issue of the modernistic journal *Spektrum* (1932), a special feature issue dedicated to Harry Martinson. Lundkvist admits that Martinson's attitude to modernity does not wholly correspond to his own affirmative view; it is however important for Lundkvist to include Martinson's world nomadism in an avant-garde agenda, characterized by echoes of futurism, vitalism and psychoanalysis:

Blommor och moderliga kvinnor. Martinson är en modernist som inte bara älskar teknik och maskiner. Kanske älskar han ej alls teknik och maskiner.

Men han glömmer inte att maskinerna finns, att de är nödvändiga och ofrånkomliga, att de är framtidens väg till blommor och kvinnor. (Lundkvist 1932, p. 17)

[...]

I en bok som Martinson arbetar med utvecklar han sin teori om världsnomaden, byggd på idéer som glimtade fram redan i skansarnas samtal, i sjömannens famlande funderingar över sin tillvaro och sin uppgift. Ständiga universella relationer, den förborgerligande bofasthetens ersättande med en modern, internationell nomadtillvaro, det är uppfattningens perspektiv. Och Martinson tror att utvecklingen rör sig i den riktningen. Och naturligtvis tror han att diktingens rörelseriktning är densamma. (Lundkvist 1932, p. 19)

[...]

För modernisterna gäller det mer och mer att fånga den nya episka rytmens sugande magi, den må handla om maskiner, psyken, förflugit liv eller blommor. (Lundkvist 1932, p. 21)

Flowers and motherly women. Martinson is a modernist who does not simply love technology and machines. Or perhaps he does not love technology and machines at all. But he does not forget that machines exist, that they are necessary and inevitable, that they are the future path to flowers and women.

[...]

In a book he is working on Martinson develops his theory of the world nomad, based on ideas that shone forth already during the discussions in the forecabin, in the sailors' tentative ideas about their existence and task. Constant universal relations, replacing bourgeois settlement with a modern, international nomadic existence, that is the outlook. Martinson believes that development is moving in that direction. And he believes of course that the movement of literature goes in the same direction.

[...]

For the modernists it is increasingly a matter of grasping the tempting magic of the new epic rhythm, whether it deals with machines, the psyche, erratic life or flowers.

While Lundkvist is thus in tune with Martinson's nomadism, Lo-Johansson, being closer to a more traditional social realism, remains sceptical and considers the concept as too vague and lyrical for him:

Jag bekänner gärna att jag aldrig helt tyckt mig kunna inse betydelsen av Martinsons teori om Världsnomaden. Jag har njutit intensivt av den som lyrik men också som av en, en smula diffus, hypotes. [...] «Världsnomaden»

har för honom helt enkelt blivit föränderlighetens – naturligtvis absolut ofixerbara – princip. Sådant är icke lätt att fästa på någonting så «statiskt» som trycket på en boksida. (Lo-Johansson 1932, p. 33)

I must confess that I have never been completely able to understand the meaning of Martinson's theory of the World Nomad. I have enjoyed it intensely as poetry, but also as a rather blurred hypothesis. [...] To him the «World Nomad» has simply become the principle of changeableness – which is of course absolutely undeterminable. Such a thing is not easy to fix on something so «static» as the print on a book page.

Finally, Johnson seems to me as the one who can grasp a more profound feature of Martinson's «world nomadism» and see it as an erratic, but at the same time very realistic perception of our modern existence, where the journey in itself is more relevant than its possible final goal:

Världsnomadens rike är ingen utopi. Det finns. Hos Harry Martinson finns det i en stämning genomstrålad av verklighet.

Harry Martinsons resor har inte dominerats av kappsäcken. Därmed menar jag, att han inte rest ut för att – som det står i sedelärande levnadsbeskrivningar – samla erfarenheter och förbereda sig till stora gärningar. Det förefaller mig att han rest ut ändå och på samma sätt som när livet sänder ut en av sina oväntade bifloder: utan bestämt mål. Resa så blir då att leva, ett sätt att leva. (Johnson 1932, p. 43)

The realm of the world nomad is not a utopia. It exists. In Harry Martinson it exists in a mood that is permeated by reality.

Harry Martinson's journeys have not been dominated by the suitcase, by which I mean that he has not set off on a journey – as you can find in moral biographies – in order to gather experiences and get ready for great achievements. It still seems to me that he has set off, and in the same way life creates one of its unexpected tributary streams: without a definite goal. Travelling thus becomes living, a way of living.

Another outstanding modernistic fellow writer, Gunnar Ekelöf, observes in his penetrating review of *Vägen till Klockrike*: «Alla Martinsons böcker är strängt taget luffarböcker» (Ekelöf 1949, p. 56; «All Martinson's books are strictly speaking tramp books»). Nomadism continued in fact to attract Martinson after *Resor utan mål* and *Kap Farväl!*, as both an intellectual and ethical stance, a literary motif, and a formal

principle of his prose. When *Vägen till Klockrike* was published in 1948, the author had been writing and gathering material for it for more than ten years, and several stories about the tramp Bolle were left out in the final version (Ekelöf 1949, p. 57; Ulvenstam 1950, pp. 207-209; Olsson 1998).

As mentioned before, the novel deals with a former, and even more regional, kind of nomadism than the one depicted in the world travel books from the 1930s. Bolle is a Swedish worker in a cigar factory when he decides to leave it for good in 1898. He has crafts skills, and rebels against the increasingly dehumanizing and mechanical work in the factory, longing for freedom, nature, fresh air and authenticity.¹⁰ The novel, undoubtedly influenced by Martinson's own experiences as a tramp, is not directly autobiographical, but rather a historical, sociological, and at the same time poetical reading of the phenomenon of the tramps in Scandinavia, in Swedish called *luffare*.¹¹ These tramps were marginal groups and individuals who wandered from village to village in the Scandinavian countryside, and through its wilderness, either hiring themselves out for occasional labour or begging in order to survive.¹²

Bolle's rupture is radical, in the sense that he will not become a seasonal, summer tramp, but a «professional» one (*yrkesluffare*), which implies overwintering in the Nordic countryside and never coming back to «civilization». Although the plot is not linear and consists of episodes concerning the life of Bolle and other companions of his, a chronological development is outlined. Bolle tramps from the end of the nineteenth century, when he is twenty-eight (Martinson 1998, p. 24; Martinson 1955, p. 34), to the time when the diffusion of cars, even in the Swedish countryside, has made tramps anachronistic and redundant,¹³ presumably, therefore, until the 1930s. Martinson's historical recon-

¹⁰ See the first part *Cigarmakarna* (Martinson 1998, pp. 5-34), in English *The Cigar Makers* (Martinson 1955, pp. 17-41).

¹¹ Ekelöf summarizes the combination of personal experience and historical perspective in *Vägen till Klockrike*, and defines it «ett slags självporträtt på avstånd» (Ekelöf 1949, p. 56; «a kind of self-portrait at a distance»).

¹² This Scandinavian tradition (Gotaas 2001; Magnusson 2006) is therefore different from the American one of the hobos, who mainly crossed the US by train or lived in big cities (Anderson 1961).

¹³ See the chapter *Den stora tidens våg* (Martinson 1998, pp. 314-320), in English *The Great Wave* (Martinson 1955, pp. 264-270).

struction is correct and reliable (cf. Andersson 2007). Throughout the novel the narrator connects Bolle's individual experience as a *luffare* with the condition of modernity: a time of social upheavals, transformations and mass migrations – when a small minority decide to step outside of established, linear «progress» and live in their own nomadic way, back to nature.¹⁴ Thus Martinson's tramps embody, in a way that can intertwine the sociological and the poetical dimensions, a threshold experience between pre-modern and modern times.

The structure of the novel as a chain of linked but self-contained episodes is introduced, alongside the novel's subject matter, in the chapter *Luffaren Bolle* (Martinson 1998, pp. 40-41), *Bolle the Tramp* (Martinson 1955, pp. 48-49). In summer Bolle is chased by swarms of midges; in a similar fashion, and through one of Martinson's surprising metaphors, «swarms of memories» (*svärm av minnen*) follow the tramp all the time he is walking. Memories prove to be Bolle's only property; a unique, nomadic experience gathers in him – a baggage that is difficult to share with «normal» people. The episodes in the novel communicate these experiences and memories from a tramp's life, whether they have Bolle as a protagonist, or one of his wandering companions, or a tramp Bolle does not personally know but has heard about within the oral culture shared by his community. It is of course up to each reader to decide whether the episodes remain «rhapsodic», or whether they create a coherent narrative. In my view, Bolle's consciousness is always present to the reader's mind even when he does not take part in the action, and this makes *Vägen till Klockrike* a well-functioning albeit peculiar novel about an individual as well as about a social group; Bolle's memory is also a minority's collective «countermemory» (cf. Braidotti 2011, pp. 32-33, 41-43). Besides, as swarms of midges are light and airy, so the narrative in *Vägen till Klockrike* appears – in spite of the pain, hardship and problematic views it can convey – free, light and nomadic: non-linear but rhizomatic.

Vägen till Klockrike embeds the experience of the author's growing pessimism about the destiny of human kind, our civilization and the

¹⁴ *Tilbage til naturen* (1945, Back to Nature), is the title of a painting by The Danish artist Storm P. (Robert Storm Petersen), who loved representing vagabonds. *Tilbage til naturen*, in particular, works as a perfect illustration of Bolle's choice (Brandt, Westergaard 2012; courtesy of Storm P. museet).

Earth during the 1930s and 1940s. The nostalgic aspect of the novel (looking back to a time where tramping in the countryside was still possible) can be explained in this respect. Modern technology is no longer seen by Martinson, as it could still be seen in *Resor utan mål*, as a set of devices at our disposal; but as something altogether negative. Social massification and standardization, global war and mass destruction are historical realities that make Martinson's openness and hope, as they still appeared in the travel books of the early Thirties, definitively impossible. «Civilization» as such is a concept to be totally rejected.¹⁵ Two essays/stories published in 1940 and 1941 give evidence of Martinson's crisis: *Verklighet till döds* (Mortal Reality) and *Den förlorade jaguaren* (The Lost Jaguar) (both in Martinson 2001). They may not make pleasant reading, owing to the author's misanthropy, but they are relevant for understanding the change of mood in *Vägen till Klockrike*. Looking back to the «cult of life» (*livsdyrkan*) of his own generation during the 1930s, Martinson's alter ego in *Verklighet till döds*, Holger Tidman, thinks retrospectively, now that World War II has broken out and the Soviet Union is attacking Finland, that such a cult was a desperate enterprise, although an inevitable one, as you can never live on your worst fears, even if you happen to be «in the shadow of death's dale» (*i dödsskuggans dal*) (Martinson 2001: 36).¹⁶

Bolle's historically earlier experience still allows a margin of freedom, but even this experience is controversial and open to different interpretations. Wandering does give him epiphanies in nature and in touch with the elements of the universe, situations of authentic human dialogue and exchange, ample perspectives and, on the whole, a form of healthy existential instability. Nevertheless, the tramp's nomadism is at the same time depicted as the opposite of freedom, a form of hopeless self-annihilation, a blind alley and a sort of unreality (*overklighet*). The fear of depending on «normal» people's, i.e. the farmers' mercy; the fear of being exposed to their recriminations for not being productive; the

¹⁵ Martinson is moving towards the dystopian vision of *Aniara*. A fundamental contribution in this sense, which can set Martinson's experiences and standpoints in the light of the cultural debate and the historical events from the 1930s to the 1950s, is the chapter *Civilisationskritik* in Wrede 1965, pp. 139-163.

¹⁶ About *Verklighet till döds* see also Hannus 1996.

fear of causing fear, especially in women: all this creates a particularly constricted, repetitive and shadowy life.¹⁷

As the narrator argues, much depends on how we define «reality», i.e. on who has the power to determine what «reality» is, whether the majority's mortal reality of efficient production and linear development, or the minority's experience of an erratic, fragmentary, but in the end more comprehensive and meaningful reality.¹⁸ As Hans Lindström has convincingly argued, Bolle's life expresses also a vital element of refusal and rebellion against monological truths (Lindström 1993, pp. 169-187).¹⁹ Bolle's defiance of disciplinary order through constant border crossing is, by the way, another substantial element of the novel's plot, since the tramps were not allowed, according to the vagrancy laws of that time, to pursue their activity outside a given district, whereas Bolle habitually wanders throughout the Scandinavian peninsula, both in Sweden and Norway.

The tramp's nomadic reality (or unreality) is finally affirmed against all odds in the novel. It is a deep, erratic knowledge that is not applicable to anything «practical», and is therefore simply disregarded as «unreal» and «improbable» by the majority of people.²⁰ Bolle's greatest regret is precisely that his nomadic knowledge, gained through constant threshold crossing between the old and the new, is irrelevant to most people:

Luffaren gick dagligen mellan det nya och det gamla. På byvägen var han i det gamla, på skogsvägen i det skrockfulla, men samma dag kunde han vara mitt inne i det industriella. [...]

Människan består av sina perspektiv. Luffaren hade många, kanske alldeles för många. Hans vägar voro nätverk och hans vyer det vandrande utsikts-

¹⁷ See for instance Martinson 1998, pp. 40-42 (in the chapter *Luffaren Bolle*), 75-79 (i.e. the chapter *Rädslan*); Martinson 1955, pp. 48-50 (in the chapter *Bolle the Tramp*), 77-80 (i.e. the chapter *Fear*).

¹⁸ Ekelöf defines *Vägen till Klockrike* «höstens stora, av mänsklighets- och evighetsperspektiv sammanhållna fragmentsamling» (Ekelöf 1949, p. 56; «last autumn's great collection of fragments, made coherent by its perspectives on humanity and eternity»).

¹⁹ Also Ekelöf's characterization of the novel as both «militant» (*kämpande*) and «pacifistically resigned» (*pacifistiskt resignerad[le stämningar]*) is precise (Ekelöf 1949, pp. 56-57).

²⁰ See for instance Martinson 1998, pp. 118-119 (in the chapter *De egendomliga*); Martinson 1955, pp. 111-112 (in the chapter *Queer Ones*).

tornets. Ja, strängt taget var yrkesluffaren den mest erfarna typ av levande och vandrande utsiktstorn som Sverige någonsin ägt eller kommer att äga. Han var full ända in i själen av perspektivuppfattningar, sina egna och andras, och hade en enorm kunskap av ett slag som inte gick att omsätta eller tillämpa. Och det kanske var detta som var det svåraste, och stundom det bittraste för honom, att själva hans erfarenhet var hemlös, emedan de bofasta aldrig hade bruk för hans pussel av verklighet utan i stället spottade på den och misstänkliggjorde den. (Martinson 1998, p. 220, chapter *Trollgårdens i Brandvaal*)

The tramp went daily between the present and the past. On the country roads he was in the past, on the forest road in the dark ages, yet that same day he might be right in the midst of industry. [...]

Man is made up of his experiences. The tramp had many, perhaps far too many of them. His ways were networks and his views those of a walking look-out tower. Yes, strictly speaking the professional tramp was the most experienced type of living and itinerant look-out tower that the Realm had ever possessed, or would ever possess. He was stuffed to the very soul with the things he had seen and those of which he had heard from others, and he had an enormous knowledge of a sort that could never be applied or put to use. It was perhaps that which was the hardest, and at times the bitterest for him, that even his experience was homeless, since those who lived in houses never had any use for his jig-saw of reality, but instead spat upon it and cast suspicion on it. (Martinson 1955, pp. 192-193, chapter *The Magic Farmstead*)

In an international perspective, thanks to the circumstances that have made nomadism a meaningful word in contemporary philosophy and literary studies – and even to the fact that Deleuze and Guattari are inspired by twentieth-century avant-garde art and literature – we can go back to the 1930s and 1940s and appreciate Nobel laureate Martinson's early definitions of nomadism as an ethical, intellectual and literary strategy, an attempt made while never ignoring the highly risky modernity we live in, but also trying to resist the dark side of twentieth-century civilization. However marginal and minoritarian, the idea of resistance against established hierarchies – for instance those which determine the meaning of «progress» – is important in Deleuze and Guattari's idea of nomadism (1980, pp. 434-527). On the other hand, the «powers of affirmation» connected with Braidotti's idea of «becoming nomadic» (2011, pp. 288-298) can be found in *Resor utan mål* and *Kap Farväl!*,

whereas Bolle's melancholy and resignation seem far from those powers.

Such perspectives help us avoid a reductive biographism when studying Martinson's work, evaluating on the contrary his attempt to balance pessimism with vitalism against all odds in the interwar period, and eventually considering his more resigned views after World War II. If we look at the «nomad» beyond Martinson's biography and beyond the specific profession of his nomadic characters (sailor/stoker and tramp respectively), but rather as a figure of the cosmopolitan intellectual who fights for a modern humanism, not enslaved by blind rationality, technocracy, materialism and profit-searching, it is clearly more difficult for the older writer – after experiencing both world wars – to believe in a socially progressive mission for nomadism. Only a form of residual resistance is possible.

Finally, the fact that Martinson's lyrical mastery is to be found abundantly also in his prose works should not make us forget that his collections of travel stories *Resor utan mål* and *Kap Farvält*, as well as his novel *Vägen till Klockrike*, are narratives that work magnificently as such in their own modernistic fashion.

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Abstract: The Swedish writer Harry Martinson worked with the idea of the “world nomad” (*världsnomad*) during the first years of his activity (1929-1933). It was based on both his experience as a traveller, a tramp and a sailor, and on the literary impulses coming from the avant-garde environment in which he was formed. Nomadic writing indicates for Martinson a lack of goal and belonging, allowing to stop and observe in a new way. The nomad is a writer who opens himself to the big world in order to encompass its multiplicity, and his vital energy represents an answer to the anxiety for the destiny of the world in the interwar period. Eventually, after World War II, Martinson would again resort to nomadism in his novel about the Swedish tramps, with a more pessimistic outlook. Considering the fact that nomadism has become a meaningful word in recent philosophical and aesthetical discourse (Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Kenneth White, Rosi Braidotti), I present and analyse Martinson’s literary practice as for the possibility it offers to intertwine existential perspective and social consciousness, and as for the interaction at a formal level of lyrical, narrative and essayistic elements. My hope is that I may contribute to a fairer assessment of Martinson’s relevant results as a prose writer of Swedish modernism, and not only as one of its major poets.

Keywords: Harry Martinson, Swedish modernism, modernist prose, nomadism, *Resor utan mål* (Journeys without a Goal), *Kap Farväl!* (Cape Farewell!), *Vägen till Klockrike* (*The Road*).

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