

“ON NOMADIC SHORES INWARD”: HARRY MARTINSON’S JOURNEY TO LATE-LIFE SUICIDE

BY DAVID TITELMAN

The aim of this study was to explore the unconscious dimensions of suicide as conveyed by the Swedish writer Harry Martinson, who took his life in 1978, four years after having received the Nobel Prize in Literature. A psychoanalytically informed “listening” to Martinson comprised a close reading of his writings, reflection on my total response to the material, the application of psychoanalytic hypotheses on severe depression and suicide-nearness, and the study of biographical sources. The dramatic fluctuations of Martinson’s self-regard were noted, as was the juxtaposition of opposites in his poetry: darkness that seeps through observations of the beauty of nature and man or the reverse, a gleam of love that defuses the cruelty of the world. Martinson’s drive to communicate with himself and others by talking and writing, to find auxiliary objects compensating for the traumatic losses of his childhood, and to realize mature love in adulthood was understood as a counterforce to self-destructiveness and threatening narcissistic disintegration. Pressured by negative reactions to the Nobel, which overlay decades of envy and

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political critique from colleagues, whose support he coveted, Martinson's aggressivity—reflecting the near soul murder of his early life—exploded in his suicide.

Keywords: Harry Martinson, suicide, creativity, narcissism, aggressivity, object relations, depression, Nobel Prize.

After deservedly but also, according to some, scandalously receiving the Noble Prize in literature 1974, the Swedish writer Harry Martinson at age seventy turned silent. The alleged scandal was that he, like Eyvind Johnson, with whom he shared the prize, was a member of the Swedish Academy, the institution that had bestowed it. "Derision and laughter roll around the globe in response to the academy's. . . corruption and will sweep away the reputation of the prize," one critic wrote (Delblanc 1974, cited by Espmark 2005a). Four years later Martinson irreversibly quieted himself by slitting his abdomen with a pair of scissors seized at the psychiatric clinic of the Karolinska Hospital in Stockholm where, severely depressed and possibly in a state of confusion, he had been taken by friends.

This study is an inquiry into the psychological dimensions of Martinson's journey towards its grim end. My first aim is to elucidate the unconscious determinants of suicide as conveyed in his writings. A second aim is to introduce him, a rarely translated poet of great distinction, to English-speaking psychoanalytic readers. My method is to "listen" to Martinson by (a) closely reading his works and correspondence as well as selected biographical material, (b) making use of my affective response to his texts, and (c) applying relevant theories on severe depression and suicide in understanding the material at hand.

The applied theoretical frame rests on the three dimensions of the unconscious psychology of severe depression outlined by Freud (1917) and further elaborated by, among other psychoanalytic writers, Green (1986), Grunberger (1979), Kernberg (2004), Salonen (2018), and Segal (1993): unintegrated narcissism, self-destructiveness or aggression, and unsatisfactory internal object relations. Borrowing from Strindberg, Ibsen, and Freud's *Schreber* (1911), Shengold (1989, 2013) supplemented the metapsychological perspectives on radical despair with the experience-near term *soul murder*, a concept that is also expected to be relevant.

Contributions by additional writers will, I hope, be justly credited along the way, albeit that the application of theory in this work is tacit. The primary focus is on Martinson's own formulations.

Using the outlined method, I have earlier (2006) addressed the fate of another writer, Primo Levi, whose death at age sixty-nine was a probable suicide. Having survived a year as an inmate of a Nazi extermination camp at age twenty-four, Levi for the rest of his life was tormented by memories and vulnerable to renewed narcissistic insult related to this experience (e.g., the denial of the realities of the Holocaust by revisionist historians), a predicament that can be compared to Martinson's experiences. The aim of this study is, however, not to compare the two writers in a systematic fashion but to replicate the method of the previous study in a similar-enough empirical context.

Two of the chosen inroads to depression, unintegrated narcissism, and aggression turned against the self, were salient in Levi's writings. Although inconsistently effected—his reflections on the links between his relations with others in the camp and his sense of self are germinal—Levi's efforts to restrict his readers' view of his most intimate relationships limited our freedom to apply an object-relations perspective to his attitude to suicide. I expect that Martinson's more explicitly autobiographical writings will add to our understanding in this regard.

TO TALK OR NOT TO TALK

Overcoming an impulse of my own to remain silent and refrain from again (as in the Levi study) exploiting the suicide-nearness of an admired writer and making claims about his death, I begin this exploration from "the surface" by citing a text in which Martinson's conflict between a wish to talk and a wish to be silent is manifest. In *Kap farväl* [*Cape Farewell*] (1933), the second of his two early travelogues about his experiences as a merchant-ship stoker around the globe, in a chapter called "Places where nothing happens"—placed between chronicles of the seemingly more glamorous Balearic Islands in the Mediterranean and La Plata in Buenos Aires—Martinson recounts how he and a companion, a Scandinavian named John, roamed the alleys of the smoggy port of Middlesbrough in East England, daydreaming about women and relaxation from the strain of life at sea. He writes that the port area, a

junkyard filled with dilapidated naval equipment and metal scrap from World War I, seemed empty of life:

The most we could figure out about these heaps of metal was that they consisted of discarded boilers, into which we stared as if they were [empty] wine barrels, and of what remained of an exploded German submarine from the Scapa Flow [the sheltered waters in the Orkney Islands, where a British marine base was located and German war ships were closed in and sunk by the Germans themselves during World War I].

It lay as a dead shark with the tangled remnants of its machinery as intestines. One of its torpedo tubes was almost intact and stared back at us. We threw pieces of junk into the carcass. Straight into the tube! A broken manometer swung back and forth on its copper pipe. We struck it down, too... We grabbed a huge propellor wrench, the kind that weighs about 45 kg, to smash many other objects of the submarine to pieces. We continued this work until we were sweating and exhausted. A pair of childish boy jackals, tired out on the *Campo Santo* of junk from the war.

... We lit cigarettes. Before the match went out, blinded by it, we stumbled over even more junk. "It's got to be another damned submarine shark," John, who had hurt his toe, howled. "No, stop, it's a stone." We lit more matches and held them to the stone, which was formed as a short obelisk. "Here is something to read," said John, "light the matches and shine on it! I guess it's about the steel works. Or, 'here rests the man who invented bacon.'"

We started to read and were filled with the chilling sensation that follows shame. We lit match after match. When. . . our two match boxes were empty, we hadn't read more than one of the four sides of the stone. "Guys from the steel works. They died in the war", said John. "We're out of matches, I said. "We can buy a flashlight up in the dump."

It's dirty and dusty, the dust smears in the humid fog, the ground is full of gravel and mud under the soles of our wide shoes. First coal dust- and dirt-splashed shabby palisades, then housing blocks, shacks—the color of which no-one can define.

Brown, blackish grey perhaps. A paradise for eyes that cannot take bright colors; strangely soothing: lazyish. The life of man probably has three shades: lazy, lazier, laziest. The soul of the environment is like a soaked rat's nest. People pass by full of lazy, heroic proletarian phlegm. England's proletarians are the Chinese of the Western world. . . too many on islands that are too few. Yet, England is the source of the modernity of the West: the industrial epoch.

Most certainly everything must be connected in other ways than people say. Delete the name of England. Delete all names of nations. Life is psychology. Countries are psychology. They exist on different psychological levels and are differently pained by dogmatic ideas. "I'll be damned, if the world. . . doesn't suffer from a personality split in 15-20 different ideals or genders. Or what do you say, John?"

[John:] "Can't you ever stop talking. . .?" [pp. 191-193]¹

Before John asked Harry to shut up a second time and Harry explained that putting thoughts into words is what civilization is about, the two men visited the local general store. The shop attendant was a young woman whom they first approached by asking if there might be a place where they could find girls who like sailors, to which she shyly replied: "I wouldn't think so." She was a girl with "beautiful hands and nails that gleamed like lilies of the valley. No doubt she can play the piano too . . . we hear a piano singing somewhere in the house" (p. 194). Warmed by the visit to the store, a "woman's universe," Martinson continues:

The door closes behind us. . . .Never again in our lives will we meet that girl. . . [Her name may have been] Svea Nilsson, Saya Valcaya, Alice Brown, or any name. Outside is Middlesbrough. . . in East England. I didn't say any of this to John, he would only have told me. . . to shut up once again. [pp. 194-195]

In this passage, central aspects of Martinson's life and writing are evident: the richness of his narrative, his hope for a more rational world

¹ All translations from the Swedish in this article are mine except *Aniara*, the rendering of which is my slightly modified version of an English translation by Martinson, Klass, and Sjöberg (see Martinson 1956).

and a better future for himself, his self-irony, and the shadow over everything he wrote of his mother, who had abandoned him and his six sisters when he was six years old. His self-confidence rings loud here and, even stronger, in the nomadism he preached in this book and the preceding *Travels with no Destination* [*Resor utan mål*] as well as in his breakthrough collection of poems, *Nomad* (1931a). That one senses an underlying conflict between creativity and self-silencing in these texts adds to my appreciation of them. And that Martinson's youthful universalism was a defense against homelessness diminishes neither its moral nor its adaptive value.

THE UNDOING OF A FAMILY

Between ages five and seven Martinson experienced three significant losses: (1) the death of his father, Martin Olofson, an abusive man—Harry remembered the periods when he was home as the worst of his childhood—who in 1910 succumbed to tuberculosis (TB) after having been sent back to Sweden by a physician in Portland, Oregon, where he had fled some years earlier from a prison sentence for violent assault (he was immediately arrested upon his return but released on medical grounds); (2) the departure of his mother, Betty, who in 1911 emigrated to *Karlifonien*, as the six-year-old Harry called it, albeit that she too settled in Portland; (3) the death the same year of his eldest sister Edith, by then a mother substitute who was entrusted with the care of their father and infected by him with TB.

After Betty's departure, her sister Hilda took care of the children but withdrew from this responsibility when she got married a year later. Harry and his six sisters, four older and two younger, were placed and for more than a decade regularly moved between foster homes on farms in *Blekinge* in south-eastern Sweden. Soon after Edith's death and Hilda's retreat, Harry suffered from hallucinations, a symptom that would recur in difficult periods of his "parish wanderings," as he called his childhood after age six (Erfurth 1980; Martinson 1935).

Martinson's childhood has generated several myths. One is that he and his sisters were sold to the lowest bidders at a community auction. An auction was indeed organized, by Hilda, but it was the family's furniture and other belongings that were sold—in the children's presence. A

second myth concerns Betty, who is sometimes said to have abandoned her children out of the blue, acting on an unexplained impulse. However, according to Erfurth (1980), Betty, a woman of middle-class origin and ambitions, during her last years in Sweden struggled hard to manage her absent husband's mismanaged general store and to support her children; she survived several financial crises with the help of relatives. When Martin Olofson died, she had no choice but to again file for bankruptcy, this time without being bailed out by anyone. Edith informed the five-year-old Harry about this, but he didn't know what *konkurs*, the Swedish word for bankruptcy, meant. He sensed that it was something bad that turns downward "like a corkscrew" (Martinson 1935, p. 24) and that additional disaster was looming.

Harry's other two elder sisters, who eventually joined their mother in Portland, told Erfurth (1989) that Betty's reason for emigrating was to retrieve a pension granted to families of deceased employees of the Portland public transport system. In Portland, however, she was informed that the benefit was not applicable in her husband's case. Erfurth presented a more pressing reason for Betty's escape from Sweden: she was pregnant with a child, fathered by a man who was not her husband, a transgression that could be dealt with only by fleeing. On her way to America, in a hospital in Gothenburg, she gave birth to a child that was immediately transferred for adoption. Although Harry several years later told their former housekeeper (who told Erfurth) that he knew about his mother's illicit pregnancy, he kept this to himself and, as far known, never referred to it in his writings.

Briefly visiting his home region in 1921 after his first stint at sea, the seventeen-year-old Harry recognized his youngest sister Mimmi by a village well. She was twelve, but looked like an aged woman, emaciated and with frozen bare feet. He learned that she had carried water for her foster family since age six, although she suffered from an unhealed fractured hip after having fallen under a millstone. Clearly, her fate was worse than his. Thinking about this and about his own demeanor, with ripped trousers and shoes, he was paralyzed by guilt feelings and shame (Erfurth 1981); he would never stop criticizing himself for being self-absorbed and having permitted himself to forget about his sisters' hardship.

A year later, Martinson, now an eighteen-year-old marine stoker, found himself in New York waiting in vain between ships for his mother's reply to a telegram he had sent her in Portland. Bending to her devastating silence but also, I surmise, trying to maintain his idealization of her, he chose never to talk or write about this experience. Nordström (2002), who documented Betty's fate in America, including Harry's actual (external) search for her, nonetheless found references to it in Martinson's sea books. Awed by the American landscape that opened up before him and a coworker named Wallrich as their ship traveled up the Mississippi river, the narrator of *Travels with no Destination* slips: "Here it was, the country to which my mother had run away. . . I began telling Wallrich about it, a bit carelessly, the way you do about things you intend to forget" (Martinson 1932, p. 55). And in *Cape Farewell*, Martinson (1933) concludes that he was driven to write these books by his "formless, wordless longing for California" (p. 293; Nordström 2000, p. 262).

Flowering Nettles

In Martinson's seminal childhood novel *Flowering Nettles* [*Nässlorna blomma*] he describes the protagonist, Martin, as "more stupid at age seven than when he was five and above all more frightened, many times more frightened" (Martinson 1935, p. 47). An abandoned, near-psychotic boy—visibly oedipal, his sexuality is seething—Martin saves himself by means of his intelligence and the support of caring adults whose paths cross his. He sometimes finds solace in the bosoms and warmth of women among the farm-owning families or girls on the lower rungs of the hierarchy of laborers. But his comfort is sometimes marred by strange, instinctively forbidden feelings, even in relation to the immense and sometimes cruel Karla on the farm called Norda, the worst of his provisional homes. There, after having been thrown into a brick wall by one of Karla's brothers, Wilhelm, Martin regains consciousness, feeling that "he no longer wished to have a future" (Martinson 1935, p. 224). He thinks hard about the riddles that confront him, is embarrassed by his own feelings, and hates his own ingratiating smile. He sometimes takes revenge on his tormentors, including the goading women, in fantasies of burning down their farms.

One Sunday in the fall, his contracted day of rest, Martin is ordered by Wilhelm to make bundles of Ash-tree branches for feeding the sheep.

After two hours of hard work a disaster befalls him. Exceedingly lonely, he has the following stream of thought:

Wilhelm had said: forty bundles and then you are free.

God would give Wilhelm half of the punishment, for breaking the Sabbath. At least some consolation.

I better not make them too thin, he thought. And so he made the bundles thick around the bosom, as matrons with a sash of young branches tied around each one of them—a waist.

Best not to make them too thick, he thought. If I do, the bundles won't dry inside. And so he made them thinner, thin even. In this way they turned out uneven. Sheaves of vacillation.

It is a sin to cut down trees, he thought, and let the heavy knife rest in order to make up his mind about how sinful.

It's a sin to starve the sheep too. Sin stands against sin. . . . He approached the glowing moment of reconciliation. The heavy cutter swung, it cut and cut. His thoughts were ever blonder. . . . as if he were in a poster reproduced in a Christmas magazine, harvesting leaves. Wilhelm was almost forgiven by him now and almost forgiven by God.

Then something happened!!!

Yes, something happened under the brightness of the Ash-tree arches, at a time when all real children were comfortably seated in Sunday school.

Unseen, one of the neighbor's grazing calves had entered through a weak part of the fence. Now it reached the sheaves and, ignorant of all evil that resides in "parish orphans", it started eating their leaves. And it did more. It soiled the sheaves in the middle of the stack.

Martin turned around. Discovered what had happened. With a cry of painful rage his soul was pulled back a thousand years into the cold. With a single cut of the heavy knife he split the calf's head. It fell. Ooh! Ooh! With the blood gushing from its forehead it fell dead, without a sound.

And now. Now he danced around the calf. No! No! His despair only made it look that way. His whole body froze with terror. His heart began to pound, to batter him. He beat himself in the face with his fists. Like a madman he ran around the calf in circles and screamed, God! God! God! [Martinson 1935, pp. 130-131, italics in the original]

Martin manages to bury the calf and conceal all traces of blood and of having moved earth from one place to another. When the neighboring farmer queries about the missing calf, Martin lets a louder-voiced farmhand deny knowing anything about it and suggest that the tinkers, who had recently passed by, may have something to do with its disappearance. Martin thanks God for the tinkers, but his guilt feelings accompany him wherever he goes.

As far known, this animal sacrifice did not in fact occur in Martinson's life, beyond his witnessing a pig being slaughtered for Christmas (also retold in *Nettles*). The killing of the calf is, I believe, a fantasized catharsis that mitigated his rage and bolstered the organization and coherence of his mind and sense of self. The profound existential danger that young Martin faced was sensed by Martinson at age thirty, when he published *Nettles*; we encounter it again, in new versions, in his later writings. In *Nettles*, after this incident, when one of the farmer's daughters tells Martin that he looks pale and mild-eyed, his first thought is: "So it shows, they can tell that I am walking around feeling grateful to God." Martinson (the writer) added:

Beneath or over. . .his false appearance he was in another state of mind, which undid. . .annulled, and displaced. Everything in him was in flux; the whole world was moving inside. He was in between Life and Life, between birth and maturity; in his lonely childhood's forbidden semi-life. In a desert. [p. 141]

RECOGNITION

Life Savers (Auxiliary Objects)

Martinson's first publications were poems, submitted 1925-27 to newspapers and labor-union bulletins whose reimbursements were sometimes limited to coffee and sandwiches. Occasional reviews were favorable. But

he was criticized for copying identifiable literary forbears, among them the Canadian Robert W. Service (whose tales from the Gold Rush, Erfurth [1987] tells us, were popular in the North American workers' press), Edgar Lee Masters, Carl Sandburg, and Rudyard Kipling. Driven to develop his craft, Martinson seems to have been stimulated by being likened to his literary heroes.

In the late 19th century, an uncle on Martinson's father's side, Jöns (a.k.a. Olof) Olofsson, published a collection of poetry, titled "Serving Chief" ["*Tjenande Chef*"], under the pen name *Obed Xefe* (again, "serving chief" [Hebr. and Span.]). In a poem written at sea in Antarctica, Obed recalled taking leave of his mother whom he did not expect to meet again: ". . . the salty waves separate her from me, but my mother's tears will not wane" (Erfurth 1980, p. 32). He was said to have died on this trip, on his way to India, at age twenty (Martinson 1945b). Harry read his uncle's poems on printer's scrap, used as wrapping paper in his father's store. I suggest that Obed was the object of a benign primary identification (Freud 1921, 1923; Salonen 2018) who Martinson failed to find elsewhere. If so, it is likely that this internal bond stood in conflict with a concomitant early identification with his raging father, which we may assume played a destructive role in Martinson's life, including in his ultimate self-immolation.

At age eleven, Martinson wrote and put together a book about "American Indians" and read from it to his classmates. The school he attended meant the world to him. He was attached to his teacher, Karl Johan Staaf, an eccentric, unmarried man who was both respected and socially maligned for his unconventional ways. Stav [Swe.: staff, pole], as the children called him, appreciated Harry's intelligence and imagination, including his fantasized adventures across the globe. Yet he warned Harry about lying and encouraged him to continue his explorations by reading. Harry was secretly disappointed when Stav consented to his foster parents' written request that he be exempt from school to work with the harvest; he scorned himself for his feigned gratitude in response to the teacher's positive reply. Learning about Stav's death in 1936, Martinson wrote the following words in his memory:

Yes, Stav was a living human being, and after his death his school continued to rock as a cradle, which was gratefully

preserved in my...soul, across the seas. [What Stav gave me] ... turned out to be limitless and its lesson infinite ... there were times when my gratitude to him was such that, to me, it placed him on the level of men like Columbus, Magellan, Livingston, John Ericson, Sitting Bull...and Jack London. [Susic 2014]

Only a year later Martinson confronted Stav's fallibility as a dependable inner presence. In a nature essay, he recalled how Stav, introducing the children to the symbol of "a mild *passage wind* emanating from the warm seas between the 8th and 30th latitude," managed to calm "the half of. . .[young Harry's] soul [that thrived] in adventure," while he at the same time disregarded that "the other half remained in the boy's private darkness" (Martinson 1937, p. 80; cited by Söderblom 1994, p. 210, italics added). As a young sailor, Martinson's recollections of Stav were even more conflicted:

More than once I was ready to jump, to leave this life, in which one level scrubbed against the other in ways that Stav had never talked about. . . .He sat only on one level, while I restlessly moved from one to the other. . . .The years at sea were ... confusing for a person who sought a plan for unity in the world. [Martinson 1937, p. 81]

On a cold October evening in 1919, in the waiting hall of the Jonsered train station in Western Sweden, Margaret Kjellberg observed a surprisingly young tramp-like beggar. She approached the boy who, noting *her* fearlessness (Martinson 1936), told her that he had spent the night in a barn and asked her for food. He was on his way to Gothenburg to seek work at sea and sail to America, where he hoped to find his mother. Seemingly an experienced boater, the "noble lady," as he called Ms. Kjellberg in his coming-of-age sequel to *Flowering Nettles, Vågen ut [The Way Out]* (1936), said that it was a bad idea to set out to sea in the rough autumn storms. With the understanding that she would recommend him to the owners (her own family), she advised him to seek employment at the Jonsered textile mill the next morning and remain there at least until spring. Following this advice, Harry spent the fall at Jonsered, which to his amazement comprised not only a factory but also a food canteen, social services, and a library for its employees—in

addition to a fairy godmother who looked after him from time to time. In the spring he left for Gothenburg and his first job at sea. For the rest of her life, Margaret Kjellberg continued to assist him, including with financial loans. When he eventually published books, he always sent her a copy, and at his ceremonial appointment as member of the Swedish Academy 1949 she was his personal guest of honor (Kjellberg 1978).

Another formative relationship was with the publishers, father and two sons, Karl-Otto, Tor, and Kaj Bonnier. Although Karl-Otto and Tor were impressed with the poems Martinson submitted in the spring of 1928, they recommended postponing publication until he had assembled a collection that was “as a whole, stronger” (Anderson 2011, p. 20). Sensitive to the tone of their letter rather than the rejection—maintaining a degree of idealization of the senders as well as of himself—Martinson took the counsel to heart, soon resubmitted, and in 1929 published his first major collection of poems, *Spökskepp* [*Ghost Ships*]. The dynamics of this interaction were to be repeated: in 1930–1931, Tor Bonnier wrote no less than four rejection letters in response to Martinson’s different submissions (Anderson 2011). Politely acknowledging each letter and continuing to take them as encouragements, which in fact they were, he (1931) published the widely praised *Nomad*. But Martinson was even more gratified by being included the same year in an anthology, *Modern lyrik* [*Modern Poetry*] (Asklund 1931), that featured modernist Swedish-language poets, including from Finland, foremost Rabbe Enckell whom he considered his most important mentor.

Kjell Espmark (2005b), professor of literature and member of the Swedish Academy, has written that Martinson’s nature poems were indeed inspired by Enckell’s “sensual presence. . . affinity to nature, and magic humanization” (p. 47) without, however, emulating his expressionism; Martinson’s poetic voice, Espmark writes, was profoundly original. One recurring figure of thought I have noted in this poetry is that Martinson lets an initial observation of nature’s cruelty, or of the futility of its creatures’ struggle, be supplemented by a no less organic, contrary force—*Eros*—that at least intermittently neutralizes the destructiveness of the preceding observation. A specimen:

A clock wanders
tonight over the clearings –

Over the forests, mile after mile: the echoing sound of a crow.
 She wakes a fox
 and the moss-covered rock by the lair's dark eye
 watches sinisterly from its shadow.
 But the sun's lizard-like gleam is seen climbing up the trunk
 of the Aspen tree.
 It is in the lingonberries' youth. [Martinson 1931b, p. 165]

POLITICS

During the 1930s, Martinson was hospitalized for tuberculosis, pained by doubts about his marriage, and censored politically, most notably by Ture Nerman (1931), the editor of a communist newspaper, who in a critical review of *Nomad* ridiculed Martinson for his alleged individualism and betrayal of his own social class. The title of Nerman's piece was (in my translation): "From the culture front, pee in the snow and neurotic waterfalls: More 'modern poetry'—enough already." Writer friends protested against Nerman's insults in articles and letters to editors. These exchanges culminated in a public debate on modernism, which Martinson is said to have won by contrasting the slogans of social realism with what he considered true poetry, including that based on the first-hand experience of class differences by the Russian poets Blok and Yessenin (Åberg 1931; Erfurth 1987).

In the late 1940s, a professor of the sociology of literature, Victor Svanberg, emerged as a new inquisitor from The Left. After a series of attacks by Svanberg, Martinson, overcoming his civility—his habitual "ingratiating smile"—at last struck back in a brief communication in a literary journal. His reply was sharp but also seeped in sadness:

From the cradle to the grave controlled numbered, registered, as required every year voluntarily adding my name to the census register to the point of lethal exhaustion, when November comes with loneliness, lung disease, and snow; rationing-loyal since God knows how many years and most likely onward until the day I die. . . . Since many years accused of being a unsocial poet by the professor of esthetics and politics Victor Svanberg. Born into a world that I didn't create and a human society for which I, having been born too late, cannot be held responsible,

in so far that I do not have to atone for the transgressions of my grandmother's grandmother, which also included being born to late, confess that I am who I am. [Ulvenstam 1950, pp. 166-167]

In a conversation in the late 1960s, Martinson confided to Espmark (2005b) that he was “working in the catacombs” (p. 6). Espmark was shocked to find himself listening to an admired colleague who at the peak of his creativity was losing his self-confidence and trust in his own language. Martinson's sense of being neglected by the new generation of writers and critics was no delusion: writing with a political message was the norm among the younger generation of Swedish writers at this time, and in a 1969 newspaper article with the insulting title “Do you remember Harry Martinson?” an aspiring poet questioned whether Martinson's work was genuinely creative or mere “nostalgia. . . without satisfying imagery or interest. . . to a generation awakened by Vietnam” (Håkanson 1969, cited by Espmark 2005b, pp. 8-9).

The most hurtful critic in this period—perhaps throughout Martinson's career—was the politically radical yet also aristocratic editor of *Dagens Nyheter*, Olof Lagercrantz, who had followed Martinson since the 1930s and, according to another member of the Swedish Academy, Lars Gyllensten (2000), contributed to Martinson's demise in 1978. In 1956 Lagercrantz's criticism of *Aniara* reiterated what he had written 20 years earlier about Martinson's “bent for tasteless linguistic constructions” (Anderson 2000, p. 80; Lagercrantz 1936, 1956). While Gyllensten's moral outrage is understandable—he saw Lagercrantz as a leader of a mob that hounded Martinson to his death—a masochistic quality of Martinson's relationship with his lofty critic is also noticeable, for example, in these words in a letter to him: “Thank you for your patience, and your unassuming manner every time you apply the burning coals onto my blockhead's stumbling thoughts” (Martinson 1944, p. 321).

Married to a Communist

Harry first met Moa Swartz, who was fourteen years his senior, in 1927. He had just returned from sea, unemployed and homeless. Moa, to this day—under the name Moa Martinson—a recognized writer in her own right, was charmed by the young poet and provided him with a home in her cottage, some 80 kilometers south of Stockholm. Although friends soon noted Moa's emotional instability and held that it was Harry's

interventions that made her manuscripts publishable, he insisted that the psychological support went both ways. In a letter 1929 he wrote her: "life at last gave me too a heart, the heart for which I hungered all these years" (Erfurth 1989).

The winters were particularly hard, Moa's cabin was cold. Harry suffered from recurring TB symptoms and needed to spend time in sanatoriums. While he fared well from these breaks, they left Moa feeling abandoned and upset. The couple's mounting differences and conflicts culminated in Harry's failed attempt to establish a romantic relationship with another woman and in his subsequent abrupt escape, including from the completed manuscript of *Flowering Nettles*, which he had left on a table exposed to Moa's feared revenge. He had decided to travel to Iceland with the fantasy of ending his life there. En route he corresponded with the Bonniers, keeping them updated on his personal predicament as well as on the completion of *Nettles*, which he knew was the weightiest literature he had written thus far. Bonniers in turn—to Moa's mortification—honored their promise not to reveal Harry's whereabouts and sent him an advance payment, which he retrieved by general delivery in Trondhjem, Norway. After having boarded a ship there for the last stretch of his trip, he received a telegram from Tor Bonnier with a message from Moa: *she* was contemplating suicide and threatened to destroy his manuscript first. Martinson immediately arranged to be disembarked by lifeboat and cabled Bonnier that he was "homesick and guilty and returning immediately" (Erfurth 1989, p. 118).

Later that year, the couple participated in the "First All-Soviet Writers Congress" in Moscow, where Harry was invited as an international delegate. He was disturbed already by the conference motto, "the poet is the engineer of the human soul," and by Stalin's lethal campaigns against his imagined enemies, many of whom were writers. In a plenary lecture the former member of the Soviet *Politburo*, Bukharin (1934), who also had reason to fear for his life, slandered Martinson's admired colleague Yessenin, whose character flaws and ideology were said to be reflected in his poetry as well as in his alleged suicide in 1925. He noted the anguish of Pasternak, who sat on the podium, "looking sad. . .his gaze. . .far away, mentally absent and timeless, fatalistically proud. And Isaac Babel uncannily said to

him that “if we had people with your open face, we wouldn’t have to shoot so many” (Svensson 1980, p. 71)—the atmosphere was maddening. Moa was nonetheless dazzled by the parties and gifts that were showered upon the foreign participants, and uncritically embraced the political charades. After a tortuous return journey through Soviet-occupied Karelia, during which, as Martinson wrote in a letter, “we nearly killed each other” (Anderson, 2011, p. 94), she eulogized the Russian communists in the social-democratic daily, *Stockholmstidningen*, only to be attacked from the Left and the Right for being unfathomably naïve.

Martinson remained silent about his Russian experience as long as he and Moa were married. They separated in 1939, when he had already met Ingrid Lindcrantz whom he was later to marry. The separation was painful for both parties. From Martinson’s correspondence (Erfurth 1987; Martinson 1934) we know that that he consulted a psychoanalyst in the 1930s and 40s, most likely Nils Nielsen, a founding member of the Swedish Psychoanalytic Society in 1934. An indirect documentation of Martinson’s analytic work is his recollection of a nightmare that was eventually structured as poem and published after his death (Martinson 1980), without the suicidal ending of its original form:

I stood in the dream’s cathedral of fear
 The big copper woman, who lay there
 with her back soldered to the lid of the sarcophagus
 drove terror into me, shackled my foot with led

That the copper woman knew who I was
 I immediately sensed as a deadly weight
 and that I had been summoned here by her alone
 of this I am sure.

... from the gallery’s emptiness the organ’s pipes glimmered
 like stalactites in the arch of a cave
 ... there was nothing ...
 that could help collect my crumbling courage.

For all was fulfilled as was written in stone
 in a time when water deserted all plants

and it was said that man shall pass away
and become dead stuff's dead slave.

... from the towers bells suddenly fell down
towards earth, shaken by the ore-marbled roar
and the copper woman rose, a cry
as of *Erinyes* traveled from afar
unto her lips when she pulled me in
tight against her copper body in fearful death.

And while the final, frightened insight emerged
cooling the spark of every sense of joy
I gazed towards the law of space where my thoughts wrote
a guilt-laden formula: better to be dead. [Erfurth 1987, pp.
225-226]

With Nielsen, Martinson acknowledged that the copper woman represented Moa—and, I assume, mother. The “guilt-laden formula” seems to have been acted out as a self-punishment: after signing a contract with the publishing house *Norstedts* he broke his long collaboration with the Bonniers. In a letter to Tor Bonnier he explained his step as motivated by “a conflict with myself that bothers me profoundly and that I wish to cure myself from—if this is possible” (Martinson 1940a, p. 253). Bonnier responded tactfully and underscored that Martinson would be welcomed back, should he wish to return to the fold. He did so a year later, when Bonniers issued a revised edition of *Nomad* (Martinson 1941).

WAR PANIC

Reality Unto Death [*Verklighet till döds*] (1940b), one of the two books Martinson published with *Norstedts*, is a testimony to his depression at the time. In addition to the report from the writers' congress in Moscow, it includes a stunningly realistic short story about a sailor's death by drowning, titled “Death by water” [*Död genom vatten*] and a narrative about two journalists' experiences as recruiters to the Swedish battalion in the Finnish Winter War against the Soviet Union, the yearlong war that broke out in November 1939 after the signing of the Molotov-

Ribbentrop pact, when Finland was attacked by the Soviet Union in symmetry with Nazi Germany's invasion of Poland two months earlier.² The journalists, Holger and Eyder, represent Harry Martinson and Eyvind Johnson, both of whom in actual reality took part as volunteers on the Finnish side of the war. Both men would also become members of the Swedish Academy—Johnson in 1957, eight years after Martinson—and share the Nobel prize 1974 under equally complicated circumstances but with different personal consequences (Johnson continued to lead a normal life and died from natural causes in 1976).

Reality Unto Death opens with a description of pro-Nazi manifestations in the streets of Stockholm as well as in Sweden's upper cultural echelons and of Holger's mounting claustrophobia in this environment. He was nauseated not only by politics, but by the materialism he saw evolving around him, assumedly more undisturbedly in neutral, unscathed Sweden than in war-torn Europe at large. Martinson claimed that the young generation was swept away by Hollywood's ideals of woman- and manhood, including "perverse illusions" (his expression) about the glory of war. The impact of "engineers" and the cult of modern technology disturbed him: war tanks, ships, cars, and military and civil airplanes alike were worshiped at the expense of the needs of the human soul, which he felt were addressed only by a minority of "poets."

Holger's and Eyder's unease rose on the sideline of the Finnish-Russian warfront, where the Swedish army waited impassively, bound by nonaggression commitments east, west, and south. Financed by the Swedish government, which covertly supported Finnish independence, they were expected to honor its official neutrality in their talks to the soldiers who flocked to the meetings. Another balancing act was not to be trapped in polemics either with communist or Nazi spies, whom they knew infiltrated their audiences. The two speakers were also affected by an inner conflict between their internationalism, presumably shared by the Soviet soldiers, and sympathy for the Finnish struggle. Martinson knew that he projected his personal history in his idealization of the

² After losing the Winter War against Russia in 1940, Finland in 1941 entered a second "War of Continuation," coordinated with Nazi Germany's attempt to invade the Soviet Union.

Finnish peasant fighters whose lives and habitat were ravaged by the Soviet war machine.

In *Travels with no Destination*, he had asked himself whether the idea that "all cultures are mere steps toward the ultimate: the world nomad" held true, and responded, as if praying: "Give us truth and open-mindedness. Let us stubbornly keep singing our vagrant song" (Martinson 1932, pp. 10-11). Two years later, on a propaganda flight arranged for the foreign delegates to the Moscow conference, the desolation of the Soviet pioneer towns, unmistakable from above, told him that his nomadism was a lost cause (Söderblom 1994). In an essay written in 1937, formulating a rationale for standing up for yourself and your own, Martinson had invoked his mother: "he who in these dark times forsakes self-defense may just as well spit on his own mother and say, 'No-one was more meaningless than you, who gave birth to me. As long as oppression reigns, self-defense is the. . . [highest] form of life'" (p. 38). If these words, which now became Holger's *credo*, were to embolden the Swedish fighters for Finland in 1939, they had to ring louder than the competing thought, which he was careful not to utter:

It was sometimes difficult not to express your innermost opinion...which acknowledges that suicide might just as well be completed at a...gathering point in the Finnish forests straight ahead from here to the north-east in the large parish of death *Salla*. For, in times like these, that moral gesture would at least be pure, compared to the meaningless idiocy of things that has driven the small nations to embrace it. [Martinson 1940b, p. 63]

Firing up young men to cross the frontier only to end up as cannon fodder was the ultimate moral dilemma and the tipping point for the two orators' decision to stop talking and physically join the fighting. Holger—like Martinson in actual reality—was now assigned the task of delivering military post to and from the battlefields by whatever means available: air, dogsled, or foot, usually at night. The final ten days of the battle at *Salla* were beyond words. We again hear Martinson sternly criticizing himself for talking too much:

All was lost in alarm and fire, cries, dread, evil reality's dread without end. The spanning peacock tail of the aurora, which every night swayed back and forth with its gaudy feathers high above the crying despair of the war, that tail itself was darkened by soot and extinguished when the shots in the face, the terrible face shots, hit their target in an ear, an eye, a cheek.

It is a crime to believe that you can describe this. Don't waste your ink on the cruel cat-and-dog game and hypocritical hyena-behavior of pretending to recount how everything transpired when terror and grenades tore a tendon, when machinegun-swarms showered a chest to death, when the foot that was to take a step no-longer existed, when the cold sought out the wounds and killed reality with reality. [Martinson 194ob, p. 107]

In the end, barbed wire and military debris were all that could be seen protruding from the snow-hills that covered the battlefields. Even the trees along the Finnish line of defense were felled and hidden under the snow together with the corpses.

There were no longer any landmarks for localizing villages or towns. . . .Nor were there, for those who had lived here, any anchors for memory. . . .Memories themselves were extinguished and. . . those who had lived here had to make do with a dream of loss and want, but without the option of reconnecting this dream with the reality of a forest whose mild wind can embrace dreams, as forests are prone to do. Reality, cursed by its name, had expanded here in a genuinely concrete way. In large concrete strokes everything was annihilated [Martinson 194ob, p. 85]

SOOTHING WINDS?

Martinson characterized *Reality Unto Death* as an unfinished outline of a larger work, to be completed in better times. This completion was never written, unless we consider as such the fruitions of his restored creativity after the war. After being treated for his lung disease, he (1945)

published a collection of poetry titled *Passad* [*Passage Wind*], which was hailed by the critics as his emotionally and poetically best contained work thus far. Its opening poem, "In praise of maturity" ["*Till mognadens sång*"], announces reconciliation:

. . . At dawn from the baths we saw
 a boat escaping to sea.
 A holding boat it was
 it fled to holding seas.
 . . .
 By a law of compelling necessity
 a ship rocks towards the day;
 held by holding seas [Martinson 1945a, p. 10]

Sensitive to the underlying darkness of everything Martinson wrote, Söderblom (1994) noted that the passage-wind metaphor is a symbol not only of peace and calm, but also of loss. He wrote that it was the waves of these winds that carried the swollen corpse of the drowned sailor of *Reality Unto Death* all the way into the now considered poetry: "my brother the sailor/who remains afloat/while he is drowned and dead. . . . [beyond] the rescue that that didn't happen" (p. 212). I, too, hear the new beginning heralded in the final poem of *Passad's* introductory suite as a sad retreat, if not resignation:

I have planned a voyage,
 I have furnished a house
 on nomadic shores inward [Martinson 1945a, p. 24]

In *Passad's* concluding group of poems, "*Li Kan talar under träden*" ["Li Kan speaks under the trees"], a Taoist master recounts his experiences of persecution and survival to his followers, the vulnerable *Cikadas*. The Martinson reader is reminded of the legion of tramps depicted in Martinson's (1948) *Vägen till Klockrike* [appr.: *The Road to Bluebell Country*] in which he, again, depicts the social realities and tensions of Sweden between the world wars. Led by a vagabond philosopher named *Sandemar* who, strangely able to avoid begging, walks the roads dressed in a tattered British tweed jacket and writes and wipes out his experiences on a portable slate (like Freud's [1925] "mystic writing pad" that

holds detectable traces of memories, even after they are erased), the tramps assemble by the still hot ovens of an abandoned brick factory, only to be locked in and trapped—they are burned to death—by the police. The reference to the Holocaust is clear in both books.

In *Passad's* penultimate suite, "Hades and Euclid," Martinson addressed the conflicting life and death drives in history, mythology, and his own life:

When Euclid wanted to measure Hades
he found that it lacked depth and height.

...

Low lay the furnaces of hell
on the flat land.

There in the brick chambers

– superficially as in graves of the dead –
the arbitrarily sentenced were burned

...responded to without dignity,

...responded to without the perspective of eternity.

...

And Euclid, king of measures, cried
and his cry sought the god of spheres, the Cronid

...

And Euclid fell forward.

The great measurer pressed himself against the ground,
bit the dust and cried.

He called:

who ascends?

Who descends?

Who ascends with good will?

Who descends to depths

with truth's searching eye and heart?

...And by good will he heard a wave
through all

and through all peoples.

He heard a high and a deep stream,
a steady and high wind of passage.

It came to cleanse the air,
 it came to awake.
 It came to air out
 for maturity and growth, for height and depth,
 for a good will's abundant world for all
 the surface that had frightened him so;
 the surface that had tormented him for a thousand years
 and a thousand more;
 the surface that rages in Hades. [Martinson 1945a, pp.
 143-147]

EXPLODING

Driven by the need for love and food, a loathing of ordinary work conditions, and an "inexplicable" desire to move from one end of the country to the other—he crosses national borders too—*Bolle*, the ageing, main protagonist of *The Road to Bluebell Country*, feels worn. His ways exact a price. One day, after being cruelly shamed by a farmer, he:

walks [away] slowly. Resigned and with mildness. It is almost a sport to. . . maintain such mildness for hours. . . the most hateful moments. . . The farm is already out of sight when the. . . mildness begins breaking, like a tight film of. . . control around. . . [your] growing inner hardness. This is what is called *exploding*. [Martinson 1948, p. 271, italics added]

About a decade after writing about the fallen Euclid and the exploded Bolle, Martinson (1956) completed his ultimate travelogue, *Aniara*, a 160-page, epic poem about a spacecraft with 8,000 refugees escaping from Earth in times of total war and environmental devastation. *Aniara*'s planned destination is Mars, but after a critical incident it is thrust out of its orbit into an unknown journey in more external space. Six years later, the pilots who manage the vessel's steering system, a computer named *Mima*, establish that it is heading to its predictable extinction in an unknown universe, the *Lyra* constellation of stars. *Aniara*'s narrator, the *Mimarobe*, is responsible for *Mima*'s maintenance.

The highly intelligent *Mima* is able to provide comfort to the passengers as long as *Aniara* travels within the known laws of space, time, and causality; unmoved by emotion and moral conflict, she retrieves

objective and believable signs of human life from the increasingly distant *Valley of Doris*, from where the passengers originate. But when she too develops feelings, the consequences are dire for herself and those who have depended on and even worshipped her. Taking advantage of this crisis, *Chefone*, a Stalin-like dictator, strengthens his position and enforces a death cult and a persecutory rule on Aniara.

The Mimarobe is not only attached to Mima; he also loves a female pilot, *Isagel*, who is but one of several representatives of his original love *Doris* from earthly Dorisburg. He knows that his love for Isagel is an unsatisfiable yearning. We know that she represents the poet Karin Boye, with whom Martinson had an unconsummated amorous relationship around 1940 and who took her life 1941 (Erfurth 1989; Svedjedal 2017). But Isagel—her mild articulateness, her beauty, her hands, her ambiguity—also bears a resemblance to the shop attendant in Middlesbrough whom he had described in 1933:

Something in her eyes is an unreachable
yet lovely glow from the unspoken:
the attraction that ambiguity often holds
when the beauty of the riddle prevails.

She draws curves, her nails shine
as dimmed lights through the dusk of the hall.
She says: follow this curve with numbers, here
where my grief's darkness casts its shadow. [Martinson 1956,
Aniara 34, p. 58]

The Mimarobe and Isagel are imprisoned by *Chefone* who, maddened by the annihilation anxiety that gradually permeates everyone in Aniara, rages against love and life. His own fate is indeed soon to be sealed, as is that of all Aniara's inhabitants: they die twenty-four years after the vessel's departure from Earth and 15,000 years before its arrival in Lyra. Even though Martinson wrote that "there is no protection against man" (*Aniara*, 26, p. 46), he let the Mima profess trust in the individual's capacity to dream and reflect:

Our soul is worn by dreams, we continue to rub
dream against dream *in lieu* of reality,
and every new pretense becomes a ladder

to the dreamer's next wishful castle in the air.
 And all that is far away becomes home;
 yes, beyond all borders lies our protection. . .

. . .

When afterwards it dawned on the High Command
 that there was no-more a return
 and that the laws of the external field were
 different from those that firmly determine
 the safety of voyages in internal space,
 panic first broke out, then apathy
 that between storms of despair spread
 its cold stillness of emotional death,
 until the Mima as a consoling friend
 with specimens of life from other worlds
 to everyone's comfort, unlocked the treasury of her visions.
 [*Aniara*, 8, pp. 20-21]

The last words the Mima transmitted were from someone on Earth
 who called himself "The Exploded":

She let The Exploded himself bear witness
 and, shattered and stammering recount
 how hard it always is to explode,
 how time rushes in to prolong itself.

At the call of life, time rushes in
 prolonging the second when you explode.
 How terror rages in,
 how horror rages out.
 How hard it always is to explode. [*Aniara*, 29, p. 51]

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

This study evolved as a review of Harry Martinson's life-long struggle with extreme narcissistic hurt, longing, and rage. His life was marked by grief and severe anxiety, including a lasting fear of exclusion. Orphaned and abused but also strikingly intelligent, he as a child and young adult protected his sanity by finding auxiliary benign objects: respectable and respecting others whom he also allowed to find him. His proclivity for communicating with others as well with himself by talking and writing

and his capacity to love nourished his self-regard and for a long time formed an antidote to suicide.

Martinson's literary renderings of the cruelty and shallowness of life, notwithstanding its beauty, and of the desolation and coldness of outer space, aside from its starry nights and the life-giving sun as seen from Earth, stand out as life-supporting compromise formations; his embrace of opposites and containment of conflict, which outweigh the threat of resentment and resignation, are compelling qualities of his poetry and prose. The recognition of these and other qualities of his work he received in his own lifetime was, however, all too often coupled with envy and political criticism that joined forces with his self-contempt. With age, his narcissistic balance deteriorated, and depression gained the upper hand. His resistance was broken after the Nobel calamity in 1974; disarmed, he approached the breakdown he had anticipated in his writings.

The applied method—listening attentively to Martinson and reflecting on my theoretically informed perceptions—proved helpful in elucidating what I had previously, in the study on Levi, discussed as a *suicidal process*: the internal development of self-destructiveness from unconscious death wishes to completed suicide, under the influence of interacting internal and external vulnerability- and protective factors. In my version of this model, Martinson's journey was a life-long balancing of narcissistic calamities—challenges to his self-regard and wish to live—and a formidable but, in the end, failed struggle to overcome them. The closeness of this psychoanalytic portrayal to Martinson's self-understanding attests to the validity of our narrative. His being a devoted Freud reader does not diminish the significance of this convergence; the resonance he felt with Freud was a meeting of the poetic imagery of two creative minds.

That the expectation that object relations would be addressed more directly by Martinson than by Primo Levi proved correct does not signify that object relations *per se* are the key to the psychology of suicide. In subjective experience, unintegrated narcissism, aggression, and unsatisfactory object relations usually overlap. Neither aspect is by itself sufficient for solving the riddle of suicide. Moreover, rather than object relations, it was unbound self-destructiveness, corresponding to what Freud (1924) eventually named *primary masochism*, that grew on me in a

humbling way in this work: Martinson's ultimately unbound self-destructiveness made his suppression of healthy narcissism and self-preservation—the actual killing—understandable. The death drive (of which primary masochism is a manifestation) remains useful as a construct that directs our attention to aggressivity against the self (Segal 1993).

Kernberg (2009) has emphasized that the death drive is manifest only when a person's life is difficult, and that it is expressed as an affect—when anger or depression are seething. On varying levels of ego integration, Martinson's material attested to this point: from the threatening soul murder of his childhood to his ambivalence to "talking" in his sea books to the endured political persecution throughout his career as a writer, the derealization chronicled in his war book, the barely contained darkness of his late writings, and the explosion of his suicide in 1978, we were privy to Martinson's self-directed rage.

Acknowledging the acuity of Kernberg's observation and continuing to reflect on my attachment to psychoanalytic tenets, including an openness to metapsychology as (scientific) poetry, I hold on to Freud's view of man as torn between loving and creative instincts on the one hand and opposing, destructive ones on the other. Without this outlook, it would have been more difficult to capture the depicted experiences of Martinson's life and work. Another conclusion is that, in psychoanalysis as well as in poetry, a brave confrontation with the derivatives of the forces of love and destruction in self and life can be helpful, but it can also be, as in Martinson's early and late life, when the accumulated onslaught on his self-regard was intense and his defenses weak, instrumental in breakdown.

The following excerpt from a letter Martinson wrote to Tor Bonnier in 1935 touches upon the threads of this discussion: the interwoven manifestations of unintegrated narcissism, self-destructiveness, object loss and hatred, the wish to communicate, and—with the provisional help of a trusted listener—find safety on inner shores, however insufficient that lonely retreat would prove to be with time:

At heart I am an incurably sad human being, an oversensitive destiny-driven type of a person constantly on the run from my memories. . . .By birth and fate I belong to wandering, to the roads, and to the sea. The yearner's cabin is mine. I am the

courier of my own fire. Maybe I didn't want this, but this is how it is. This became my fate and it has its horrible causes. My family's cruel tragedy and my broken childhood form the background of the unease that will someday kill me. [Andersson, 2011, p. 93]

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