CHAPTER 5

(Not) Translating the Incomprehensible: Defamiliarizing Science, Technology, and Science Fiction in Harry Martinson's *Aniara*

Daniel Helsing

When thinking about science fiction (SF), poetry is not likely to be the first literary form to come to mind. As Christopher Cokinos puts it in a recent anthology devoted to space poetry and SF poetry: "For many readers, there is science fiction and there is poetry—separate genres doing different things" (Cokinos 2020, 171). Cokinos's point, of course, is that these readers are mistaken: SF poetry is in fact an established subgenre of SF literature. Furthermore, Cokinos and Julie Swarstad Johnson, the editors of the anthology, argue that poetry is particularly well-suited to explore and expand our conceptions of space: "Through science, we comprehend the universe and can begin to venture out into it; through translations of science into journalism, essays, and especially poetry, we venture

D. Helsing (✉)
Linnaeus University, Växjö, Sweden
e-mail: daniel.helsing@lnu.se

I. Campbell (ed.), *Science Fiction in Translation*, Studies in Global Science Fiction, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-84208-6_5

out into imagination as well, plumbing the depths of meaning" (Johnson and Cokinos 2020, ix). But the often-overlooked connection between SF and poetry does raise an interesting question: Does poetry sit uneasily with space and science?

The composition of the epic poem *Aniara* (1956), written by the Swedish author, poet, and Nobel Laureate Harry Martinson (1904–1978), seems to suggest that at least for Martinson, the answer to this question is a cautious yes. *Aniara: En revy om människan i tid och rum*—translated into English as "Aniara: A Review of Man in Time and Space" (1963, 1991, and 1999)—tells the story of a spaceship that gets thrown off course during an evacuation from toxic radiation on Earth. The ship, carrying 8000 refugees and originally headed for Mars, begins to drift helplessly toward the constellation Lyra. The narrator of the poem is the nameless *mimaroben* ("the Mimarobe"), and he is in charge of Mima, a kind of artificial intelligence who is able to pick up images from various parts of the universe and display them on a screen, to the comfort and amusement of the passengers. The poem consists of 103 songs: it chronicles life aboard the ship until, twenty-four years after leaving Earth, everyone has died. As evidenced by the essay "Stjärnsången," written already in 1938 (translated into English in 2020 as "The Star Song"), Martinson wrestled with the challenges that modern science poses for poetry, such as how to represent poetically the vastness of space and the nature of stars. In the years between "The Star Song" and *Aniara*, Martinson also became increasingly preoccupied with technological developments—not least the nuclear bombs deployed in Hiroshima and Nagasaki—and wrestled with the related challenges of depicting through poetry the destructive potential of advanced technology.

If we, following Cokinos and Johnson's suggestion, construe poetic representations of science as translations, then the key question becomes: What kind of translation is *Aniara*? As I will argue, we can use Lawrence Venuti's (1995/2008) distinction between "domesticating" and "foreignizing" translation practices to illuminate Martinson's poetics in "The Star Song" and *Aniara*. Using this distinction, I will argue that Martinson uses foreignizing translation practices when approaching space and nuclear violence; he develops original imagery to evoke some degree of comprehension of these phenomena, only to recede again before attempting domesticating descriptions, instead leaving the reader in a state of awe, wonder, and terror. By comparing Hugh MacDiarmid and Elspeth Harley Schubert's translation of *Aniara* from 1963 with Stephen Klass and Leif

Sjöberg's translation from 1999, I will furthermore argue that the 1999 translation retains more of Martinson's foreignizing translations of science by staying closer to the Swedish original and, in addition, deploying some foreignizing translation practices of its own. The 1963 translation, by contrast, does use foreignization practices occasionally, but overall, it departs more from the original and tends to domesticate the poem.

If Martinson struggled with representing by means of poetry the extreme scales of science and technology, it is fair to say that critics and scholars have struggled with *Aniara*'s relation to SF. Despite the poem's obvious SF themes, and despite Martinson being open about reading and appreciating SF, the reception of *Aniara* has wavered on whether to actually classify it as SF. This is partly due to SF's relatively low status as a literary genre in Sweden for most of the twentieth century, in contrast to Martinson's reputation as one of the century's most highly regarded authors. But there are other aspects, as well: for example, some scholars have seen Mima as embodying Romantic views of the poet rather than scientific ideas of the computer. Using Simon Spiegel's (2008) distinction between "diegetic estrangement" and "defamiliarization" in SF, I will argue that some plot elements in *Aniara*, Martinson's style of narration, and his foreignizing translations of science and technology diverge from common characteristics of Anglo-American SF at the time, making the poem not only a defamiliarization of science and technology, but of SF as well.

Translations into English of *Aniara*

While *Aniara* has been translated into English three times, it has only been published in the United Kingdom or the United States twice. The 1963 version, translated by Scottish poet Hugh MacDiarmid and Scottish-Swedish translator Elspeth Harley Schubert, was published by Hutchinson in the United Kingdom and by Alfred A. Knopf in the United States. The 1999 version, translated by the two literary scholars Stephen Klass and Leif Sjöberg, both based in the northeastern United States, was published in the United States by Story Line Press, a small (now-defunct) publishing house in Ashland, Oregon. The 1999 translation is a slightly revised version of Klass and Sjöberg's previous translation, which was published in 1991 by the small Swedish publishing house Vekerum förlag in collaboration with Harry Martinson-sällskapet ("The Harry Martinson Society"). All three version translate the title as *Aniara: A Review of Man in Time*

and Space. The 1999 version stands out though: while the title page of the 1999 translation states *Aniara: A Review of Man in Time and Space*, the book cover reads: *Aniara: An Epic Science Fiction Poem*. Currently, all editions have gone out of print and are difficult to find even in used bookstores.

The 1963 translation by MacDiarmid and Schubert initially received poor reviews in both the United Kingdom and the United States. Writing in the *New York Times*, John Berryman calls the translation "lucid but wooden" but feels unable to judge the poem's merit: "The poet's capriciousness seems better conveyed than what must be, to account for its popularity [in Sweden], ecstatic and chilling qualities in the original." He concludes by stating that in "English [*Aniara*] is not moving" (Berryman 1963). While Berryman primarily criticizes the translation, Keith Sagar, in the *Sunday Times*, finds Martinson's imagination lacking: "The treatment will strike even a reader wholly unfamiliar with science-fiction as deficient in imaginative force and originality" (Sagar 1963). Kingsley Amis, writing in the *Spectator*, is similarly unimpressed, charging Martinson with a "disastrous unfamiliarity with both science fiction and science fact" (Amis 1963). A decade later, however, following the announcement that Martinson would be receiving the Nobel Prize in literature in 1974, Bruce Lockerbie, writing in the *New York Times*, is quite impressed with *Aniara*; he compares it to T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and suggests that it "may well be a work of equal power and prophecy" (Lockerbie 1974). That same year, Martinson himself made it clear that he did not like MacDiarmid and Schubert's translation, calling it "a scandal" in an interview in the *New York Times* (Uncredited Reporter 1974). Much more recently, Geoffrey O'Brien instead praises the 1963 translation in a long essay about *Aniara* in *The New York Review of Books*, following the release of the internationally screened feature film *Aniara*, directed by Hugo Lilja and Pella Kågerman (2018). O'Brian explains that when he first came across MacDiarmid and Schubert's translation, "its propulsive urgency carried me along in an uninterrupted reading." Though O'Brien reports that the 1999 translation "is said to be more accurate and somewhat more complete," he finds the 1963 translation to be "more persuasive as English poetry" (O'Brien 2019).

While the 1991 and 1999 translations by Klass and Sjöberg did not receive the same amount of attention in the Anglo-American press as the 1963 translation, they did receive a few reviews in academic journals. Steven P. Sondrup calls Klass and Sjöberg's 1999 translation "excellent" and argues that it is "the most accomplished and compelling" (Sondrup

2000, 479). Sondrup contrasts it with the 1963 translation, which "preserves the general contours of the poem and is credible as the adaptation it claims to be but never was a viable means of glimpsing the depths of Martinson's poetic vision or the overarching power of the poem" (Sondrup 2000, 479). Sondrup goes on to suggests that the 1963 translation may have had a detrimental effect in "militat[ing] against a more accomplished English version being published sooner" (Sondrup 2000, 479). For Sondrup, the 1999 translation succeeds where the 1963 translation fails, namely in offering a "resounding recreation of Martinson's voice" (Sondrup 2000, 479). But he is not convinced by the title printed on the book cover of the new translation—*Aniara: An Epic Science Fiction Poem*—which, he speculates, may be the publisher's attempt to reach SF readers.

In a review of the 1991 translation, Alan Swanson is less impressed by Klass and Sjöberg's work, though he finds that "there is nothing incorrect in this version" (Swanson 1994, 422). Swanson does, however, argue that the 1963 translation is better in some regards. Lawrence Venuti's distinction between domesticating and foreignizing translations (a distinction which Swanson does not use) is useful for clarifying Swanson's argument. Venuti points to the peculiarity of foreignizing translations: "The 'foreign' in a foreignizing translation is not a transparent representation of an essence that resides in the foreign text and is valuable in itself, but a strategic construction whose value is contingent on the current situation in the receiving culture" (Venuti 2008, 15). A foreignizing translation can only utilize resources from the target language and culture to create a foreignizing *effect*; truly foreign elements of the source language and culture will remain unrepresentable. Venuti, of course, still argues that foreignizing translations, at least into English, are sorely needed in today's world. By using "materials that are not currently dominant" in the target culture (Venuti 2008, 20), a foreignizing translation can disrupt the prevalent Anglo-American ideal of "fluency," according to which a translation is deemed "acceptable by most publishers, reviewers and readers" when it does not seem like translation at all, but rather like "the original" (Venuti 2008, 1). Disrupting the illusion of the transparency of translations is crucial, suggests Venuti, for preventing a culture from lapsing "into an exclusionary or narcissistic complacency" (Venuti 2008, 20). Swanson illustrates the foreignizing character of the 1963 version with the translation of a key name in *Aniara*: "Doris," with the related names and constructions "Dorisburg" and "Doris dalar" ("dalar" can be translated as "valleys" or

"vales"). In *Aniara*, "Doris" is both the name of the hostess who greets the passengers onboard Aniara and an affectionate name for the Earth; "Dorisburg" is a major city on Earth, and "Doris dalar" refers to the Earth and earthly environments. Klass and Sjöberg translate these as "Doris," "Dorisburg" and "Dorisvale," respectively, while MacDiarmid and Schubert translate them as "Douris," "Dourisburg," and "Douris' plains"/"Douris' valleys." Swanson argues that simply retaining "Doris" makes the poem too fluent and gives American readers the wrong associations—for Americans, Doris "is a very popular, even prosaic, name, often associated with the 1940s and 1950s" (Swanson 1994, 422). For Martinson, however, the name has connotations to ancient Greece, nature, and life (Wrede 1965, 81–82). Swanson finds MacDiarmid and Schubert's foreignizing "Douris" better, because it "attempts to avoid the obvious English associations and retain a bit of the Swedish pronunciation" (Swanson 1994, 423).

However, when comparing the two translations further it becomes clear, as I will show, that Klass and Sjöberg's 1999 translation is more foreignizing than MacDiarmid and Schubert's translation in other, arguably more important, ways. Even though the 1963 version foreignizes the name "Doris," it oftentimes domesticates *Aniara* on a grammatical and semantic level. In this regard, Klass and Sjöberg's 1999 translation stays closer to the Swedish original, in which Martinson uses linguistically novel constructions to defamiliarize the reader. In the songs I will read, crucial foreignizing elements of Martinson's translations of science are, to some extent, lost in the 1963 translation, and so a fundamental part of his poetics is weakened in that version.

The Scientifically Incomprehensible: The Vastness of Space and the Nature of Stars

Martinson first had the idea of writing a space epic in 1938. He did not pursue this idea at the time, but his fascination with then-recent developments in physics and astronomy—relativity, quantum physics, astrophysics—led him to write the essay "Stjärnsången" (1938/1989) ("The Star Song"), in which he discusses the challenges of writing space poetry. When he returned to the idea of a space epic fifteen years later, he had become increasingly preoccupied with the destructive potential of advanced technology and the horrors of nuclear warfare. These two strands—his

fascination with space and his abhorrence of nuclear violence—came together in a sequence of poems he wrote in 1953 under the title "Sången om Doris och Mima" ("The Song about Doris and Mima"), included in the book of poems *Cikada* (1953) ("Cicadidae"). The poems in "Sången om Doris Mima," which three years later would form the first 29 songs of *Aniara*'s 103 songs, chronicle the first few years of Aniara's journey: the evacuation from Earth, the accident that causes the spaceship to veer off course and drift helplessly into outer space, and the initial struggles of the passengers as they come to terms with their predicament. In this section, I will look at Martinson's space poetry and read "The Star Song" alongside a key song in *Aniara*. In the next section I will look at Martinson's depictions of nuclear violence in two other songs.

"The Star Song" illuminates the space poetry of *Aniara* and can be viewed as Martinson's attempt to formulate a poetics for the modern scientific age. The challenge of writing space poetry, according to Martinson, is that the universe has become so vast and so incomprehensible that traditional poetic devices, such as metaphors, are unable to capture that vastness and incomprehensibility:

> There are no longer only stars out there but thousands of galaxies. Astronomers no longer speak of light-years, incomprehensible in and of themselves, but of millions of light-years. In addition, there is the development of the scientific views of the nature of light, quanta, and mass, and the theories of the astronomical schools, which are being crossed like quiet mathematical blades over the dizzying depths of the universe.
>
> Using hyperboles and overtones was an ancient right of poetry, but where can poets find exaggerations with regard to the worldview of modern astrophysics? … These gigantic suns, which one would like to conceive of as quivering titanic spheres of lightning in whose interiors musical storm scales interweave to create crescendos that surpass all comprehension. They could only be comprehensible through properties that lie beyond every possible form of human imagination. For us, they are only comprehensible via scientific methods, tempered by mathematical equations or cooled off on a blackboard. (Martinson 2020, 5)

The problem is not only intellectual: it is also existential. Astrophysics causes us to lose our footing: "now less than ever can astronomically illiterate human beings feel at home in the bottomless star garden of the universe. They know too much to be able to return to the old ways yet too little to be able to digest the astrophysical perspectives in their thoughts,

their views, their songs" (Martinson 2020, 4). We need star songs to orient ourselves in the universe, but the universe of our time seems to resist such songs.

How, then, should a poet approach the newly revealed dimensions of the universe? In formulating his views on the nature of human comprehension and the task of poetry, Martinson emphasizes the importance of delimitation. The universe, while unimaginable, becomes comprehensible through scientific methods and mathematical equations: "Only in this way can the unfathomable leave perfectly precise yet unreal traces because truly grasping something requires grasping it with your senses, your mind, your feelings. Reality, in this sense, requires delimitation. The unlimited cannot be experienced as real" (Martinson 2020, 5). Martinson then connects the sense of limitation to the sense of wonder, which he considers the source of poetry. Traditional poetic metaphors evoke images that are unspeakably insufficient to capture the universe, yet they may lead to a *sense* of comprehension. They are thus not only ineffective when trying to grasp the universe; they may also be misleading. In this sense, traditional metaphors can be said to use domesticizing strategies when translating the findings of science into any natural human language.

Martinson's reflections on metaphors and human limitations in "The Star Song" form an important backdrop to song 85 in *Aniara*. To explicate Martinson's "foreignizing translation" of science, I use Klass and Sjöberg's 1999 translation, which is very close to the Swedish original:

> The galaxy swings around
> like a wheel of lighted smoke,
> and the smoke is made of stars.
> It is sunsmoke.
> For lack of other words we call it sunsmoke,
> do you see.
> I don't feel languages are equal
> to what that vision comprehends.
>
> The richest of the languages we know,
> Xinombric, has three million words,
> but then the galaxy you're gazing into now
> has more than ninety billion suns.
> Has there ever been a brain that mastered all the words
> in the Xinombric language?
> Not a one.

Now you see.
And do not see. (Martinson 1999, song 85)

This song deploys an intricate use of metaphors and similes, only to retract those same metaphors and similes. In the first half of the first stanza, a galaxy is compared to "a wheel of lighted smoke," and stars are described with the metaphor "sunsmoke." The simile and metaphor are original, evoke vivid images, and make unexpected connections between cosmic and mundane phenomena, thus enabling the reader to comprehend galaxies and stars by explaining the unknown in terms of the known. But in the second half of the stanza, the validity of the simile and the metaphor is retracted; the narrator suggests that he uses these images for "lack of other words." The second stanza deploys a similar strategy: first it compares the unknown (galaxies and stars) to the known (a natural language, in this case the fictional Xinombric), only to state that even this comparison, which emphasizes the unfathomability of the universe, fails to convey that same unfathomability. On a first glance, it may seem odd for Martinson to include the stanzas' concluding lines: "I don't feel languages are equal/to what that vision comprehends," and "Now you see. /And do not see," respectively. Even though the narrator has already stressed the limits of the images in the first stanza (lines 5–6) and the limits human comprehension in the second stanza (lines 1–7), these limitations are stressed yet again in the concluding two lines of each stanza. The concluding lines may seem overly explicit, but that is precisely the point. By retracting the images yet again, the narrator emphatically undermines the possibility of grasping the vastness of the universe through figurative language. But the similes and metaphors are necessary to bring the reader to that point: without first getting a *sense* of comprehension through the similes and metaphors—which are original and do convey a sense of comprehension—the effect of *incomprehension* would not be achieved. This is especially strongly brought out in the two lines which conclude the song and which create a paradox: whenever you think you have understood the vastness of space, it only means that you have not understood it. By resisting the fluency of his own similes and metaphors, the narrator's retraction of his own poetic images can thus be regarded as a foreignizing translation strategy of the vastness of space as conceptualized by astrophysics.

Even though MacDiarmid and Schubert's translation of the same song broadly conveys the same images, an analysis of the details makes it clear

that their version domesticates the Swedish original—and by extension, the universe. MacDiarmid and Schubert's version reads:

> The galaxy swings round
> like a wheel of shimmering smoke
> which is the light of stars,
> or sun haze.
> For lack of other words, you know,
> we call it sun haze.
> I mean just that languages do not suffice
> to express everything
> contained in that spectacle.
>
> The richest of the languages we know,
> Xinombric, has some three million words,
> but the galaxy you are watching now
> contains far more than ninety billion suns.
> Has any human brain ever mastered all the words
> in the language of Xinombric?
> Not a single one!
> Now you understand?
> And yet—do you? (Martinson 1963, song 85)

As is readily apparent, the two translations are very different. In the Swedish original, the first stanza has eight lines, as does the 1999 translation. The 1963 translation, however, has nine lines. Among other changes, MacDiarmid and Schubert insert the extra line "or sun haze" after the third line. The Swedish original has "solrök," which in literal translation would read "sun smoke." In Swedish, the word "solrök" is linguistically novel and defamiliarizes both our sun and stars in general, since conceptualizing stars as consisting of "smoke" establishes an unexpected association between two apparently very different phenomena. Klass and Sjöberg's word "sunsmoke" replicates the defamiliarizing effect of Martinson's word, but it adds an additional foreignizing effect by fusing the two words "sun" and "smoke" into one word. In Swedish, fusing established words to create compound words is a regular part of how that language works, but in English compound words are rarer, and "sun smoke" would be the natural construction; "sunsmoke" thus foreignizes the text grammatically as well as semantically. Furthermore, MacDiarmid and Schubert add the explanatory "sun haze" after the expression

"shimmering smoke." "Haze" is a much more established phenomenon in relation to the sun; the reader may come to think of sunsets and hazy skies, for example. Thus, "sun haze" domesticates the "sun smoke" metaphor not only by explaining it, but also by replacing it with a metaphor that connects the already commonly associated concepts of "sun" and "haze."

The 1963 translation also domesticates the narrator's retractions of his own similes and metaphors. At the end of the first stanza, MacDiarmid and Schubert insert a deflationary "just" in "I mean just that languages do not suffice," suggesting that the stanza can be *reduced* to conveying the limits of figurative language and human comprehension. This deflationary attitude—trivializing the poet's attempt at capturing the nature of stars—is further reinforced by the use of the word "spectacle" in the concluding line of the first stanza. Klass and Sjöberg's "vision" is much closer to the Swedish "synen," and like "synen," "vision" has both a literal meaning (what you see) and a religious connotation. This religious connotation is important; in the preceding song, the narrator explains that the "chief astronomer" shows the passengers an image of a galaxy, in response to which members of "the galactave religion" "sink down to their knees / and start to pray" (Martinson 1999, song 84). "Galactave" is a made-up unit of measurement consisting of fifteen light-years (song 70). Choosing the word "spectacle" instead of "vision" thus not only trivializes the image of the galaxy—it also domesticates the idea of religion by implying that a religion based on cosmic vastness cannot be taken seriously.

The 1963 translation similarly domesticates the narrator's retraction of his own images at the end of the second stanza. The paradox contained in both the original Swedish and the 1999 translation—"Now you see. / And do not see"—is replaced by a rhetorical question: "Now you understand? And yet—do you?" There is no way out of the paradox of the 1999 translation; it impedes reading and opens up a sense of wonder by confronting the reader with an absolute limitation of human comprehension. By contrast, while the rhetorical questions of the 1963 translation do suggest that the number of stars in the universe is incomprehensible, the concluding lines read more like a quiz question after learning a scientific fact: they do not force the reader into the unending circularity of paradox and hence do not open up to wonder in quite the same way.

The Technologically Incomprehensible: The Violence of Nuclear War

A central character in *Aniara* is Mima, the "artificial intelligence" who is able to pick up images from different parts of the universe and display them on a screen. Six years into the journey, Mima picks up disturbing images from Earth. We learn that the metropolis Dorisburg, and possibly the Earth itself, have been destroyed by nuclear weapons. After displaying images of unimaginable destruction, the narrator watches helplessly as Mima starts to deteriorate. A few days later, Mima self-destructs; she (Mima is gendered) cannot bear the suffering and cruelty of humankind and commits suicide.

Mima is one of the most explored characters in *Aniara*; she has been read as an AI, as an embodiment of Romantic views of the poet, as a symbolic representation of art, among other interpretations (see, e.g., Wrede 1965, 232; Tideström 1975, 75). Rather than focusing on Mima herself, however, I wish to focus on the representation of some of the images that Mima broadcasts before she dies.

In song 26, the first to depict the nuclear horror taking place on Earth, the narrator lets two anonymous characters—"the stone-dumb deaf man" and "the blind man" (Martinson 1999, song 26)—depict their own deaths. In both cases, Martinson suggests the incomprehensibility of nuclear war by presenting original imagery which he then retracts, similar to how he suggests the incomprehensibility of space. Here, however, the retraction is indirect, suggested both by the paradoxical nature of the descriptions and by the accounts given by the dead men.

The stone-dumb deaf man uses a contradictory description to characterize the sound of the nuclear blast: it was "the worst sound he had heard. It was past hearing" (Martinson 1999, song 26, line 2). Hearing a sound which is "past hearing" is clearly impossible, creating a paradox akin to the impossibility of grasping the number of stars in the universe. A few lines later, the impossibility is repeated: "It was past hearing, so the deaf man ended. / My ear could not keep up with it / when my soul burst and scattered / and body burst and shattered" (Martinson 1999, song 26, lines 6–9). The fact that the man is dead is then repeated and made very clear: "So he spoke, the deaf man, who was dead" (Martinson 1999, song 26, line 14). Similar to how the narrator repeats the incomprehensibility of space in song 85, the narrator here repeats something seemingly obvious (the loudness of the blast), while repeatedly relating something clearly

impossible (the dead man speaks) and presenting an original and paradoxical image (the sound was past hearing).

After the dead deaf man has spoken, the blind man speaks. The "horrifically intense" light which blinded him is beyond description: "He was unable to describe it" (Martinson 1999, song 26, lines 21 and 23). Nevertheless, the man uses an original metaphor to describe it anyway: "He mentioned only one detail: he saw by neck. / His entire skull became an eye / blinded by a brightness beyond flashpoint" (Martinson 1999, song 26, lines 24–26). Here too, the man is already dead when giving his report, and here too, an original and paradoxical image—the man's "entire skull became an eye"—suggests the inhuman scale of nuclear violence.

While MacDiarmid and Schubert's translation differs from Klass and Sjöberg's in choice of words and other details—for example, as opposed to both Martinson and Klass and Sjöberg, MacDiarmid and Schubert put quotation marks around the statements of the deaf man—overall, the discussed passages are not domesticized in any significant way. But if we turn to the concluding lines of song 29, which comprise the final images of Mima, the 1963 translation can again be said to domesticate the poem and, by extension, nuclear violence. In her death throes, Mima conveys a final image to the passengers:

> The final word she broadcast was a message
> from one who called himself the Detonee.
> She had the Detonee himself bear witness
> and, stammering and detoned, tell
> how grim it always is, one's detonation,
> how time speeds up to win its prolongation.
>
> Upon life's outcry time does increase speed,
> prolongs the very second when you burst.
> How terror blasts inward,
> how terror blasts outward.
> How grim it always is, one's detonation. (Martinson 1999, song 29, lines 13–23)

MacDiarmid and Schubert's translation of the same passage is very different (and one notices immediately that they also omit the blank line between lines 18 and 19):

> The final words she uttered was a message
> sent by the Victim of Disintegration.
> She let this witness testify for himself
> and stammering, incoherent, tell
> how ghastly fission is in mind and body,
> how time comes surging in, and surges on,
> how time comes surging at the wail of life,
> prolonging the grim second of one's dissolution,
> how terror whirls about,
> how terror blows away,
> how ghastly fission is in mind and body. (Martinson 1963, song 29, lines 13–23)

Again, Klass and Sjöberg's translation is very close to the Swedish original, and again, they foreignize the translation to defamiliarize the reader even further. For Martinson's words "Den sönderspräng*d*e" and "sönderspräng*t*," Klass and Sjöberg use "the Detonee" and "detoned," respectively. In Swedish, both words are (in the context of someone speaking) semantically novel but not ungrammatical; in English, neither of the words exist. The reader can surmise their meaning, but the words defamiliarize the reader on a grammatical level as well as on a semantic level. MacDiarmid and Schubert, by contrast, have "Victim of Disintegration"—a clumsier and less striking term—and they disregard the paradoxical and suggestive "detoned" all together in favor of the somewhat vague and bland "incoherent."

But MacDiarmid and Schubert's translation falls especially short in the Detonee's account of being blown up. Instead of the rather unnatural, and therefore foreignizing, "how grim it always is, one's detonation," MacDiarmid and Schubert have the relatively fluent "how ghastly fission is in mind and body." By using "fission," furthermore, they appeal to the nuclear vocabulary of the 1940s and 1950s, rather than, as both Martinson and Klass and Sjöberg, speak in more foreignizing terms about nuclear blasts. And the absence of historical markers is important. Martinson never uses words like "nuclear bomb" or "atom bomb"; instead, he uses the made-up word "fototurb" ("phototurb" in both translations) to defamiliarize nuclear weapons even further. Finally, both Martinson's and Klass and Sjöberg's descriptions are paradoxical and suggestive in yet another way: the Detonee describes how his own detonation is *always* grim, suggesting that it is happening over and over. The image of the Detonee as

always being detoned—mirrored too in the repetition of that line at the end of the second stanza—disappears in MacDiarmid and Schubert's translation. Instead of retaining Martinson's foreignizing translation of nuclear violence, MacDiarmid and Schubert thus domesticate Mima's final image by removing the paradoxes and by using relatively fluent, historically anchored descriptions.

Science Fiction in Sweden and the Reception of *Aniara*

When Martinson wrote *Aniara*, SF was a recently established genre in the Swedish book market. As literary scholar Jerry Määttä details in a comprehensive study of SF in Sweden in the 1950s and 1960s, SF-themed literature emerged during the latter third of the nineteenth century and maintained a steady, though low-profile, presence throughout the first half of the twentieth century. This changed in the 1950s. The term "science fiction" was introduced in 1951, and in 1953 the prominent publishing house Natur och kultur published the first major anthology of Anglo-American SF short stories in translation, *Morgondagens äventyr* (1953) ("The Adventures of Tomorrow"). Other publishing houses followed suit, and SF quickly became an established and identifiable genre, gaining the attention of both the public and the critics (Määttä 2006, 72).

While SF counted many enthusiasts among the reading public in the 1950s, the literary critics and scholars were, in general, not so enthusiastic. There were promoters of SF among the critics, but most were outright hostile or at the very least skeptical. Some critics dismissed SF as aesthetically inferior, while others rejected SF as immoral and saw it as a form of American imperialism; some critics were skeptical of the perceived excesses of SF but could appreciate individual authors, such as Ray Bradbury, while others saw SF as an entertaining but not serious form of literature. This common dismissal of the genre was in line with a general dismissal of popular literature among critics and scholars at the time (Määttä 2006, 102).

The year 1953 not only saw the launch of SF in Sweden; the same year, Martinson—by then a well-known poet, author, and member of the prestigious royal academy Svenska Akademien—published *Cikada*, which, as detailed above, includes the first twenty-nine songs of *Aniara* in the guise of "Sången om Doris och Mima." As literary scholar Johan Wrede shows

in the first comprehensive study of *Aniara*, while *Cikada* overall was very well received by the critics, "Sången om Doris och Mima" received a more mixed reception. Some critics were enthusiastic and praised "the collection's importance as an idea poem [idédikt]"; others viewed it as "long-winded" and "poetically dry" (Wrede 1965, 19–32; my translations). "Sången om Doris och Mima" was also associated with SF. In an appreciative review, Per Erik Wahlund, without revealing his own view of SF, called it "a kind of science fiction in lyrical form" (Wahlund 1953; my translation). Axel Lifner, on the other hand, concluded that Martinson ought to have omitted "Sången om Doris och Mima" from *Cikada* and said that the poems were scarcely more than "a science fiction story in verse" (quoted in Wrede 1965, 31; my translation).

In other words, when Martinson published *Aniara* in 1956, SF was an established genre in Sweden, albeit considered "low-status" by many critics. In spite of the mixed reception of "Sången om Doris och Mima," the publication of *Aniara* was a major, national literary event. On the day of publication, October 13, 1956, all major newspapers ran long reviews by respected critics. Martinson was interviewed on national radio and the newly instituted medium of television. *Aniara* became an immediate best-seller: in the remaining months of 1956 alone, more than 10,000 copies were sold, and by the end of 1963, 44,831 copies had been sold (Wrede 1965, 45). Most critics, though not all, praised *Aniara*, and Martinson had become "folkkär" (Määttä 2006, 137)—a Swedish word for someone who is well known and beloved by the people.

The early critical reception of *Aniara* did not disregard the poem's closeness to SF, even though the critics did regard the poem as surpassing SF aesthetically and philosophically. As Määttä explains: "Most people who commented on [*Cikada* and *Aniara*] seem to have agreed that both 'Sången om Doris och Mima' and … *Aniara*, in one way or other, were related to, or even belonged to, the popular Anglo-American genre, even if several critics simultaneously stressed that Martinson had added something new to science fiction" (Määttä 2006, 134; my translation). In interviews, Martinson himself, furthermore, was open about his interest in SF literature, and he considered Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles* (1950), which had appeared in Swedish translation in 1953, as one of the most important novels of the 1950s (Määttä 2006, 139; Määttä 2012). However, as the 1950s progressed, the Swedish critics increasingly tended to identify SF with "commercial literature of inferior quality" (Määttä

2006, 336; my translation). In particular, they tended to avoid using SF as a genre label for literature that was not marketed as SF.

This tendency is apparent in the first book published about *Aniara*: mathematician and critic Tord Hall's *Vår tids stjärnsång* ("The Star Song of Our Time"), published only two years after the poem itself. Hall does not mention SF; instead, he places *Aniara* in a much longer and more prestigious literary tradition spanning all the way back to the Pre-Socratic philosophers, Lucretius's *On the Nature of Things*, Dante's *Divina Commedia*, and the canonized, late nineteenth-century Swedish poet Viktor Rydberg (Hall 1961, 7). Johan Wrede, in his monumental *Sången om Aniara: Studier i Harry Martinsons tankevärld* (1965) ("The Song about Aniara: Studies in Harry Martinson's World of Thought"), mentions SF in passing and acknowledges that Martinson may have been inspired by the genre, but in his wide-ranging discussion of the poem's themes, Wrede too focuses on prestigious traditions, such as philosophy, science, mysticism, and "high-brow" literature. As Määttä argues (2008), the tendency to disregard the importance of SF as an influence has been a staple of the voluminous literature on *Aniara* ever since: while the influence of SF has not necessarily been denied, it has often been downplayed. This, of course, is not to say that these other, more "prestigious" traditions are not central in *Aniara*—clearly, they are. But as Määttä points out, "for someone versed in [the] literature [of the time], very little of the content of *Aniara* was original; themes like nuclear war, mass evacuations of Earth, generation starships, colonies on Mars, collisions with asteroids, advanced computers, artificial intelligence, and so on, were commonplace in science fiction already in the 1940s" (Määttä 2008, 457).

Part of the explanation of why critics and scholars have been hesitant to call *Aniara* SF is thus that SF has been held in low regard by most dominant literary scholars and critics in Sweden, at least from the late 1950s to the early 2000s. But is this the only explanation?

Aniara as Science Fiction?

My aim in this final section is of course not to argue that *Aniara* "really" is or "really" is not SF; given the inherent malleability and open-endedness of genres, attempting to make either of these cases would not be very productive. That said, there is a case to be made for saying that typical works of SF literature, at least of the kind relevant here (mid-twentieth-century Swedish and Anglo-American SF), tend to have some traits in

common. On a thematic level, themes such as the ones enumerated toward the end of the previous section—nuclear war, colonies on Mars, and so on—comprise one such set of traits, and in this regard, *Aniara*'s closeness to SF is apparent. On a formal level, however, things get a little more complicated. To explore the ways in which *Aniara* differs from what we may think of as "prototypical" SF, I will use Simon Spiegel's (2008) concept of *diegetic estrangement*.

Spiegel develops the concept of diegetic estrangement in a discussion of Darko Suvin's influential definition of SF as cognitive estrangement. Suvin, in turn, develops his concept with reference to Viktor Shklovsky's concept of *ostranenie* and Bertolt Brecht's concept of *Verfremdungseffekt* (Suvin 2016, 18–19). Spiegel argues that even though Suvin refers to Shklovsky and Brecht when defining cognitive estrangement, there is an important difference between Shklovsky's and Brecht's concepts, on the one hand, and Suvin's concept on the other. Different though Shklovsky's and Brecht's concepts may be in other regards, one thing they have in common is that they are both meant to describe "a stylistic device that describes *how* fiction is being communicated" (Spiegel 2008, 370; italics in the original). Spiegel argues that for Suvin, by contrast, it is not the *how* that is of main interest in SF, but the *what*. When an SF text makes us see the world in a new light, it is not because *our familiar world* is described in an unusual way, but rather because *an unfamiliar world* is presented. In other words, Spiegel argues, the defamiliarizing effect of an SF text is primarily located on the *diegetic* level, not on the formal level (as for Shklovsky and Brecht). To clarify the terms involved, Spiegel reserves *defamiliarization* for "the formal-rhetorical act of making the familiar strange (in Shklovsky's sense)"; and he introduces the term *diegetic estrangement* to refer to "estrangement on the level of the story" (Spiegel 2008, 376). Crucially, the cognitive component of Suvin's concept requires that the unfamiliar world is made scientifically or rationally credible. Achieving this, Spiegel argues, involves the opposite of defamiliarization, namely *naturalization*: "the novum must have been naturalized before diegetic estrangement can take place" (Spiegel 2008, 376). In other words, SF is not characterized by defamiliarization, but rather by naturalization followed by diegetic estrangement.

This also means that there is a tension between defamiliarization and diegetic estrangement, because defamiliarization makes the naturalized novum seem less natural; defamiliarization "contradicts the genre in certain ways. If the novum is not naturalized, but made strange, sf's central

device—rendering the marvelous possible—is made obsolete" (Spiegel 2008, 378). But even though there is a tension here, Spiegel does not suggest that defamiliarization and diegetic estrangement are necessarily mutually exclusive; a text may defamiliarize the reader on a formal level while also estranging the reader on a story level. However, he argues that at least in Golden Age SF—typically identified with the 1930s and 1940s, sometimes extending into the 1950s (Määttä 2006, 425, n79)—the narration tends to be "classical" (Spiegel 2008, 378; 384, n12).

It is clear that the narration in *Aniara* is anything but "classical"; Martinson uses poetry, of course, on top of which the individual songs are composed using a variety of styles (from solemn to parodic), as well as different types of verse (from rhyming stanzas to blank verse and free verse). This fact alone contributes to explaining why critics and scholars were hesitant to categorize *Aniara* as SF—especially since, as we saw, in the late 1950s they started to tend to reserve the genre label for works marketed as SF. But the formal features of *Aniara* also raise a more principal question: Does Martinson's use of poetic form conflict with SF's naturalization and concomitant diegetic estrangement, as characterized by Spiegel?

On the one hand, Martinson does use some strategies of naturalization. The cognitive component of SF enters both through the basic premise of the story and through Martinson's use of a highly developed scientific-sounding vocabulary. As the narrator explains in the first two songs, the Earth has "become unclean / with toxic radiation," and people are being evacuated to colonies on Venus and Mars (Martinson 1999, song 1). In the third song, the ship is forced to "swerve to clear the Hondo asteroid," but during the ensuing course corrections, the ship's "Saba Unit" is damaged by "space-stones" and "space-pebbles," and the people onboard realize that there is no hope of reaching Mars (Martinson 1999, song 3). To describe the technological aspects of the ship and its flight, Martinson uses made-up scientific-sounding words such as "field-egression" and "magnetrinos" (Martinson 1999, song 2). The take-off from Earth is described as a commonplace occurrence: "A purely routine start, no misadventures, / a normal gyromatic field-release" (Martinson 1999, song 2). When describing Mima, the narrator similarly uses made-up technical-sounding words such as "the third webe's action" and "the ninth protator's kinematic read-out" (Martinson 1999, song 9). The history of the invention of Mima is furthermore related as common knowledge: the narrator explains that after the inventor had realized that Mima had started self-evolving beyond human comprehension, "then, as everybody knows,

he changed / his title, had the modesty / to realize that once she took full form / she was the superior and he himself / a secondary power, a mimator" (Martinson 1999, song 9). By using technical and futuristic vocabulary in a self-evident way, as though the terms and concepts are commonplace in the diegesis, Martinson thus naturalizes the story and achieves diegetic estrangement. The familiar world of the 1950s is made strange through a collision with the unfamiliar but naturalized world of *Aniara*.

But on the other hand, as the story progresses, Martinson occasionally undermines the cognitive component of SF on the level of plot. For example, in song 13 the chief astronomer gives a lecture in which he explains that they now realize that their understanding of the universe had been wrong all along; they understand now that "knowledge is a blue naiveté," that they are "lost in spiritual seas," that the ship is "a little bubble in the glass of Godhead" (Martinson 1999, song 13). In song 53, a spear mysteriously flies past the ship, only to disappear without a trace, prompting some people to go mad and one person to commit suicide. No explanation or resolution is given, and the spear is never mentioned again. In these ways, Martinson puts the cognitive component of SF into question by undermining the scientific understanding of the universe in the diegesis (as expressed by the chief astronomer) and by introducing unexplained events on the level of the plot.

Furthermore, while Martinson does naturalize the story in some ways, the highly original poetry used throughout the poem defamiliarizes life onboard the ship. Instead of using a realist aesthetic and naturalistic dialogues, Martinson uses, in the words of Geoffrey O'Brien, an "archaic-futuristic mode of expression" (O'Brien 2019). The narration is fragmentary and versified, with echoes of ancient myths and oral epics, mixing archaic language with futuristic terminology. And though there are people speaking and acting in the story, O'Brien points out that they are not really characters, but rather "figures of dream or allegory, ideogrammatic embodiments that can change their form or aspect as the poem evolves" (O'Brien 2019). In other words, the high degree of defamiliarization used to characterize the diegesis contrasts with the realist aesthetic typical of much SF. Martinson never grants the reader the illusion of realism, but rather constantly impedes the reading through his style of narration. This weakens, if not outright contradicts, the cognitive component of SF.

Finally, the ordinary world of the 1950s is made strange not only through diegetic estrangement and defamiliarization of the diegesis itself, but also through highly defamiliarized descriptions of space and nuclear violence that have no substantial relation to the diegesis of *Aniara*. As we saw in the readings of songs 85, 26, and 29, Martinson defamiliarizes the vastness of space and the horror of nuclear war through original figurative language, paradoxes, and an emphasis on the limits of human language and understanding. Even though the images are conveyed by the narrator of the poem, they defamiliarize phenomena familiar to people in the 1950s. And in these cases, Martinson does not naturalize space and technology; rather, by using poetic techniques that convey a sense of absolute incomprehension, he *denaturalizes* what we think we know—that space is vast, that nuclear war is horrible. This too has the effect of undermining the cognitive component of SF: even though future technology is naturalized, Martinson makes it clear that we do not even understand the intellectual and experiential consequences of twentieth-century science and technology.

In other words, while there are clear SF themes and an initial naturalization of the plot in *Aniara*, the narration and poetics of the poem also contradict what we may think of as "prototypical SF," as theorized by Darko Suvin or as typified by Golden Age SF. While there can be no definitive answer to the question of whether *Aniara* "really" is SF, one can at the very least say that the poem is an unusual kind of SF. Or put differently: *Aniara* defamiliarizes the genre of SF, making critics unsure of its classification and showing readers that there is an unknown universe of SF out there.

References

Amis, Kingsley. 1963. *Kingsley Amis Companion: A Guide to the Writings*. http://kingsleyamiscompanion.com/styled-9/styled-8/styled-118/. Accessed 9 Apr 2021.

Berryman, John. 1963. Epics from Outer Space and Wales. *New York Times*, July 21.

Cokinos, Christopher. 2020. To the Stars, with Difficulties. In *Beyond Earth's Edge: The Poetry of Spaceflight*, ed. Julie Swarstad Johnson and Christopher Cokinos, 171–172. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press.

Hall, Tord. 1961. *Vår tids stjärnsång: En naturvetenskaplig studie omkring Harry Martinsons Aniara*. 2nd ed. Stockholm: Albert Bonniers Förlag.

Johnson, Julie Swarstad, and Christopher Cokinos. 2020. Preface. In *Beyond Earth's Edge: The Poetry of Spaceflight*, ed. Julie Swarstad Johnson and Christopher Cokinos, ix–xi. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press.

Kågerman, Pella, and Hugo Lija, directors. 2018. *Aniara*. Meta Film Stockholm.

Lockerbie, Bruce D. 1974. The Trip of Aniara. *New York Times*, November 10.

Määttä, Jerry. 2006. *Raketsommar: Science fiction i Sverige 1950–1968*. Lund: Ellerströms.

———. 2008. Review of *Efter femtio år: Aniara 1956–2006: Föredrag vid ett symposium i Kungl. Vitterhetsakademien 12 oktober 2006. Samlaren* 129: 452–458.

———. 2012. En romantisk häxmästare har gått ur tiden. *Svenska Dagbladet*, June 07.

Martinson, Harry. 2004 (1956). *Aniara: En revy om människan i tid och rum*. Stockholm: Albert Bonniers Förlag.

———. 1963. *Aniara: A Review of Man in Time and Space*. Translated by Hugh MacDiarmid and Elspeth Harley Schubert. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

———. 1989 (1938). Stjärnsången. In *Kring Aniara: Sammanställd och kommenterad av Stefan Sandelin*, ed. Stefan Sandelin, 13–21. Södra Sandby: Vekerum Förlag.

———. 1991. *Aniara: A Review of Man in Time and Space*. Translated by Stephen Klass and Leif Sjöberg. Södra Sandby: Vekerum förlag.

———. 1999. *Aniara: An Epic Science Fiction Poem. A Review of Man in Time and Space*. Translated by Stephen Klass and Leif Sjöberg. Ashland: Story Line Press.

———. 2020. The Star Song. Translated by Daniel Helsing. *The New York Review of Science Fiction* 30 (6): 4–7.

O'Brien, Geoffrey. 2019. There's No Place Like Home. *The New York Review of Books*, August 15.

Sagar, Keith. 1963. *Aniara* by Harry Martinson. *The Sunday Times*, March 03. *Complete Review*. https://www.complete-review.com/reviews/sverige/martinsonh.htm. Accessed 09 Apr 2021.

Sondrup, Steven P. 2000. Review of *Aniara: A Review of Man in Space and Time*, by Harry Martinson. Translated by Stephen Klass and Leif Sjöberg. *Scandinavian Studies* 72 (4): 477–482.

Spiegel, Simon. 2008. Things Made Strange: On the Concept of 'Estrangement' in Science Fiction Theory. *Science Fiction Studies* 35 (8): 369–385.

Suvin, Darko. 2016. *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*, ed. Gerry Canavan. Bern: Peter Lang.

Swanson, Alan. 1994. Review of *Aniara: A Review of Man in Space and Time*, by Harry Martinson. Translated by Stephen Klass and Leif Sjöberg. *Scandinavian Studies* 66 (3): 421–424.

Tideström, Gunnar. 1975. *Ombord på Aniara: En studie i Harry Martinsons rymdepos*. Stockholm: Aldus.

Uncredited Reporter. 1974. 2 Swedish Writers Win the Nobel Prize. *New York Times*, October 04.
Venuti, Lawrence. 2008 (1995). *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*. 2nd ed. London/New York: Routledge.
Wahlund, Per Erik. 1953. Lyriskt självförsvar. *Svenska Dagbladet*, November 20.
Wrede, Johan. 1965. *Sången om Aniara: Studier i Harry Martinsons tankevärld*. Stockholm: Albert Bonniers Förlag.