

**Per Helge**

## **Poetry, knowledge and unintentional science**

Some reflections with regards to one theme in the poetry of Lars Gustafsson

Per Helge, born in 1945, is a poet and writer, living in a small village of northern Västmanland. He has published some twenty books, mostly collections of poetry and prose poetry. For many years he has also worked as a literary critic in newspapers and magazines. His most recent book, *In such a slow area as ours*, is a 'lyrical essay' about living close to nature and the landscape, tracing the conditions and wonders of human life.

This paper is an edited version of the lecture Per Helge gave on the occasion of the Author's Colloquium with Lars Gustafsson in June 2006 at the ZiF.

### ***Lyrik, Wissen und nicht-intentionale Wissenschaft***

*Als Carl von Linné die Landschaften und die Menschen darin eingehend erforschte, verfolgte er wissenschaftliche Ziele. Seine Berichte erwiesen sich aber auch als, wie wir es hier nennen wollen, ›unintentionale‹ Poesie. Die ›intentionalen‹ Dichter fühlen sich ebenfalls zur Landschaft hingezogen, um Spuren und Teile des großen Puzzles, das wir selbst sind, zu suchen und zu finden. Indem er aus allem, was ihn umgibt, Lebenserfahrung gewinnt, schafft der Dichter eine Form von Wissen ähnlich dem, das die Ärzte als ›Praxiswissen‹ bezeichnen. Wir könnten es auch ›nicht-intentionale‹ Wissenschaft nennen, nämlich ein Wissen, das sich auf die existentielle, menschliche Anwendung wissenschaftlicher Gesetze und Bedingungen konzentriert.*

*Diese Art von Wissen ist der Erinnerung ähnlich, die Art von Erinnerung, die der Dichter erweckt, wenn er aus der Landschaft oder anderen Lebensbereichen die Bausteine gewinnt, aus denen er Bedeutung in der Gestalt eines Gedichtes schafft. Ein Modellbeispiel dafür ist Lars Gustafssons Erinnerungsarbeit, die die Kindheit, die (Wieder-)Erschaffung der (verlorenen) Heimat zum Thema nimmt.*

*Der vorliegende Essay verfolgt Gustafssons Erfüllung dieser großen Aufgabe im Wandel seiner Lyrik von der Dominanz ›harten‹, sachlichen, objektiven Wissens (wie in der Philosophie, den Naturwissenschaften etc.) hin zur expliziteren Gründung in intuitivem, offenem, lebenspraktischen Erfahrungswissen aus Tradition, Landschaft und der Geschichte seines eigenen Lebens.*

Der Aufsatz von Per Helge ist die überarbeitete Fassung seines Beitrags im Autorenkolloquium mit Lars Gustafsson ›Literatur und Wissenschaft‹, das im Juni 2006 stattfand (vgl. ZiF: *Mitteilungen* 4/2006, S. 33ff.). Der Sammelband mit den Kolloquiumsbeiträgen (einschließlich eines Statements von Lars Gustafsson) ist in Vorbereitung: Susanne Kaul (Hrsg.): *Literatur und Wissenschaft. Autorenkolloquium mit Lars Gustafsson / Literature and Science. Author's Colloquium with Lars Gustafsson*. Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 2007.

1.

The great LINNÆUS, who thoroughly explored the landscape and the human beings in it, had scientific aims: to get as close as possible to the truth, to the divine plan that could be revealed there. As we know, he came so close that on one occasion he proclaimed that he had seen God on the back.

LINNÆUS' s writings about his discoveries, filled as they were of love and affection, turned out not only as scientific reports but also as a kind of matter-of-fact poetry, an *unintentional poetry*.

Also the intentional poets are drawn to the landscape; not so much in order to see God' s traces in it as out of a longing to meet something else: in a very sublime shape, as though everything were a huge mirror, we seek and find traces and parts of the grand jigsaw puzzle of ourselves.

We meet a huge alphabet of signs that perpetually forms itself into script. Yes, here can be found, differently than the clay strata in the ground but still imperative, an archaeology of the living, all the time regrouping itself, galaxies of events and life and echoes and footprints and voices, never ceasing to rush into and through one another.

Inveterate, eager archaeologists as we are, we use our knowledge of this material as soon as we meet as humans and talk to each other. I live in an old village, a comparatively small one, of less than 150 inhabitants. Often enough, if not daily, I meet one or more of them at the mail-box in the morning, when we go there for the day' s papers. At these moments we talk, about seasons, about wind and weather, as it happens in other villages all over the world.

There are people who believe that the talking together about such trifles is a stupid talking of seasons and wind and weather. A stupid belief. We meet each other in an accessible, open archive, common to us all, and we express ourselves in a way to show where in the drama of living we can be found on this particular day. More refined than with the centigraded Celsius scale we have in two or ten minutes achieved an exact knowledge of the direction that the irresistible movements of life have taken since the latest issue of the local three-days-a-week newspaper had the grace of appearing also in our remote part of the rural district.

All that, this special knowledge, can be registered in our rambling, wandering minds, but also, and then better organized, as poems, those ingenious containers of words and lines and all that is being grasped between the lines.

One thought that has been expressed more than once by LARS GUSTAFSSON is the one that the landscape strictly speaking does not exist until the poet describes it. If we regard that thought

in the light of another of his ideas, namely the one that poems may exist before they are brought into being, we dare conclude that in this connection the two aspects become one; the landscape—including the human representations of it beside the mail-box—offers the poems that exist but reach the state of being only after they have been written.

On such occasions, by distilling experienced life out of what surrounds him, or her, the poet creates a knowledge similar to what the doctors call proven experience. In accordance with what I just said about LINNÆUS, I would like to call it ‘unintentional science’. Simply and roughly this means: the knowledge that devotes itself to the existential, human application of scientific laws and conditions.

This delicate kind of knowledge of human life is very close to what we call memory. In some, not too small, extension, it is even the same thing. Of course, to a high degree, this memory is what the poet activates and benefits from when out of the landscape, or for that matter, out of any sectors of life, he gains the parts, the building stones that help to form meaning, in the shape of a poem.

One model example in this connection, to show how the combination of the intention, the poetic tools and knowledge (the kind that I have called unintentional science), can be used, is to me LARS GUSTAFSSON’s great, ongoing task of memory: it deals with childhood, with creating a homeland. Here I will follow that trace onwards for a while.

## 2.

The way of meeting that task has turned gradually from using ‘olid’, more matter-of-fact, objective knowledge into more openly relying on intuitive, open, proven experience. In this connection an important part has been played by the yellow colour.

LARS GUSTAFSSON’s early poetry was mostly unpersonal and turned outwards. Intensely it investigated how the world is set together, and it reported a never-ending row of remarkable discoveries. The investigations also told us about the relationship between the ego and the world, about the ability or disability of the language to give sense to the world around; the interest that the poems showed to things and objects of all kinds maybe was a way of saving oneself from senselessness—no matter what degree of philosophical meaning the concept may be given. If meaning lacked, one could always seek some kind of truth.

The landscapes that we glimpse in the early collections of poetry are formalized, abstract, with poetic standards interwoven: “a land where white waters fell”, “and there were forests, mossy grey”, “a care-worn day with wind in the trees”. These three examples are taken from

*The Balloonists*, the first collection, in 1962. A few times a house can be seen; often yellow, a curtain, also yellow, can flutter, the light can be yellow, and the fields are yellow. The reader observes this as striking; in due time that yellow colour is given one explanation. We will come back to that.

Single places are given names, they appear briefly among the trees, or through the letters in the poem, as seen through a windscreen when you travel fast in a landscape. Here are Näs, Djupnäs and Trummelsberg, in the first three collections. These places can be found on the map. They are situated close to Lake Åmänningen in Västmanland. The heart of a certain landscape sends its first twinkling signals.

The early poetry collections often speak of loss and of a direction out in the distance. They are also permeated with a feeling of grief which seems to originate from the basic concept, or insight, or experience, that it is impossible to grasp life as being something whole, whatever heroic attempts are made always to give names to its parts and fragments. What could have been united, whole, all the time escapes as flakes and splinters in all directions, the way the galaxies do in the universe that exploded at the very moment it was born. It is in this void between the things of the world, the void where the secrets live, that we can also see, in short views, glimpses and fragments of the native landscape of childhood.

Is there even a road or path towards a state of freedom of some kind? Maybe, and in such a case, it goes along gravel roads and quiet streets in the villa blocks of childhood. In the poem that opens the collection *A morning in Sweden*, published in 1963, its title is “Moving”, a small boy walks down a street (Frankegatan in Västerås), and the boy is LARS, watched by himself as a 27-year-old man. In the key of sorrow, loss, absence, turns really visible, for the first time, the mother-vessel that the voyager-poet has been thrown out from—the childhood. The theme is continued in the next poem, now the boy is striding the bicycle on which he is to cycle along through poetry books to come, and the pain evoked by the memory of childhood’s endless villa gardens with the children and their voices echoing against the fences is totally naked, since the loss is definite: “It is close: quite close, quite impossible.”

In the poem titled *A solemn morning*—still it is a morning in Sweden—that little boy gains speed with his bicycle, and now he knows for the first time what freedom means: it is to be found in cycling. He laughs, “and with his secret quickly and soundlessly he directs himself away from us”. But we had time to observe: home, that is where the secret dwells. What LARS GUSTAFSSON approaches, as time as well as the poetry books pass, often cycling in this boyish

manner, is freedom, the belonging to a home, not solely as a philosophical problem—which he allows it to remain—but as a sensual insight, an experience of the senses.

In the collection *The Balloonists* there is a poem beautifully and painfully keyed in minor, which is called “Falling image”. There the frail image of flickering shadows and lights of the aspen leaves fall over the child’s face “soundlessly through the years / echoes invisible and slow / through the frost of twenty winters” and “reaches its goal an autumn night / late in a remotely standing house”. The poem ends into the open, like this:

*Then you receive messages from one  
You have never known.  
But he existed once and seeks you,  
In the lamp light you recognize  
And at long last you know who you are.*

That stanza leads right into one of LARS GUSTAFSSON’s great, and for his own poetry so important, even crucial poetry books: the one published in 1970 with the title *Love Announcement to a Sephardi Lady*.

### 3.

In a free, montage-like form, where time levels and themes come and go, passing through each other, echoing in one another, the poetry of this book gives form to an inward—and an outward as well, but first and foremost an inward—journey which is both shocking and liberating. It begins in 1939 and the main part of it is made against a fond of a light which, influenced by a yellow blind in a window at number 19, Floragatan, flooded its golden colour over the floor. It was a kitchen floor, says the voice of the poem, on which I spent the greater part of the ending years of the thirties.

(Here the reader halts for a second, recalling to have observed, in the reading of LARS GUSTAFSSON’s earlier poetry, the appearance of the yellow colour. Now its meaning reveals itself overtly and explicitly.)

The spring of 1969 is the actual present time of the poem, and to it “returns, like a gleam of the past, some secret memory of a golden yellow light.” And, the poem continues:

*like a signal from a sinking ship  
or like the signal from someone very far from here  
trying to reach me and not knowing any other language*

*and thus the child signals to the grown-up  
I myself to myself with warnings beyond comprehension  
from another decade when the world was yellow.*

The time is chaotic, says the poem. “Fifteen or sixteen wars are being fought now, independent of each other, this morning.” The intellectuals in Europe are still there, the ancient banking palaces as well, birds move uneasily over the ices, under which the frozen eyes of burbots stare, there is wind and cracking ices and the changing of seasons, and “it is time, I tell you, not knowing for what”. The current events have heaped themselves together into a gravity whose burden triggers this openness to pain and sorrow; now it is not time for “the horror of dying” but for “the horror of living”.

In the midst of this great weariness someone has entered into life and “made me painfully aware of the time when I was three”, it is, the poem says, “a lady, woman, girl” on the outskirts of a desert, a beautiful and fascinating figure,

*and how, remarkably, almost without words,  
she has changed me, ever more,  
so that I no longer felt bitterness,  
only grief,  
the mildest grief*

Someone, the poet tells us, saw him, “over the deeps”, with dark eyes: “a Sephardi lady with precious stones in her belt”.

The poet, through her, has discovered his position: a loneliness similar to that of ROBINSON, on the desert island. When ROBINSON sees that he is alone, however, he has the greater part of his loneliness behind him. So where is “the isle that changes our lives / and forces us to begin again from the beginning?”

Just as ROBINSON, his hair white, suddenly recalls that once in his younger days he saw a footprint, and finally, after the length of seventeen years understood “that this sign / was placed into the sand by a stranger”, so the speaker of LARS GUSTAFSSON’s long poem realizes that he is not alone. The world around and the past have caught up on him. The unknown woman he did meet sees right through the whole of the western European “progress concept”, with its wearied and distorted era, and with the look of her eyes she opens his eyes, out of quite another deep of time, into a different deep of time. “You are an answer. I seek the question.”

Who is she, that Sephardi lady with precious stones in her belt, in the eyes of whom “something was shining with a brilliance surpassing that of gold?” Well, says the voice of the poem, she is his Anima.

*At first, two or three years old,  
I mistook you from Emma, a grandmother,*

*living in some yellow rooms,  
where the curtain moved in the wind.  
After that for many years I didn't see you.*

*Next time I saw you, you were a Sephardi lady  
smiling at me in a café in the desert,  
and all at once I recognized you.*

He is now ready to follow her, to let her take him anywhere she wants, as long as she leads him to peace.

*And walking like this,  
your fingers twisted into mine,  
we went ever deeper into the night*

The isle that changes our lives existed, it appeared in the shape of a Sephardi lady, and, which the poet had long forgotten, in the shape of his grandmother, dead since thirty years. And the sight line between these two Anima figures pointed right into the lost but golden yellow world of childhood.

*Love Announcement to a Sephardi Lady*—if we read it like this—bears witness to an existential, DANTE-like walk through the darkness, which reaches its lighter climes through a crucial and lasting orientation in a new direction. This orientation has directed him away from rationalistic, mechanistic views—also in the look upon human beings—towards the social and human sphere, and into the deepest, the most vulnerably and vitally personal look upon things.

Moreover, a new tone, strongly and positively present in LARS GUSTAFSSON's poetry, in approximately the same way as humour, the much too often neglected humour of his prose—is, ever since this 'new direction', something that must with its proper name be called love. Maybe that is logical—love and loss condition one another. But, nevertheless: Love, as a key, as a fundamental taint and attitude: love as a kind of knowledge that brings the pursuit of living from existence into being. The art of living is the art of loving. This is not a beautiful dream, only. It is sheer reality, profound knowledge.

#### 4.

*Västmanland is wonderfully beautiful  
Now, in early June, the lilacs*

*Smell and there comes smoke  
A light blue smoke out of the gardens,*

*I remember that smoke from the age of fourteen  
And how one cycled the streets*

*All evening, there was a worry  
That nothing could appease.*

*There is something important to that,  
But what it is I can't remember.*

*Now everything stands absolutely still  
Smelling under a soft, grey sky of rain*

*And I have started listening to the bird song  
Again, for the first time in ten years*

*I do care about what they are singing,  
And they don't sound quite the same,*

*I think there are more anapests in the rhythm  
And it doesn't hurt that much any more.*

*Please, come here, but don't expect too much:*

*Honestly speaking  
There is not so much left of me*

*(if, for instance, you mean that boy  
who existed once, surviving brings some costs)*

*Since tens of years I keep waiting for you,  
I am sure I will recognize you,*

*There will be not a doubt.*

The long poem beginning like this is called "Letter" and can be read in the collection with the title *Warm rooms and cold*, published in 1972. We hear clearly the new tone, neither formalized, fable-like, as in the early collections, nor sad, elegy-like, as in *Love Announcement to a Sephardi Lady*, two years earlier, but talkative, in the *parlando* mood, free, with not too much respect. Distracted, sometimes, but filled with sensual presence. The landscape is here, and it is called by its name: Västmanland. It is neither strange nor odd, or anything other with the corresponding claims, but wonderfully beautiful! This new freedom in invocation and tone also has its correspondence, as for the contents, in the ending lines of the poem, which say that "there are days now / when I believe that already I am totally free."

This is a freedom which looks quite a lot like a homecoming. In the light of a new hope and a new kind of patience, pronounced in several poems, that seems to go for the next book of poetry as well, a collection of Sonnets, in 1977, especially the opening lines of it:

*The water withdraws  
The stones become visible.*

*It was a long time ago.  
They really have not changed.*

*The old stones.*

*Artesian wells, Cartesian dreams*, from 1980, is another of LARS GUSTAFSSON's great collections of poems. In many of its ballads and elegies the tangible landscape and that of memory have become one. And the well that, from the Sonnets onwards, the poet likes to describe himself as, turns out to be connected to other wells. Down through the layers of experience, all the way towards childhood, but even farther, deeper; to the groundwater that is nature in all of us.

In the ballad about the paths of Västmanland, one of LARS GUSTAFSSON's finest, and wisest, it is nothing but the ancient, the archaic script of nature, created through generations of the people living in and stewarding it, that gives life its direction and its proper pace. Never before, as far as I can see, has the poetry of LARS GUSTAFSSON had this free and strong flow. This is another instant when he is totally free. The path, it reads, "It has done it all / so many times before. That is the whole meaning / of being a path. That it has been done / before." The path has been made by us all, through the centuries, together—"we write the paths, and the paths remain / and the paths are wiser than we are, / and know all that we might want to know." Here the perspective has turned. Now it is the landscape and the memories, of the child and the grown-up alike, which are allowed to write "Lars Gustafsson", they are wiser than he and know all that he might want to know. So far from abstract science, so close to proven experience!

## 5.

*Preparations for the winter season*, in 1990, and *Stone locker*, in 1994, both contain several examples of a melancholic, elegiac, transitoriness-stricken preparedness for old age, but they also manifest the homecoming once and for all, to the living people, the objects, the memories of both of them.

And so LARS GUSTAFSSON is ready to take the full step. In 1996 he publishes the collection of poems that he has given the title *Variations of a theme by SILFVERSTOLPE*, which is another way of saying: of childhood, of the attempts at trying to deal with—and cope with—the loss of it. Pleading to this poet of Västmanland and making common cause with him, strictly speaking is a logical consequence of LARS GUSTAFSSON's ever more eager striving towards the homeland that has been there, although diffuse, for such a long time.

In *Four poets*, the collection of 1988, where LARS GUSTAFSSON carries through a poetic—and philosophical—game with roles, one of the four poets, namely BERNARD FOY, carries evident features of Silfverstolpe, biographically as well as poetically. Those Foy-Silfverstolpe poems admirably catch both moods and settings that could have been created by the elder colleague. GUNNAR MASCOLL SILFVERSTOLPE, born in 1893 and in his heart at home in his native place in southern Västmanland throughout his short life, is an unfairly neglected and undervalued poet. Within a geographically restricted boundary he develops and explores questions of universal range: about native belonging, roots, love of everything and everybody close, as well as the sense of tradition and an obligating place of one's own in it; he accomplished that in five thin but lasting books of poetry between 1919 and 1940. He died in 1942.

Ever since LARS GUSTAFSSON's gymnasium years in Västerås GUNNAR MASCOLL SILFVERSTOLPE, the predecessor and in due time the *Wahlverwandtschaft*, has been implicitly and explicitly close. Here, in this new collection, a few lines from one of his best known poems offer the theme that LARS GUSTAFSSON keeps varying. The variations are musically inspired—LARS GUSTAFSSON mentions BACH's *GOLDBERG Variations* as one model—but the whole arrangement may also be seen as a practical and well fitted response to the need for a diverting protection against the naked spots of pain in one of the most closely personal examinations of the interior that he has ventured into.

“That was the time when every hour possessed / its proper strength that had to be extracted.” This is the theme, and the poems attempt at varying the question of time, the measurable time and the flowing time, time passing and we ourselves passing; through the well of memory in which we are incessantly travelling, in a time dimension that no instruments can ever seize. But the poems do something more; and by reconnecting to *Love Announcement to a Sephardi Lady* we can get hold of one of its major tasks. We must recall the Anima figure that we met there, as well as the fact that now and again a Gnostic thought has been visible in LARS GUSTAFSSON's poetry.

Think of the line quoted above: “You are an answer. I seek the question.” That question has already been pronounced earlier in the same book: “In summer, the window blind, all yellow,

was drawn halfway down, and over the floor there was a flood of that yellow light. Was that the beginning?" Yes, we venture to say, it seems that it was.

Some pieces in *Variations*, among them the big *Fuga canonica*, come back to talking about a homeland. (This is a special reverence to SILFVERSTOLPE, since one of his books had that title.) "My own homeland / is not here / and much brighter", LARS GUSTAFSSON writes, and at once he makes it clearer by adding: "That was my real homeland. / (And I was not there. / I have never been there.)" Exactly that: A brighter land which is, if not a Gnostic homeland, so at least a kind of earthly correspondence. As difficult to reach, except in your mind and thought, as the heaven of the Christians. And so, you have to create it yourself, write yourself one!

In the state of PLATO the poets had a very low value, because what they accomplished was images of images (of a higher idea). What if we turn the matter upside down, and instead of looking upon poems as depictions, we consider them creations of something that never before existed? The poems that grow to be manifestations of deeply hidden parts of memory, such as we have all the time been talking about—maybe one could look upon them as a kind of basic images, as *Urbilden*. (The IT generation might perhaps prefer to call them virtual images.) Just as the landscape in some sense does not exist until the poet writes it into being, so with the *Urbilden*. They never existed, in that form, only as our own longing for them, as their own absence. This would mean that poems don't depict but create a more complete version of reality!

Striving towards this, in the special respect that I have dwelt upon here, that is: towards creating for himself a homeland of his own, is, I think, what LARS GUSTAFSSON has to an ever larger degree devoted himself to, in his writing of poetry over the last few years.