



INSPIRATIONS, TRANSPIRATIONS,
ASPIRATIONS
LARS GUSTAFSSON

Born in 1936 in Sweden. Studied Theoretical Philosophy, Literature, and Sociology at the Universities of Oxford and Uppsala (D.Phil., 1978). Academic Appointments: University of Tübingen, Visiting Fellow of the Würth Chair of Poetics, Fall 2005. Fellow of the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, 2004/05. Lecturer of The Michener Center for Writers, University of Texas, 2004. Hayden W. Head Regents Professor in the Plan II Honors program, University of Texas, 2002. Jamail Distinguished Professor in the Plan II Honors program, University of Texas, 1998–2001. Aby Warburg Research Professor, Aby-Warburg-Stiftung, Hamburg, Fall 1997. Fellow of the Royal Swedish Academy of Engineering Sciences, 1995. Jamail Distinguished Professor in the Plan II Honors Program, Adjunct Professor of Germanic Studies and Philosophy, University of Texas at Austin, 1982–present. Research Fellow, Center for Interdisciplinary Research, Bielefeld, 1981–82. DAAD Fellow Berlin, 1972–73. Major literary publications: *Der Tod eines Bienenzüchters* (1978, originally published in Swedish as: *En biodlares död*). *Nachmittag eines Fliesenlegers* (1991, originally published in Swedish as: *En kakelsättares eftermiddag*). *Auszug aus Xanadu* (2003, originally published in Swedish as: *En tid i Xanadu*). – Address: c/o Blomqvist, Tegelviksgatan 38, 11641 Stockholm, Sweden.

1. Inspirations, or Hundred Good Conversations

Yes. I remember it as a happy time.

Have I ever learned as much in ten months as during my stay in Wiko 2004/05?

The interdisciplinary contacts and exchanges, manifested in colloquiums, study groups and informal conversations, are of course the very heart of Wiko. The synergies they are

able to produce are amazing and I do not think that I have learned so much in such a short time in any other milieu. Nor have I changed opinions on so many questions in any other place.

Paging through old yearbooks, I find that there has been – all along – a sort of rebel movement against the social duties of the Fellows, demanding shorter or fewer common lunches and other social events, in favor of severe monastic discipline where everybody remains in her cell, reading and writing. I think this rebellion movement is fundamentally mistaken; it is the conversations that make Wiko different from every well-kept academic library. What a luxury to hear the composer Stefan Litwin – inspired by a brilliant young biologist like Kevin Foster – compare the movement of a sequence in the genome from one place to another with the adventures of a theme in a fugue by Bach. Of course, out of these meetings are born new energies, bright ideas, surprising questions.

There are some contexts in which I have felt especially strong influences: Musicology, modern Evolutionary Biology, and Political Science.

It was interesting to see that different project groups showed quite visible differences in their communicational skills. While some research groups like the Image Researchers, popularly called “The Picture Boys” – with the remarkable exception of Professor Karl Clausberg, who generously helped me with criticism and valuable advice for a stranded earlier essay in the philosophy of color – showed a strong tendency to keep their findings and their esoteric activities to themselves, the biologists showed a remarkable generosity in time and energy in sharing their thoughts, their findings, and their insights with people from practically every other discipline represented. The same holds true for the two composers and the two musicologists of the class. The political scientists – who were always interesting – represented quite a broad spectrum, from the fashionable so-called radical views of the day, forgotten tomorrow – to profound and thought-provoking studies of the problems of modern democracy and its coming crisis.

Very inspiring was a study group organized on the initiative of Stefan Litwin and the present writer to read Thomas Mann’s *Doktor Faustus*, an informal group in which the great musical talents of Stefan Litwin and the great insight of Wolf Lepenies into modern German history contributed to fascinating a surprisingly wide following.

I have been surrounded by philosophers most of my life – since I taught the subject for some twenty years and studied it for a considerable time in my youth – so talking at lunch and dinner with Myles Burnyeat and Dominik Perler, to mention just two from a very qualified bigger group, about emotions in Plato and whether the class of un-thinkable

objects is an empty or a non-empty class, only gave me a strong feeling of being at home, the small talk of every day being the perfectly familiar and normal one . . .

2. Transpirations, or Literary Progress

My project as formulated was to write a verse novel, “The Sundays of the American Girl”. The verse novel, a genre that most modern readers probably connect with Goethe’s “Hermann und Dorothea” and other quite venerable but rusty material, but not quite absent from the modern lyrical scene (see in the German region e. g. Durs Grünbein’s “Schnee”) is of course an eminently post-modern enterprise. There is not only the long poem’s classical problem of resisting its own length. In a narrative poem, there is the obvious need to convince the reader that you could not have told the same story in prose. In other words; there has to be an obvious necessity in the form. I have achieved that – I think – by introducing very strong non-naturalistic elements in the first-person narrative of the girl. The most non-natural being that, when she tells her story, this lonely, imaginative, and very solipsistic young woman has already suffered a violent death.

Prosodically, the poem, which was finished in the mid-spring and consists of some 110 pages, is quite simple, based on couplets in a fundamentally iambic meter.

Why this rather steep identification with a young woman in a university library in Texas? The best answer might be Borges’ old thought; there has only been one man. (In the gender/neutral sense of the word, I assume.)

Having finished – more or less – the “Sundays of the American Girl”, I felt free to turn to a few other projects. I returned to an older manuscript for a novel “Fru Sorgedahls vackra vita armar” (The beautiful white arms of Ms Sorgedahl) and found that, writing the poem, I had achieved a completely new approach to the problems of a love story from 1954. Finding the tone for the American Girl, I indirectly found the right voice for the prose novel.

During the year I got an invitation that I regarded as a great honor: to deliver the “Defense of Poetry” speech at the opening of Poetry International Rotterdam. The speech, which was duly delivered in Rotterdam on June 20, 2005, in a certain sense sums up my poetical experiences of the year. A slightly shortened version was first delivered in my poetry reading at Wiko on January 26, 2005 (see also p. 268 in this volume).

A special outreaching project that I have carried through the year was a stage performance of my monologue novel *Windy* – direction and acting by two young but very accom-

plished theater people from Berlin, Nina Weitzner (director) and Eva-Marie Schneider (sole actor). The public rehearsal took place in the Kolloquiumsraum of Wiko on July 6, 2005 and the first downtown performance at the Berliner Festspiele in September.

I appreciate the friendly economic and moral support for this project from Wiko, the Royal Embassy of Sweden, and Dr. Hubert Burda, Munich. And – most of all – the unflinching determination and ambition of my young lady friends.

3. Aspirations. Berlin – the Place of Great Resources

If it were not that personal duties prevented it, I would of course have stayed in Berlin even after my session in Wiko. There is in my eyes no doubt that Berlin is the best big city in Europe for intellectual and artistic work. It is a highly civilized city, a city where all major catastrophes have *already* taken place, so that you don't have to fear much from the future, and it has the most remarkable intellectual and artistic resources in its universities, its opera houses, its libraries and collections. It is my profound conviction that great things, strong ideas, and much beauty will come out of this wonderful city in the future years. And Wiko will play its very important part in that future.