

A DEFENSE OF POETRY*
LARS GUSTAFSSON

A defense of poetry is what you are expecting. The task doesn't seem, however, quite so simple.

What shall be defended against what?

The two questions that pose themselves are:

1. *What* is it that should be defended?
2. And against *what*?

Here we have an equation with two open – yes, indeed, wide open – variables. I shall do my best to provide some content.

There are many sorts of poetry and I'm not at all certain that I want to defend them all. Poems can have very different contents. Some of them, if not actually the majority, are much too bad to be of any interest whatsoever to us. One might even be able to claim that such a thing as a half-good or a rather good poem doesn't exist. Poems, and I shall return to this point, seem to me to be a sort of intellectual operation that can only succeed or fail. It is not only that there are bad poems, there are also unpleasant poems that we would rather see erased from the surface of the earth. Of course I am primarily thinking of political agitation.

But he who searches will of course find more than that. Not all religious poetry is innocent, and he who lifts one stone or another in European modernism will find that some pretty remarkable insects can live under it. What do we do with Marinetti?

Obviously the concept "poetry" is much too general for anyone to be able to defend it. So let us try to clarify the concepts!

It is not in all its appearances that poetry is worth defending, but only in a core sense. It is the hard core that interests us. The vague periphery that surrounds this hard core – in Swedish we sometimes used to call it "centrallyrik", is something that I shall not go into.

* This is an extended version of my evening lecture held at the Wissenschaftskolleg on January 26, 2005.

Does poetry, understood in this sense, as that which is central in poetry, the successful poetic operation, really need to be defended? And if so, against whom? Where are the fiendish forces that might threaten poetry?

And, assuming that they really existed, would they not have been successful long ago? Like mathematics, poetry seems to me quite able to take care of itself.

A comparison would not be uninteresting. Like poetry, mathematics is a very old, exclusive, and obviously indispensable part of human culture. Mathematics can be used for almost any task, from completing tax returns to measuring the age of the universe, and everything in between. It is not always popular, because it is exclusive and not quite easy to learn. It is admired for its beauty, and insofar as it is mathematics, it does not express any opinions of its own. It is difficult to tell where it actually takes place, in the physical world, in our minds, or in a world beyond time and space. Its obviously infinite ability to expand exerts an enormous attraction. Mathematics, in all but its most primitive forms, is not part of popular culture. Mathematical papers are published in journals that would always operate at a loss if they were not supported by various outside sources; and exponential success for a mathematical result does not mean reaching a broad public, but recognition from those who read mathematical publications. Of course sometimes there is a general public for mathematics: the logarithm tables might be a good example, at least before minicalculators conquered the market. But a broad audience has nothing to do with *success* in mathematics.

Poetry, seen as a fundamental part of human existence, seems to have interesting similarities to mathematics, but also differences.

From my childhood I remember the almost palpable dislike that surrounded poetry. A trace of that stigma that surrounded poetry, and especially the idea of writing poetry, is something I can still feel. When friendly and talkative taxi drivers ask me about my profession, I always prefer to tell them that I have spent the last twenty years teaching philosophy at an American university.

Mathematicians have told me that they have a similar experience. They have a strong feeling that presenting yourself as a mathematician is a *conversation stopper*. People don't quite know what to do with such a piece of information. The poet can often experience similar situations. The poetic and the poet work rather as an obstacle to communication than as a means to it.

Are the reasons the same? Maybe partially. To say "I am a mathematician" or "I am a poet" are pretentious claims. How are they pretentious? As a sort of claim to quality.

But somewhere here the comparison ends. A mathematical result cannot be in principle difficult to judge. Either it is valid or it is not valid. To present something as a poem is pretentious. But not quite in the same way. There is no generally accepted procedure for deciding whether a poem really is a poem or only pretends to be a poem. There are of course acts of recognition. What is more frequent than to realize that a poem is a great poem without quite being able to explain why? Sometimes the greatness of a poem can even seem mysterious. As is the case with Goethe's "Über allen Gipfeln".

Like some other words, such as "natural", "animal", "European", the word "poem" has a double meaning. All the words I have mentioned can be understood in two different ways: normatively or descriptively. Man is an animal, but is not permitted to behave in an animal way. Everything he does belongs to nature, but still some acts of man are described as unnatural. Nomads from the Torne Valley and seal hunters from Greenland are, from a neutral descriptive perspective, European. But normally they are not invited to prestigious colloquia dealing with the political and cultural unity of Europe. In such a context, "European" becomes a value statement, connected with cathedrals, decoratively folded napkins, and the fables of LaFontaine.

In the same way, the word poem can be used for anything that looks like a poem: for chants, national anthems, and the more or less witty verses found in advertising, but also exclusively reserved for a successful speech act that has done or does something to our experience.

An interesting property of poems is that great popularity or great usefulness has nothing to do with poetic value. Are there any more pointless poetical texts than our most frequently heard national anthems? They make even third-class "hit songs" appear new and interesting. Just like hamburger joints and favorite swimming holes, these acquire an affective value as the years pass – a sentimental, or in extreme cases, intoxicating brilliance that hardly has anything to do with their propositional content. This sort of texts become as impossible to understand as the emblems on old national flags. I regard them as being as uninteresting poetically as advertising slogans, however intoxicating they can be for the moment.

On the descriptive level, it is hard to define what a poem is. "Text with uneven right margin" definitely does not help. Especially because poetry can take on so many disguises. Prose, as we know from Baudelaire, Ekelöf, and Cioran, can work as a poetic costume quite as well as the sonnet form. It is hard to find a recurrent quality that characterizes all

poems – and perhaps we shall have to be content with something like Wittgenstein's fine old "family similarity".

If we leave that general descriptive talk in which everything that looks like a poem can be called a poem and turn instead to normative talk, we will of course not recognize as a poem everything that looks like a poem. A real poem has to be a successful poem, a successful speech act. In approximately the same way that only a mathematical proof that really proves something can be called a mathematical proof. It is not enough that it looks like a proof. The proof has to prove. For the poem it is not enough to look like a poem. It has to achieve something.

What is it that the poem has to achieve to become a poem?

I think we must start looking for that answer in the medium of the poem, language. This apparently infinite, continuously changing sea that fills our consciousness like an endless melody. In this sea, we swim whether we want to or not. Everything we can know or say about the world, we are fishing out of this mighty stream.

Human consciousness is, in an interesting way, elastic. It does not permit any empty spaces. The stockbroker, hectically preoccupied on two telephones at the same time and with his eyes on the computer screen, and the prisoner in his cell, ambitiously preoccupied with training a fly to come when he whistles for it – the mental spaces of both are filled to the same extent. Out of this mighty river that always fills itself to capacity comes poetry. As an art. As an instrument to embrace the world. Because most of this river consists of language.

Through language, the poet approaches the world and the world the poet. But the poetical use of language differs in many interesting ways from other types of speech acts. And there are many from which to choose. For example, a romantic understanding is that poetry is in some way threatened by rationality, by logical and empirical thinking. That seems to me as unrealistic as to claim that the art of baking is in some subtle way threatened by oil painting.

Rational discourse always intends to take us from the subjective space where we live to a neutral one where we can meet. In scientific contexts, personal pronouns always strive to become the third person. The phenomena are supposed to be observable by anybody, the experiment is supposed to give the same result no matter who carries it out. The rational language of science and technology create a neutral linguistic space at the price of a lost subjectivity.

The poet fishes out of the same stream, but without trying to generalize the original experience into something universal and of equal validity for all. Whereas physics abstracts an experience in such a way that it holds for anybody, poetry can never have any other ambition than that it should hold for somebody. If the poet tries something else he becomes a rhetorician. In real poetry there are no universal truths, but only individual truths.

The result of the successful poetic operation is a captured experience. Not a third-person experience, but a first-person experience: it is the subjective in the experience that must achieve a sort of objectivity.

Poetry and experience

How is this transition achieved? How does experience turn into poetry? What does the poem keep and what does the poem reject?

The use of the first person in poetry can serve as an example. In narrative prose, the word "I" can in principle refer to anybody, a real or fictitious person, in other words, to whomever is supposed to be speaking. "I" in prose is nothing but an agreement among other agreements. In poetry this word can only have one meaning or means nothing at all.

Ramsberg's Thumb

There was something odd
about one of Ramsberg's thumbs.
I think a circular saw had taken
half of it.
He had built our stove in '39
and it's still intact.
The remaining joint had something childishly round
and defenseless about it.
Nature and unnature at one and the same time.
Or nature's strange ability to seem unnatural.
Even today I often think of Ramsberg's thumb.

I remember him, short and broad, an almost bald little man who actually was a clever mason. I must have seen him for the last time around 1943 or '44, thus approximately 60 years ago. He always went around dressed in a waistcoat and he had a pocket watch in his vest

pocket, clearly his most prized possession. His glasses, which were taken off and on in an unpredictable rhythm, had frames of nickel and lenses that seemed quite thick.

After he built the stove, he often came to visit. He drank coffee and played cards with my father. He stayed – I don't know how far into the autumns – in a minimal summer house further along the village road. It did not belong to him but to a nephew. Everything was very tenuous. The nephew, who was an alcoholic and given to strange fits of rage, might throw him out at any moment. Where he would go in that instance he had no idea. And then there was this with the thumb.

First, let us ask how experience turns into poetry. How does this transition take place? What does it keep and what does it reject?

If I look back at my own, in these days rather large, literary production, I observe a certain paucity of metaphors. Nothing like a dogmatic reaction, nothing programmatic. Some Swedish poets in my lifetime, for example, Erik Lindegren and Tomas Tranströmer, have excelled with a virtuosity of metaphoric technique. Have I perhaps been unwilling to compete with some highly esteemed contemporaries who obviously do this so well that one could hardly do it better? Or is the reason something different, something more internal?

The metaphors in my poems are few. Many of my poems are completely devoid of metaphors. The poem about Ramsberg's thumb is such a poem. The thumb does not stand for anything else. Except perhaps "nature", which Ramsberg as a whole could also symbolize.

Yet it is obvious that this thumb demands to mean something more than itself. It creates a sort of tension. I am very fond of provoking such tensions in my poems. They maintain a sort of openness, they remain an enigma. The poem goes in search of whatever it wants.

If this is done in a programmatic way, it soon becomes boring. Like when a painter puts a nail into his canvas and then, encouraged by an enthusiastic review, continues to put nails in all his canvases.

The poem I have presented for your scrutiny here, of course, has a lot of references beyond the one to the old mason. Who, in his loneliness, trolling from his boat in the twilight, even today reminds me of the harsh ferryman Charon as he is depicted in Dante's *Inferno*. This mutilated thumb, with its round, somewhat helpless surface, can of course be given a phallic interpretation. And then there is the business with "Nature". Sometimes I think (*honni soit qui mal y pense*) of the Marquis de Sade and his stubborn insistence that everything that is found in nature is therefore natural. While Rousseau, and to some extent

Diderot, have complicated things quite thoroughly by making nature into something positive, into a norm.

A waterfall in Lapland and an old rusty oil refinery in Bitterfeld indeed represent very different aesthetic values, but both are doubtless produced by nature. A poet who in the seventies wanted to dissuade the Swedes from building nuclear power plants claimed with great emphasis that all nuclear reactions are unnatural.

She was also in Rousseau's tradition. This thinking is insidious, because it is attractive and at the same time profoundly misleading. A poem can carry so many ambiguities!

At the end of the Ramsberg poem there is also an "I". An interesting word. "I am not here." It might seem an absurd claim. If I am not here, I am obviously not in a position to draw attention to the fact that that is the case. The affinity to "Cogito ergo sum" is striking and certainly not accidental. On an answering machine "I am not here" is a completely rational concept. But not in the poem. The "I" of the telephone answerer is fictional – the "I" of natural address is not. The prose "I" that we meet in Knut Hamsun's *Hunger* or in Thomas Mann's *Felix Krull* can be fictive. The fictive "I" can be exchanged for a proper name. The authentic "I" cannot be exchanged.

The "I" of poetry has a claim to authenticity. And who is this "I" who often thinks of Ramsberg's thumb? Is it the "I" who writes the poem? Or is it an "I" that the poem brings into play? If the latter is the case, I think we are dealing with a sort of infinite regress. One "I" produces the next in an endless series. And the poem – no different from a lady who must walk faster all the time in order not to fall because her heels are too high – will move forward toward an end that always has to be outside the poem.

The Girl

All at once life stands
smiling softly like a girl
on the other side of the stream
and asks
(in its provocative way)
But how did you end up over there?

Here there really is a metaphor. The whole poem is metaphor. On the other hand there is no "I" here. Because the "I" that is lacking in the poem is the very one through whose eyes everything is seen. One might distinguish between two sorts of "I" as they appear in poems.

Explicitly as the word “I” that is supposed to refer to the writer. And an implicit “I” that does not appear at all as a word, but as a perspective.

That is the case with this poem. It has a hidden eye. That of the observer.

“The Poem must communicate before it can be understood” (T. S. Eliot)

There is an old dream that recurs at roughly equal intervals in the history of ideas. We find it in some Renaissance philosophers in the context of the search for the original language of mankind. We find it in Leibniz, as a formalized universal language, which is supposed to make it impossible for us to misunderstand each other. And we find it under the influence of modern computer science as the dream of an ideographic superlanguage.

What all these – of course, unrealistic – language utopias try to accomplish is a language that carries its meaning immediately accessible in the same way that a face carries its expression. The sign should be identical with its meaning and immediately accessible to everybody. But this is, of course, not possible. Alphabets are very attractive objects for mathematicians. They can be used to make interesting transformations, they can be folded into themselves in elaborate mappings, thereby creating the most complicated codes. All of this is very interesting and gives results from which we can learn something, especially if we treat the empty space between the letters as a really existing sign that really exists in addition to the other ones.

But however much we fold, permute, and transform a phonetic alphabet we will never find a means by which the syntactic dimension will bring us into the semantic one. There is a decisive difference between them.

“My books standing here on the shelf do not know that I have written them,” says Jorge Luis Borges in a remarkable poem. No sentence has ever expressed a thought. Phonetical signs and phonemes have no intrinsic meaning of their own. It is we who use them to communicate meaning to ourselves and to other people. Meaning results through speech acts that are carried out by the users of language. The meaning that a sign might obtain is something that it acquires exclusively through our handling of it. Or, perhaps better expressed, through the history of its handling.

There is a sort of poetic utopia that is similar to the utopia of the universal language, a hope that the poem might work with the directness of an image. But that is not possible. Not even images work directly. Images, too, are read through conventions, even when we are not aware of it. Before we can see the image’s image, we must already be able to discern between those elements of the picture that represent and those that do not. As Nelson

Goodman has observed, a canvas depicting Winston Churchill and a canvas depicting Windsor Castle are much more similar to each other than to what they are supposed to depict.

So what can Eliot mean when he says that the poem must already establish a connection to the reader before it is understood? Is there such a thing as poetic address? A sort of harmonic key, which *places* the poem with the reader or listener?

Baudelaire often starts his poems as stories: "Autour de moi le rue hurlait" ("A une passante")

There is, as has often been observed, a very modern trend here, an influence from journalism, even from yellow journalism. We make acquaintance with a subject, who lets us share a part of his world and nothing else. Here no attempt is made to establish some sort of third-person perspective. There is this poet and he is who he is. It is maybe this attitude that makes Baudelaire's poems so immediately captivating. They don't simulate an objectivity that they don't have. We get to borrow the eyes and ears of an observer and we know that it is just this one person and nobody else. The street noise in the background and the buzzing sound of flies inside a swelling body of a dead cow surround us with their obtrusive, assonant, and still enchanting music.

This is one possible poetical solution. There are, thank God, other ones. Tomas Tranströmer's quick, exact metaphors that, like the flash of a camera, for a very short instant, illuminate a darkness. And then there are Rilke's strange constructions, where quite often concepts that no human would think could have anything at all to do with one another all of a sudden produce startling connections: God becomes a tower and the angels become staircases, the lion mask of the antique fountain becomes a mouth that talks.

This brings us back to our main theme: What is supposed to be defended? And against what?

What has to be defended is a way of communicating that is unique because it preserves the subjectivity of an experience in its very subjectivity and still makes it accessible. In a world where almost all communication strives toward a third-person perspective, this first-person perspective obviously becomes important simply because it is rare.

Sometimes one sees poetry represented as if it were in some sort of adverse position to rationality, technology, indeed, to all acts governed by reason. In a mixture of romantic and psychoanalytic desperation, poetry is presented as representative of feeling, passion, subconscious impulses, as a sort of defensive bulwark against what is supposed to be sterile rationality. But this is of course nonsense. There are, as Hans Larson, for example, already

showed in his “Poesins logik”, very strong rational and logical elements in successful poetry. And when it comes to emotions, we find them everywhere where there are human beings. The idea that emotions should have some special sort of sanctuary inside poetry is the consequence of an aesthetic that I used to call “toothpaste aesthetics”. The poet is perceived as existing inside a tube containing passions and unstable emotional life. When you press on this tube, feelings are expressed and turn into poetical expression.

Whatever you might think about this model, whatever it leads to, it doesn't lead to poetry. In the arts, ambiguity always plays a very important role. The musical chord tells us where it belongs only when it appears in a series of chords; a green patch of color on the canvas radically changes its appearance if it is placed close to a red patch. A seemingly unimportant utterance in the beginning of a novel might prove to contain the key to everything follows. The hovering element, that which is still undecided, that which only afterward can tell you where it wants to go, is the secret center of the poem.

The truth about the world is not a destination. It is a process.