

Swedish Poetry and Poetics: A Gathering

An Editorial Note

Charles Bernstein, editorial board

In the following pages, we present the work of seven Swedish language poets. John Mathias, Fredrik Hertzberg, Anders Lundberg, and Jesper Olsson all worked with me to make the selections. This Swedish cluster reflects *boundary 2*'s ongoing commitment to presenting innovative poetry and poetics in an international context and is an extension of *99 Poets/1999: An International Poetics Symposium*, a special issue of *boundary 2*, which I edited three years ago.

Gunnar Björling: Poetics and Poetry

An Introduction by Fredrik Hertzberg

Gunnar Björling (1887–1960) was arguably the most radical Finland-Swedish modernist poet, yet he was also, in some ways, the one who adhered most to the poetic tradition. Born in Helsinki, Björling studied philosophy, struggling to find an outlook on life that could carry him through it. After working briefly as a schoolteacher, he began writing poetry full-time, living a life more or less in poverty in a Helsinki basement overlooking the sea. Björling was an outcast partly on account of his homosexuality, the practice of which was legally a crime throughout his lifetime. Though his poetry was seen as obscure and incomprehensible by the general public, he had many friends and supporters, not least a number of younger poets and other

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artists from all over Scandinavia, some of whom regularly visited him in his basement.

Björling's debut, *Vilande dag* (Resting day), a book of prose poems and aphorisms, was published in 1922. He published another twenty books of poetry, the last one, *Du går de ord* (You go the words), in 1955. At one point, in the late twenties, he labeled his poetry "Universalistic Dada-Individualism," and from the early thirties elaborated a poetic practice sometimes referred to as "leaving out parts of sentences," or "breaking up the syntax." Bengt Holmqvist's account, from a 1949 introduction to Björling's poetry, is more nuanced: "On the whole, it seems as if Björling's sensitivity for words is mainly of a different kind than that which is achieved by a style based on effects created by images. He has realized this himself, when over the years he has increasingly restricted his images and instead directed his efforts at liberating the syntax itself from the schemes of everyday language. In this lies his great and innovative achievement."¹

At the same time, the everyday—or, as Björling might have put it, the "day"—and everyday language are at the center of his poetic project. (A recent study of his poetry, written by Anders Olsson, is characteristically titled *Att skriva dagen* [To write the day].) As for many other modern poets, language, for Björling, constitutes the poetic medium. What sets him apart is his technique of using only the most ordinary words, insisting that "my language is not in the words." There is in his poetry a skepticism of language—the despair that "each explanation is delimiting closing, each word leads astray"—paired with a struggle against skepticism and a strong faith in language, which makes reading it an extraordinary experience.

I have prefaced my translations of Björling's poems with a few selections of poetics, taken from various sources. The first two quotes are from a 1928 essay called "Universalism," the third from a 1947 essay called "Min skrift—lyrik?" (My writing—poetry?), the fourth is from the 1934 collection *Fågel badar snart i vattnen* (Bird bathes soon in the waters), and the last one from a contribution to the Finland-Swedish modernist periodical *Quosego*. The poems are taken from the following collections (the numbering is my own): 1, 7, and 17: *Luft är och ljus* (Air is and light) (1946); 2, 3, 18, 19, and 20: *Du går de ord* (You go the words) (1955); 4 and 5: *Där jag vet att du* (Where I know that you) (1938); 6: *Att i sitt öga* (That in one's eye) (1954); 8 and 12: *Ett blyersstreck* (A pencilstroke) (1951); 9: *Korset och Löftet* (The cross and the

1. Bengt Holmqvist, *Kritiska ögonblick: Essäer, artiklar 1946–1986* (Critical moments: Essays, articles, 1946–1986) (Stockholm: Bonniers, 1987), 133.

vow) (1925); 10: *Kiri-ra!* (1930); 11: *Ord och att ej annat* (Words and that not other) (1945); 13: *Vårt kattliv timmar* (Our catlife hours) (1949); 14: *Solgrönt* (Sungreen) (1933); 15 and 16: *Ohört blott* (Unheard merely) (1946).

Finally, a few words on my approach to the translation of the poems. Since Björling's poetry resists a smooth syntax and constructs its music through such resistance, I have chosen to bring out this angular, material aspect of the text, thereby perhaps occasionally exaggerating its "foreignness." What appears strange in the Swedish original may easily become even stranger in English, but this should perhaps be seen as an opportunity rather than a drawback. Philip Lewis, in coining the term "abusive fidelity," advocates a fidelity to the *abuse* of the original text, that is, to its abuse of conventional forms and language. Amplifying the foreign aspects of the original serves to refresh its (time-worn) material opacity. What has guided my hyperliteralism here is the thought that Björling's poetry should be taken on its own terms, by attending to its textual conditions rather than explaining the poetry or making it (seem) easier to digest.

Gunnar Björling

Poetics

Poetry is a form for life, released harmony from a given life-material or a life-impression that is expressed. Poetry is the *in itself* clear, unity and immediacy—experience, not intellect, morality, usefulness, not what we call beautiful or ugly. Poetry is the individual—and (note)—all. An unboundedness that is released in the mind.

It is not a thought, finished and complete, that seeks expression in a beautiful form. It is thought's struggle, what is in and below the thoughts; it is the things and all things behind them, the life-material, expressed in our perception, that we should render in aesthetic creation.

—to say something? say what? we know it not, it falls upon us, our thought grows, the leaf grows and our thoughts put forth shoots, new overviews come over us when we think write live experience.

I thought I spoke so simply that the birds held their breath. I said all that I was in one word's sound. It was said, I kill man. That was my intention.

When I get rich, I want to come with the birds, and say nothing comprehensible.

Then I am a poet.

Difficult I am to explain, the less thou shalt explain away.

Poetry

1.

It is hymn
it is word
without word
it is eyes and the hand
air is and light

2.

One time
but none really
and no one knows

I have a name
and name have
just that
oh that a
name

3.

That shadows
wordlessness
Till that is
and silence

And happens therein
and eye's look thereupon,
all therearound
and in light's flames

4.

Where I navigate my own great waters, am I closely come to
you where you walk
and speak soon a tongue
and known as only what we love.

5.

Cut out, cut
you, your word
cut out your
contour, that you cannot
explain.

Be what you are
be that music
be you, your self
like a word concert
be you, as one hidden in world's muteness
a dreamt concert.

6.

In that world
world and
in you
in your room's world

I
on the street
at a loss
An earth and shall lower
down its face

7.

A chord a tone a fleeing minute
a stone and fell in space or water's depths
and not returns
a milestone pushed aside
on endlessways' journey
a center in an aiming towards waylessnesses
a center rest, wave's entrance, drop's fusion
with timeless-, roomless-oceanlikenesses
— our word — our life!

8.

That in eyes
scent and coolness
only
and that like
 and like you
that — is

9.

I am sausagemakersbrawn and butcher's hand, I am toothless mouths and tapeworm. I am doctor of learned routine and professor of dumbness. I am general of an imagined salvation, I am full of — morals: I am whistlingly vacant like an ocarina. And if I carry a truth, it's not my fault. I am mockerer's mockery and world turned upside down. I am finger to finger, but I don't carry the Hand.

10.

This morning. Peace
and the gull's shriek.
A boat and flower
is land and water.
Flower's boat is day's
air under the horizon.

11.

I have no bird's name and herb's text
and from myself I speak
hear I that voice
seek I
I find words: and come,
words and more than understand
words and that not other is.

12.

Now glide all boats away
now flaps all for the windless-
wind away
now stills over bay and sea and the gulfs
now dies the summer's sun
and the yachts' white sails
now flutters light
for the last summercheertime
now — just like in the fogs
light of the fogs
light
of grayday's mildness's
the fading's non-faded
in the September evening
light
sounding and heard, and
not really
— listen not, you hear it not
but yet clearest
sounding and heard

13.

We went not namelessly away
our life was to give name
and word and form,
give eye's light
give stone and the sand
to learn that and we not did learn
and that under world's name and name
go deepest
namelessly away.

14.

As boiling stream of lava you are,
scorched, you scorch,
or petrify. As stone by stone
stands everything at fate's gate.
As stiffened statue is all, what more of altar-service, of dance
or trade, —
only body's images, grey as cement or ashes. —
What you were, is the tones, your eye caught
and ear bore
as sounds in the face.

15.

Calm it is quiet
it speaks not laughs not
it is quiet
calm, thinks not
longs not anymore
calm it is quiet
the eye has shut itself
the heart doesn't beat.

16.

A painting closed
like a whole's
glance of everything
only a reflex
an image a shimmer
day and light's
that is
as arrow-like
and upon the wing
so white
an evening's-peace-hour
bodiless hand
a morning merely
that with golden water's
hands.

17.

Words — they light up
words
so close close
simpler
the words
and gently listening
there is
and like bread in the hand
day — and nobody has it —
and in life
going right in.

18.

Word is word
and thing stands in my room

But word's image
image and word and to word

Oh don't stay
Remain not, remember not:
it is no more it is
after all

19.

We go and search
and we wander
we go and search
it is not in the words

it is not words
words not
but of a naught
oh your day

20.

You go the
words
and where
were you, it was
I know not and
that to your ear
will
and with the eye
merely with finger

(Translated from Swedish by Fredrik Hertzberg)