View metadata, citation and similar papers at core.ac.uk

brought to you by CORE

provided by University of New Mexico

New Mexico Quarterly

Volume 22 | Issue 3 Article 6

1952

From Pan to Panic: The Poetry of Artur Lundkvist

Richard B. Vowles

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq

Recommended Citation

Vowles, Richard B.. "From Pan to Panic: The Poetry of Artur Lundkvist." *New Mexico Quarterly* 22, 3 (1952).
https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol22/iss3/6

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by the University of New Mexico Press at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in New Mexico Quarterly by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact disc@unm.edu.

Richard B. Vowles

FROM PAN TO PANIC: THE POETRY OF ARTUR LUNDKVIST

A CERTAIN fascination always surrounds the country boy who makes good in a city way, the more so when he becomes the complete cosmopolitan. And so it is with Artur Lundkvist, the country boy of southern Sweden, who, two years after his arrival in Stockholm, partook in the early ferment of Swedish modernism, of which he has ever since been the dominant figure. Poet, novelist, essayist, film critic, editor, world traveler—he is a man of letters in the widest sense. Yet he is neither precious nor pontifical in the fashion of literary moguls, but cultivates his pungent provincial accent in order to avoid any taint of the aesthetic. No specialist, Lundkvist has made all literature his domain; his championing of the little known Czech writer Nezval, his flying visit to Pablo Neruda in Chile, his editorship of the ground-breaking *Europas litteraturhistoria 1918-1939* (Forum, 1946) typify the ubiquity of his interests. It is not surprising, then, that Lundkvist's poetry is of international stamp. I shall be concerned not merely with its uniqueness but with what might be called its barometric quality. Lundkvist's poetry is a sensitive record of that shift in poetic values which has taken place in the last three decades, a shift concentrated in the phrase of my title, "from Pan to panic."

Nils Artur Lundkvist was born on a farm in the province of Skane, March 3, 1906. Some twenty years later, after a folk school education and a brief stint of farming, he arrived in Stockholm. In his important debut volume, *Embers* (1928), he is intensely conscious of origin:

Published by UNM Digital Repository, 1952

New Mexico Quarterly, Vol. 22 [1952], Iss. 3, Art. 6

I was earth and rain,
I was soft clay—
formless.
But I was burned to brick,
I grew hard
and assumed form's angular laugh.

A major theme of this volume is the resolution of conflict between city and country:

We must find the primordial
and carry it to our cities.
Spring shall laugh in the doorways,
verdure climb factory walls,
grapes ripen about our chimneys.
Color your pale hands with earth
lest they wither away.
Bathe your bodies in dark water.
Rest on the earth, wait calmly, breathe deep
while the full moon rises . .

These lines are from "Evangelist" subtitled "A Sketch for a Lawrence Portrait," and certainly the influence of D. H. Lawrence was at that time powerful. As late as his review of the *Four Quartets* Lundkvist could call Lawrence a profoundly more religious poet than Eliot, and Lundkvist was happy to practice the same kind of devotion. But there were other influences, that of Walt Whitman most discernible. Lundkvist early addresses him poetically: "You, brother of all; you with the embracing heart; you, strong wanderer in life's storm." The two influences coalesce in Lundkvist's early hymns to the city: its streets "twisting like laughing women"; its billboards "screaming with red mouths"; its factories, "giant insects sucking honey from the world's heart"; and its whores "blooming in the darkness, poison between their leaves." Unlike so many poets of the twenties Lundkvist does not shudder at industrialism, for he feels that

The factory whistle should be a cry of joy cutting
    blood-red through space—
Not a whip lash on tired shoulders.

Vowles: From Pan to Panic: The Poetry of Artur Lundkvist

Man shall be liberated by the factory, poetry shall be unshackled by the machine. This "impure poetry" sings its songs to "machines bathing their bright steel limbs in blue oil"; it describes no boundary between the ugly and the beautiful, merely discovers

> . . . something of life and fire, beauty and damnation
> Something that stirs us up, kindles us to flame,
> Or cracks us in the jaw . . .

It can even, in the manner of Lautréamont, one of Lundkvist's progenitors, "paint the delights of cruelty." If not actually brutal, it is certainly poetry with a hard core of survival.

Lundkvist was not alone in this; he was, in fact, the central figure of a school of five diverse talents who appeared together in 1929 in *Fem Unga (The Young Five)*, the central document of a neo-romantic doctrine called *vitalism*. All of this poetry was of the soil, embraced the primitive, eschewed the academic in all shades and forms, sought out the great Life Force or dark inner stream, or some such Laurentian entity. It was not strenuously "engaged" to any particular cause, though the political tendency varied among the shareholders. Certainly Lundkvist soon parted company from the group when it showed Marxist inclinations. But he persisted in his cult of the instinct, continued "stretching his young golden limbs" through two more volumes which appeared in rapid succession—*Naked Life* (1929) and *Black City* (1930).

Lundkvist characterizes his brand of vitalism in *Nigger Coast* (1933), the reflective product of his African trek in search of the real meaning of primitivism. "I am a sexual romantic," he asserts. "I seek something else: the unknown. Something that explodes life's narrow limits. A world as fresh as on the first day. I have sought the elemental, the superperson, in myself and in woman. As individual I found woman as trivial and boring as myself. I sought her out as element. A sexual romantic. Why? To what purpose? Perhaps to none at all. . . ."

For better or for worse, then, woman is the center of Lund-

Published by UNM Digital Repository, 1952

kvist's poetry. He can upbraid her for her cold silk in his early impatience with conventional mores, but he goes on to immortalize her in "Song of Woman," one of his longest poems, which appeared in *Crossroads* (1942). Woman has experienced all:

> You have seen the silver in old wood
> and the sun like an eggyolk in the waters of spring.
> You have wandered through the chasm of sudden
> silence in street traffic. You have seen
> the sparrows rocking on a bar sign. You have felt
> a choking steam rise from street gratings.
> You have known the pain of dying fish
> casting themselves between ice wedges.

But the romance is there too:

> Your lusting call comes
> from the depths of the fountain. Your glance is
> a scythe in the untamed grass of my dreams.
> Your temples: the first swallows of spring
> over rain-wet roofs. Your eyelashes:
> the black in the poppy's petals. Your breast:
> a snow landscape where the sun sets . . . your loins:
> inscribed with a god's blind initials.

Lundkvist's pagan deity is unmistakable. Divinity and sensuality are compounded in the early poetry, and as late as 1944 Lundkvist titled a volume *Poems Between Beast and God.* The satyr image of Pan is at the very heart of Lundkvist's poetry; his poems range from hymn to propitiatory gesture. This lusty, lusting god is expressive symbol of an attempted fusion of ecstatic belief and abandoned sensuality; and Lundkvist's early poetry is a kind of *danse champêtre* spirited to city streets.

IN THE thirties the expansive energy of Lundkvist turned to criticism, and in addition to a spate of articles for the established Scandinavian journals he made himself felt in one "little" magazine after another—*Clarte, Fönstret, Fronten, Spektrum,* and *Karavan.* The last, under Lundkvist's editorship, did much in its

five issues to establish Rimbaud, Breton, Jolas, Malraux, and Faulkner in Sweden. If Lundkvist's criticism is seldom brilliantly imaginative, it has ranged freely and conveyed its views with unusual clarity. It is doubtful whether any Scandinavian knows American literature as well as Lundkvist. In the essay collection *Atlantic Wind* (1932) he writes wisely about Whitman, Sandburg, Sherwood Anderson, and O'Neill; in *Flight of Icarus* (1939) he admires Faulkner, the visionary, and analyzes the Henry Miller who can speak of "a divine conscience, a dionysiac condition in which the world exists as a poem." This condition was the ultimate aim of the vitalist impulse which continued to spark Lundkvist's maturing poetry of the thirties—the three volumes, *White Man* (1932), *Bridges of Night* (1936), and *Siren Song* (1937).

The spirit of Freud imbues much of this poetry, increasing the phallic content of its imagery, filling it with snails, bell-buoys, chalices, eyesockets—in short an array of protuberances and concavities. Freud gave scientific authority for what the poet has known all along. Lundkvist's panegyric in *Crossroads*, though in part a rather prosy cataloguing of case histories, concludes with a penetrating, if abstract, analysis of the Freudian position:

> All has a meaning, all has a secret cause,
> something is hid in each habit, each error:
> man is a burial place for unlived life.
> He finds himself in the shadow of his action
> and cannot discern it. He is his own light
> and cannot distinguish himself, nor sense his presence.
> He is alarmed at weaknesses, but the hidden
> breaks through somewhere else, unexpected. Caught
> within his emotion he can know but little of reality.
> All real knowledge lies beyond human feeling
> and then it is meaningless. White and black
> are only a question of lighting. In itself
> each and everything is nothing. Water and air
> are nothing, unless they are wanting. Thus
> need gives to all things their reality.

Lundkvist took his poetic rationale from psychology, accepting Jung's insistence that creative energy comes from the unconscious and that the poet is no more than instrument. He turned to automatism, or the free association of the surrealists, as a logical extension of the Whitmanesque manner. He admired its "mystical faith" in the unseen relationship of disparate objects (the sewing machine and umbrella of Lautréamont, the typewriter and frying egg of Eliot), a faith which carried metaphor into new realms of possibility. He was glad to see science and poetry to a degree reconciled. Lundkvist's poetry began to take on the quality of a Cocteau film, the quality which Cocteau himself best describes in his analysis of *Blood of a Poet.* He favored, he said, "a kind of half-sleep where I labyrinthed myself. I was concerned only with the lustre and detail of the images that emerged from this deep night of the human body." Lundkvist's achievement could not better be described.

LUNDKVIST is today writing what he likes to call "panic poetry." The term is felicitously chosen, for it suggests that the beast-deity Pan is still central to the poet's mythic intent, and it denotes an atmosphere of heightened terror and fright. This is, by definition, a "sudden and convulsive poetry, throwing itself forward in startling leaps, fragmentary but intensive, even in its omissions." The notion of the convulsive is straight out of Breton; the rest is largely an outgrowth of spontaneous practice, and derives its impact from that spontaneity, but to a certain degree Lundkvist's program takes sustenance from Vicente Huidobro's *"creacionismo,"* as he readily admits. Whatever Lundkvist may say about the convulsive, his is an increasingly controlled poetry. It is less scattered, more consolidated on the page than his early poetry. While free verse is the preferred medium, Lundkvist tends less and less to write one long and continuous poem in the manner of Eluard. He now employs more care in structure, sometimes by means of pseudo-stanzas, or stanzas that are spaced but not syntactically

unified, and other times by solid attack and clean conclusion.

One central dictum of Lundkvist's program is that the "word must not capture but liberate." And so it is with the image. Lundkvist's images send out a concentric radiation like Van Gogh's lightbulbs. And he is prodigal with them. This richness, which critics have called "tapestry poetry," is well demonstrated by the following poem composed in 1946:

> There the green deep darkens like a mine,
> rests on buckled iron and slimed wood.
> The blanket of canvas parts slowly, without sound.
> Bubbles rise abruptly from a shinbone flute.
> Iron-clawed fast to the rocks of the sea bottom
> the bell-buoy clangs and turns with the wind.
> Phosphorescent face of a wristwatch gleams
> on a skeleton's arm. The brainpan emptied
> of its luminous gruel is the dwelling of fishes:
> where thoughts beamed like a lighthouse
> the blood-filled crowns of fish gills move.
> And the bell-buoy clangs! Eye and ear in one
> it is painted in red and white
> like blood and bandage, like sunset and snow.
> A curl of blood-black oil rises from the depths:
> spreads itself out around the bell-buoy
> like the garb of a thousand drowned peafowl
> like the skins of a thousand rainbow fish.

Here, descriptive density does not totally exclude theme, as some of Lundkvist's critics would have it. "All is vanity," the poet is saying, somewhat after the image pattern of Hardy's "Convergence of the Twain," but with less moral insistence. And "all is the substance of art, all has its beauty," one might advance as subtheme.

But Lundkvist appears to be getting away from figures for their own sake, or "ebullient patches of delight," as C. S. Lewis likes to call them. He can write with sinew and austerity:

> Monday came with a morning anguish that passed
> into noisy security. All was easier

than one feared and harder than one hoped.
The chalk drawings slowly wore off the sidewalks.
The names of yesterday's heroes were already heard less
often.
And the wind rose, toyed idly with matchsticks at street
corners.

While this poem is less static than most, we would scarcely wish excised from Lundkvist's poetry the imagery that is his particular genius, even when it amounts to nothing more than an aimless chain reaction. We are dealing with a highly charged poetic content when we encounter "eyelids heavy as tropical fishes"; starvation "fastening green lilies at the temples"; woman "like a waterlily in a lightbulb"; a priest, "a flute without holes"; the wind "paring the landscape like a fruit"; an old woman "plaiting her thoughts like straw"; a night "with lips of stone." Lundkvist makes of the image a poem in miniature.

However, it must be recognized that in recent years Lundkvist's poetry has undergone a devaluation. One feels that he has been too prolific, that he has in fact driven his poetry to keep pace with his critical writings in the daily press. More serious, though, is a diminution in melodic fluidity which may be related to the disappearance of the buoyant optimism of Lundkvist's early poetry. In 1950 Lundkvist, who had always maintained a kind of aesthetic disdain for political involvement, came out for the so-called "third position," a minority Swedish compromise between the extremes of democracy and communism. Possibly this near-espousal of communism was motivated, however unconsciously, by a desire to recapture past eminence as a literary spokesman. It succeeded, however, in merely revealing Lundkvist's political naïveté and turning his early detachment into an empty gesture. I need say no more about the vanity of Lundkvist's recent dogmatizing; it has not affected his poetry.

What, finally, are the implications of Lundkvist's shift from Pan to panic? Panic, poetic or otherwise, is the central emotion of

our time and Lundkvist's evolution suggests that it is the product of Pan-worship, of a divided allegiance to body and soul. We have a kind of mythic and semantic verification, in that panic was said to have been a state induced by appearance of Pan with his disparate divine and bestial members. But it would be a mistake to chart social history from the performance of one minor poet.

"Panic" does this for Lundkvist's poetry: it creates that strange visual brilliance of kaleidoscopic images—those images that flash through the mind in the moment of fear; in short, a kind of lucid, controlled delirium. But this is lyric journalism; the reportage of a sharpened inner eye. Perhaps, in Lundkvist's case, this feverish vision will lead back to belief. It must, in fact, to produce a genuinely new poetry.