

The Death of a Beekeeper. Lars Gustafsson. New Directions, 1981, 162 pages. Translated by Janet K. Swaffar and Guntram H. Weber. \$5.95.

I took one personality, mainly my own childhood, my own youth up to the age of eighteen and then varied it into five different lives, strengthening one property of my personality here, weakening it in another by giving myself a little more of a certain talent, subtracting a talent there. That resulted in alternative lives, what I call cracks in the wall. These five novels are an experiment with the possible lives of a certain organism. They are a set of premises.

—Lars Gustafsson, quoted in the translator's afterword

The Death of a Beekeeper is the fifth in a series of five novels, the only one available to date in English. It is, like Max Frisch's *Montauk* or Beckett's *Company*, one of those pared-down, compressed pieces beside which other novels look like Biedermeier furniture. I hope that the rest of the series—*Mr. Gustafsson, Himself* (1971), *Woe* (1973), *The Family Reunion* (1975), and *Sigismund* (1977)—follows soon. If the quality of the other novels proves at all comparable to that of *Beekeeper* we would have to say that a major literary event has been taking place in the last decade.

Beekeeper, like Tolstoy's *Death of Ivan Ilych*, is a novel about a man who is dying. It is, therefore, by virtue of that time-honored interdependence, about living. The comparison of Tolstoy's treatment and Gustafsson's is a kind of object lesson about the differences of temperament and sensibility. Where Tolstoy works the pedals of his organ furiously to drive home the message that death is the big event, the grand horror, the reckoning, Gustafsson turns his attention to the psyche, its strategies of refusal, the stages through which it moves to assimilate the unknowable. His depiction, because it is oblique, is finally more moving. He has not set out, as Tolstoy did, to make our hair stand on end.

Beekeeper consists of a compilation of 'found' notebooks. They belong to Lars Lennart Westin who, we learn from the prelude, is 39, divorced, prematurely retired from teaching. He lives in a hut on a rural peninsula

and makes what little money he requires by selling the honey his bees produce. The description we get from the author/editor is the kind we might expect from an uninquisitive neighbor.

He has a telephone, a television set, and a subscription to the *Vestmanlands Lans Tidning*. Since obtaining his divorce he has had no notable relationships with women.

Then we learn, with an abrupt switch of tense:

What follows now are the notes he left behind. Left behind: for in this spring of 1975 in the middle of the thaw he finds out that he will not live to see the fall. He has terminal cancer. . . .

There is a deception here, to me inexplicable. The fact is that Westin *does not* find out anything of the kind. He has undergone tests because of pains that he has been experiencing, but when the results are mailed to him he refuses to open the letter. The whole book revolves around his attempt to cope with an unidentified process in his own private fashion, without medical intervention. The re-formation of his psyche in response to pain and doubt is the substance of the book.

The journals introduce disease in the most indirect yet telling manner. Westin's dog has run away, and when he finds the animal he cannot understand why it behaves as though it cannot recognize him. He considers all manner of possibilities, adding, almost as an afterthought:

There is another explanation, of course, but it is so crazy that I can't believe it.

That all of a sudden I have taken on a different smell in some damnably subtle fashion which only the dog can perceive.

When the hospital report finally arrives, Westin leaves it unopened and goes for a long walk. While walking he comes to a decision: he will ignore the letter, he will treat the situation as a kind of Pascalian wager:

Either this letter says that it's nothing bad. Or it says that I have cancer and am going to die. . . . The smartest thing for

me would be not to open it, because if I don't open it, there is still going to be some kind of hope.

With this calculated aversion Westin signals his determination to die his own death. He also gives us a perfect glimpse of the contradictions of his character, his speculative turn face to face with his refusal to confront facts squarely. Westin does not really believe that he's *not* going to die—the tone of his journal tells us that—but he knows that the margin of doubt is precisely the freedom his mind requires: it will hover and explore; otherwise it would be transfixed by certainty.

No reversal could be more complete than the one we go through as we exchange our first 'outside' impression of the lone beekeeper for the almost instantaneous absorption into his skin. The journals are so forthright, so actual, that we take on the lineaments of Westin's personality from the first. What is so masterful about Gustafsson's writing is that he can accomplish this with such an economy of means. He has the minimalist's gift, the ability to make the unstated present as a force. Combined with this is the composer's instinct—he knows when to amplify, when to fade, when to modulate. He achieves the credible texture of consciousness without ever straining for it.

Westin, monitoring his pain, denying it, courting it, pretending to accept it, sets down a series of reflections. These take the form of reminiscence, abstract speculation, fantasy, and constitute, in their sum, a drawing up of accounts. His has not been a very eventful or exciting life, he admits as much. There were idle, dissipated student days, a sober courtship, a distant marriage, one love affair, a divorce. But it is all in the telling. Gustafsson knows well that there are layers and layers in the psyche, layers of varying density and substance that are governed by ineluctable laws of relativity. The shifts and transformations, the precedence of one detail over another, the elisions of memory are what is fascinating. It is the process, not its objects, that concerns us. Thus, Westin can report one day that his whole career and wedded life mean less to him than the recovery of certain images from his childhood.

Midway through the book there is an interlude during which the pain subsides. Westin begins teasing himself with the thought that the worst may be over, that he might be getting well. His hesitation, his constant self-admonishment that he must not let himself begin to hope, are unbearably poignant. He has, simply, come to understand what it means to have the gift of life, that it *is* a gift. In the end, when the pain

starts up again, he writes: "I knew that I had only been granted a pause. . . . Strangely I have the feeling that I have used it well."

Susan Sontag, in *Illness As Metaphor*, has argued vigorously against the mystification and mythification of disease, cancer in particular, against the notion, that is, that disease can be said to derive from the character of the individual. *The Death of a Beekeeper* does, in a sense, promote the latter idea. The equivalence between the repressed life, unfulfilled relationships, and inability to face oneself directly, and cancer is suggested. Consider the following passage. Westin has brought Ann, the woman he has fallen in love with, to meet his wife. The unexpected happens: the two women take to one another and develop a relationship that finally excludes him. He writes, parenthetically:

(And I think that in doing so they took from me my last chance for achieving independence, for achieving a clarity about myself and my own dimensions, for which I had been destined all my life, toward which everything had pointed.

What the two women succeeded in blocking was an eruption of reality, of personality.)

That the cancer would be, eventually, the consequence of such failures is an idea that Sontag would not assent to. On the other hand, it conforms exactly to the theories that Reich had about the etiology of the disease. The dispute is not one that can be engaged in a trivial manner. I can only affirm that in Gustafsson's book the connection is well-imagined and convincing.

The profound and subtle texture of Westin's dying is not to be captured in paraphrase. It has a tonal integrity, a skillful manipulation of tenses, and it depicts very truthfully the complex emerging awareness of one human being. The reader's final impression is that between the first journal entry and the last (in which he learns that an ambulance has been summoned) a great psychic transformation has been effected. The tools of language are not very useful with respect to these processes in the psyche and the precise character of the change is not to be specified. We can say that the arrow has moved from lesser to greater, outside to inside, surface to depth, denial to acceptance. We cannot say, however, that Westin has grasped the full meaning of his experience. That would be too facile. It would be more accurate to say that he has

begun to see. The pathos is that he did not begin to see earlier, but the triumph is that he did begin.

In one of the later journal passages Westin writes:

I am of the opinion that the soul is spherical (if indeed it has any form at all), a sphere, in which a faint light penetrates just a little ways below the rainbowlike shimmer of the surface, where sensations and reactions of consciousness whirl about like soap bubbles, constantly changing their color, but it's only a very little ways.

Deeper inside there are only feeble traces of light, approximately like those in very great ocean depths, and then darkness. Darkness, darkness.

But not a threatening dark. A motherly darkness.

It is Gustafsson's intent to show how slight the 'I' really is, but to show, at the same time, what miraculous pirhouettes it can perform. This is not a contradiction but a tension of opposites, a tension that keeps us vibrating within our constructed selves while everything that is Other is perilously near.