



Article

# Into the Texan Sunset: Metanostalgia, Retro-, and Introspection in Lars Gustafsson's "Where the Alphabet Has Two Hundred Letters"

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**Abstract:** If restorative nostalgia concentrates on national past and future and reflective nostalgia on individual memory (Boym 2001), Lars Gustafsson's "Where the Alphabet Has Two Hundred Letters" does neither. This article argues that Gustafsson's treatment of the past landscape is *metanostalgic*, in the sense that nostalgia is a theme and a means, rather than a sentiment, and that the way his tropic reinvention deals with nostalgia differs from other uses. Though the poem partakes in the pastoral tradition, it is less concerned with this mode and more concerned with the notion of 'effect', of which Gustafsson has written extensively. Gustafsson has also elaborated on the aspects of 'centre' and 'periphery', notions that are used to define and extend the poetic landscape and the speaker's position in, and relation to, it. His poetic landscape encompasses the extremes of continents near and far, but also landscapes temporally removed, which may hold a different status in terms of their impact on 'effect', a status that is then not hinging on the obvious hierarchies of traditional nostalgia.

**Keywords:** metanostalgia; nostalgia; Lars Gustafsson; poetry; tropic reinvention; landscape; childhood; imagery; expatriation

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"Where the Alphabet has Two Hundred Letters"

American freight trains  
possess none of the European trains'  
dramatic, nervous need to show they are on their way.  
The American ones are on their way anyway.  
So long that it sometimes seems to spend half the night  
just passing my house,  
the American freight train often remains standing on a morning  
out in the grass: the crew plays reverse Casino  
during loud laughter in their special boxcar  
before the last of the brakeman's cabs.  
They are not unlike the uncles of my childhood,  
on the porch of the summer cottage, forgetting the world.  
When the trains at dusk gravitationally  
continue into the Texan sunset  
it is with an epic patience  
that does not give single damn if someone sees them or not,  
no children are expected to lift their heads in their yards to  
count carriages; they are uncountable, and thoughtfully  
these trains, like long stories,  
or maybe large philosophical systems, wander

through a continent that is itself a poem  
 where the alphabet has two hundred letters. (My translation)<sup>1</sup>

During his 20-year expatriation living in Austin, Texas, Lars Gustafsson wrote prolifically in a range of genres, and on varied subjects and themes. Some of his poems deal explicitly with the juxtaposition, co-existence, and interdependence of landscapes near and far, geographically as well as temporally, and thus they more overtly address the expatriate experience than other texts. Such is the case with “Where the Alphabet Has Two Hundred Letters” (Gustafsson 1992a, pp. 26–27), the poem that is the focus here, which is explicitly set in the American landscape. There is perhaps little debate that the nostalgic is part of the complex fabric of past and present landscapes, selves, and identities that Gustafsson weaves, but arguably, neither the concept of “restorative nostalgia” nor that of “reflective nostalgia” (Boym 2001, p. 49) are quite applicable to what Gustafsson does in the poem. Svetlana Boym states that “[r]estorative nostalgia puts emphasis on *nostos* and proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps. Reflective nostalgia dwells in *algia*, in longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance” (Boym 2001, p. 41). Gustafsson does neither in “Where the Alphabet Has Two Hundred Letters,” in which the images of the past instead are used to patch up the present, to fill the gaps of the current narrated space, place, and identity. Neither is there a focus on *algia*, as his childhood images do not function as moments desirable to retrieve in the sense of “rebuild[ing] the lost home” (Boym 2001, p. 41), but moments necessary in the poem for effect—a concept key to Gustafsson’s poetics—because of their impact on the present. They change the present in that they extend the poetic landscape, and add another layer of significance to the present image. In tacking between past and present, Gustafsson is able to say something about the present by use of the past, not through idealisation of it. This is also the case in another of his explicitly expatriate poems, “Austin, Texas,” in which Gustafsson weaves a complex tapestry of ‘before’s’ and ‘after’s’, which comment on the human predicament in relation to the futility of the dream of an idealised future, rather than the dream of an idealised past<sup>2</sup>. The elements of both longing and pain tied to the past are thus removed, yet the insistence on childhood memory, place, personae, and identity proves a clear interest in nostalgia. By opening up a dialogue between past and present images, which then continually shape each other, and thus shape the identity of the person inhabiting the poetic landscape, Gustafsson in such poems carries out a study in nostalgia, where the nostalgic is not the end but the means. It is a stylistic choice, a theme, a use of nostalgia better described as *metanostalgic* since it is essentially *about* nostalgia rather than itself nostalgic. In a previous article, focusing on “Austin, Texas,” I have suggested that

[w]hereas traditional nostalgia stands for a painful longing to return home, and, by extension, to a past time connected to the home, metanostalgic literary expression lacks the romanticizing element that is arguably necessary to sustain the nostalgic mode. Gustafsson’s poem is not nostalgic, but it is *about*, among other themes, nostalgia. His metanostalgia thus requires command of, rather than subjection to, nostalgia, and lacks some of nostalgia’s more naïve features, such as abandonment to emotion. It is a mode marked by the consciousness with which it treats the past. (Freij 2018, p. 71)

Crucially, I am not arguing that the metanostalgic lens is appropriate for Gustafsson’s poetry in general; many of his poems are more directly engaged with the nostalgic tradition and tropes, and many others not at all, but rather that in some of his poems he takes this metanostalgic approach, one less straightforwardly analysed, with effects calculated in a different manner.

<sup>1</sup> For the original poem, see Appendix A.

<sup>2</sup> “I’ve searched for something like this since the first day at school. But it wasn’t easy to know that something like it actually existed.” (lines 4–7) (Gustafsson 2000a, pp. 19–21). Note that Gustafsson suggests an ongoing search (“I’ve searched” as opposed to “I had searched”) rather than a finished one, hinting early in the poem that the dream is, in fact, impossible: the Austin he finds will fall into decay later in the poem, and his arcadia will turn to paradise lost as soon as it is found.

Boym argues that “[r]estorative nostalgics don’t acknowledge the uncanny and terrifying aspects of what was once homey [whereas r]eflective nostalgics see everywhere the imperfect mirror images of home, and try to cohabit with doubles and ghosts” (Boym 2001, p. 251). For Gustafsson, the mirror images of home or childhood are not “imperfect”; they are an extension of the poetic landscape, a space upon which he shines a light to expand this landscape. His discussion of ‘centre’ and ‘periphery’ is most relevant here: suggesting that in the poem’s landscape there exists no “significant discontinuity between ‘outside’ and ‘inside’” (Gustafsson 1969, p. 29); instead, [t]he poetic landscape is dominated by the order between objects *close* and *far*. It holds a center and a periphery and the tension between these key components plays a central part in the poem’s construction” (Gustafsson 1969, p. 31). The status of the components changes, and they are allowed to shift places within the poem when the inherent hierarchy of ‘centre’ and ‘periphery’ is overthrown; in the classic nostalgic dichotomic structure, the past holds an inherently higher value as it is the object of longing. In Gustafsson’s poem, there is no inherently higher value of the American images over the Swedish ones; nor of the past over the present, or vice versa. This, too, resists the placement of the poems in the bracket of reflective nostalgia, for which a different hierarchy applies since the past is what is desirable: ‘a longing for’ grants the past a superior status, especially since everything else is but an “imperfect mirror image” (Boym 2001, p. 251). Niklas Salmose states that “[i]n a strict sense, there are two crucial definitions of nostalgia: one, the nostalgic emotion, has to do with the dichotomy of *now and then* (and more spatially *here and there*), and the other, nostalgic mood, is concerned with universal grief, the fear of death and progress” (Salmose 2018, p. 112), but he also recognises that there is a “great deal of overlap between emotion and mood” (Salmose 2018, p. 111). Gustafsson, in his dissolving of the dichotomies of now and then and here and there, achieves a different mood, one that is concerned with both emotion and universal grief—the train being a classic symbol of the fear of progress and the corruption of the landscape—eventually, the train becomes part of the landscape. Or, arguably, his mood is concerned with neither: he does not dwell in the emotion; the sense of loss is minor, and the universal grief is understated. Salmose suggests that “[n]ostalgia evoked through the use of childhood is generally achieved by addressing the world of childhood as an alternative to the present” (Salmose 2018, p. 115); for Gustafsson, the childhood image validates the present—gives value to a moment that would arguably otherwise have carried little meaning.

Despite the fact that the mirror is in itself a dominant motif in Gustafsson’s work—poems like “The Well, Then and Forever” (Gustafsson 2000c, pp. 42–43) and “The Eel and the Well” (Gustafsson 1992b, pp. 59–60) deal with surfaces of water representing different aspects of the tenuous boundary between self and Other, past and present, knowing and unknowing—his mirrors do not show a lesser version of the ‘ideal past’, but instead underscore the illusiveness of reality, the tenuous boundary between self and Other. They do not express a wish on behalf of the speaker to return to the past; instead, the speaker is trapped in it<sup>3</sup>, part of it<sup>4</sup>; the past and the present are interdependent components of the poetic landscape. Thus, the notion of reflective nostalgia does not adequately describe what is at play in these instances. Some of these poems share traits with the (primarily, contemporary) pastoral mode, but are less concerned with the pastoral mode and disinterested in sentimentality. Instead they are concerned with the notion of “effect,” of which Gustafsson has written extensively. In Gustafsson’s poetry, metaphor as a tool is avoided and is instead executed at the metalevel. In his view, the focus on imagery creates a more honest text, allowing the reader to interpret in a less steered manner, as it avoids persuasive rhetorical devices, such as he deems the metaphor (in Söderström 2003, pp. 25–26). Gustafsson insists instead on the effect of the image, as a device that allows for clarity in lieu of didactics. The effect, then, of interdependent landscapes past and present is

<sup>3</sup> I was very afraid of falling into that well. I have been falling for decades into that well” (lines 19–20, “The Well, Then and Forever”) (Gustafsson 2000c).

<sup>4</sup> “I often feel like I am not just in the place of the eel but well and eel at the same time. Imprisoned in myself, but this self is already something else.” (lines 12–16, “The Eel and the Well”) (Gustafsson 1992a). My translation.

that they allow for the ‘whole picture’, that is, inasmuch as the poet shines the light on landscapes to be included in the poetic landscape, not to, as would be the case in a traditionally nostalgic mode, suggest that one space holds more significance than another.

Indeed, the stylistic choices in these poems of Gustafsson’s are at first glance supported by Paul Grainge’s examination of “nostalgia as a cultural style that has no *necessary*, relation to the experience of longing and loss, but which can nevertheless perform significant memory work” (Grainge 2000, p. 17). Further, Grainge argues that the “nostalgia mood is principally defined in relation to a concept of *loss*, whereas the nostalgia mode has no necessary relation to loss and longing” (Grainge 2000, p. 28). This seems to begin to describe the metanostalgic aspect of Gustafsson’s poetics, but since Grainge continues to tie the nostalgia mode to postmodern concepts of amnesia and memory crisis, there is less applicability to the way Gustafsson works with memory and his fusing of times and selves past and present.

The opening lines of “Where the Alphabet Has Two Hundred Letters” paint an expansive poetic landscape, encompassing the new and old countries. Importantly, they set the tone by defining the American freight trains through what they are *not*—the qualities afforded the American trains are positive; they do not possess the nervous, dramatic need of the European ones to show that they are on their way—a quality easily translated to the qualities of a human being, and perhaps especially a poet, whose need to explicitly explain what he is doing ought perhaps to be obsolete. The trains are so long, it is hard almost to imagine them as reaching, or even having, a destination—their main action is being in transition, and as such, even their movement has become a presence, a constant. That is, their movement has become so continual that it is no longer perceived as movement and instead blends into the landscape to become part of it.

When the train does stop, its significance changes dramatically: not until it stops does it become the madeleine triggering the memory, when the, presumably male, crew exit the impersonal machine and bring the landscape to life with their card-playing and laughter. They become the prompt for the introduction to the scene of characters from the poet’s childhood, in another summer, in another land<sup>5</sup>. The vortex entered delivers us to men on the porch of the summer cottage, men who, like the train crew, are “forgetting the outside world” and are inhabiting their own. Here, then, Gustafsson’s worlds merge, and the possibility for this is given by the act of stopping: the trains must stop and the crew must become visible, or audible, for the trigger to occur. The other requirement is that the poet must be there to witness the stopping and allow for the door to the past to be opened: in brief, the door to the boxcar must open for the men to exit and inhabit the world for the door to the narrator’s past to open.

Gustafsson’s childhood imagery (see, for example, Helge 2001), is a recurring feature of his poems: in “Austin, Texas” the idea of the narrator as a child is introduced very early in the poem and “a boy” returns in the final lines. Many other of his poems include children as characters or children evoked indirectly through childhood landscape. Aaron Santesso notes the “common nostalgic trope of children at play” (Santesso 2006, p. 165) in 18th-century pastoral, but there is a clear distinction between such tropes and the children of “Where the Alphabet Has Two Hundred Letters,” in which they are distinctly not at play, not even in child-like awe of, or remotely interested in, the trains. They are as passive as the trains whose movement has become non-movement. A wealth of Gustafsson’s other work deals with childhood imagery, but in “Where the Alphabet Has Two Hundred Letters” the image evoked is that of the uncles, seen only through the child’s eyes—the character of the child himself is never introduced. The other children in the poem remain equally faceless: their heads remain lowered. The sense of loss in the traditionally melancholy sense of nostalgia poetry does not feature here, but instead a larger loneliness linked to the human predicament and passing of time is in play. Though the children have not lost their youth, they have lost some of the idealism of youth (see Salmose 2018). The expanse of

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<sup>5</sup> This echoes another of Gustafsson’s poems, “Four Short Poems” and the line “summers, where did you all disappear to?” (line 2) (Gustafsson 2000b, pp. 58–59).

the landscape, of the oceans between continents, and that of time coupled with the loss of youth and the loss of awe of youth, evokes an irrevocable loss, but the poem is highly aware of these aspects' irrevocability. It thus does not try to reclaim them, but to comment on them. This comment is served well by both the pastoral and the nostalgic traditions. The key components of longing and idealisation removed, Gustafsson's work moves beyond the reflective into metanostalgia.<sup>6</sup>

It is hard to avoid making reference to Edward Thomas's (1917) "Adlestrop", considering the similarities in subject matter between Thomas's and Gustafsson's poems:

#### Adlestrop

Yes. I remember Adlestrop—  
 The name, because one afternoon  
 Of heat the express-train drew up there  
 Unwontedly. It was late June.

The steam hissed. Someone cleared his throat.  
 No one left and no one came  
 On the bare platform. What I saw  
 Was Adlestrop—only the name

And willows, willow-herb, and grass,  
 And meadowsweet, and haycocks dry,  
 No whit less still and lonely fair  
 Than the high cloudlets in the sky.

And for that minute a blackbird sang  
 Close by, and round him, mistier,  
 Farther and farther, all the birds  
 Of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire.

The poems share many traits: the train stopping, the season, the grass, but also similarities in form; the pastoral features and the focus on silence, eventually disturbed. In both poems, there is a lack of visible life and they both give preference instead to evoking this presence through sound, Thomas's blackbird echoing in the laughter of Gustafsson's train crew. In "Adlestrop," "no one left and no one came," and this is similar in "Where the Alphabet Has Two Hundred Letters," where the men are merely an extension of the train, not coming to join the surroundings but merely showing their presence through their laughter and voices. In that sense, the train crew are Thomas's blackbird, breaking the silence and bringing life to the scenery<sup>7</sup>. They thus also evoke the poet's inner life and forge the connection to the childhood memory. The image of the childhood uncles is brief, but forms a link to the childhood imagery in other poems of Gustafsson's, in some of which "Uncle Knutte" and "Uncle Einar" feature<sup>8</sup>; these are thus recurring personas whose full significance may be realised only when Gustafsson's poems are seen as fragments of a 'whole' (arguably themselves interconnected islands in the poetic landscape). We get here only a brief invitation to the past and its characters, and the poem as a whole is understated, arguably abandoned, and more unfinished than many of Gustafsson's other poems. In a typically Gustafssonian manner, these men act as triggers, evoking the old men of the narrator's childhood, and open up the interlacing of past and present landscapes.

<sup>6</sup> It is worth noting that Daniel Cross Turner has used the term metanostalgia: "Much of Justice's poetic output is therefore properly read as an expression of *metanostalgia*: nostalgia for the process of nostalgia itself" (Turner 2008, p. 190) and that his usage of the term differs from the one applied here.

<sup>7</sup> "It [nostalgia] is also evoked by sounds such as those of church bells or the cowherds' tunes played on the horn, which may either soothe or, more often, stimulate nostalgic melancholy" (Marcus 2018, p. 14). See also her discussion of the distinction between imagination and memory, and voluntary and involuntary memory.

<sup>8</sup> See "The Eel and the Well" (Gustafsson 1992a, pp. 59–60).

Gustafsson's protest here is against the inevitable passage of time, which, like the American freight train passing his house, "does not give a damn" whether anyone notices. But the narrator does notice, which is how such Wordsworthian spots in time come into being, and hence the manner in which the poet/narrator/reader is explicitly able to construe and construct himself. Gustafsson's problematisation of space, place, and time simultaneously creates effects of acceptance and resistance, and the metanostalgic treatment of the image makes for a complex application of traditional and contemporary pastoral tropes.

After the brief encounter with the train crew and their childhood counterparts, a whole day passes without any more description. The trains continue into the Texan sunset, this with an "epic patience," not giving a damn whether or not they go unnoticed. The train is de-romanticised and stripped of the glamorous notion of 'the journey' and even the children's typical awe of and interest in trains are irrelevant and no longer expected: it is not worth trying to count the uncountable. No one will see them, these trains that are such an inherent feature of the quotidian that they have lost their meaning. This ties in well with Gustafsson's "hatred of metaphor," whereby he sees it as too simple a technique (Söderström 2003, p. 25) and one that ought to be part of the poet's cognitive process rather than at the level of execution in the poem. Stripping the train of its traditional metaphorical value is part of the Gustafssonian focus on effect. It is almost frustrating to see a traditional metaphor overturned, and it does require "epic patience" to accept that 'nothing happens' here. The train itself, as a machine, as a constant, travels into the Texan sunset with this "epic patience" and without concern of what it is, or what it does or does not represent. It may be a train, or a story, or a "large philosophical system," yet it is given the more human trait of being a "wanderer" in the landscape, both a physical and a poetic one, if the two are even separable at this point: in the final lines, Gustafsson has fully extended the notion of the poetic landscape and turned the continent itself into a poem. The way Gustafsson extends and contracts the landscape, or rather, how he shifts from centre to periphery without giving those a hierarchical status, is part of the techniques he employs for the purpose of 'effect'. That the alphabet of this continent has 200 letters again suggests its vastness, and its untameability, and is arguably also making a point about the different linguistic parameters of expatriation. Gustafsson continued to write poetry in Swedish during his time in America, and the idea of working within the familiar language to comment on the exoticism and strangeness of the other language via the *Heimlich* of the native tongue is worthy of comment. Gustafsson asks: "is a poem a depiction? And if such is the case, how far away from the original can a translation be before it ceases to be so?"<sup>9</sup> (Gustafsson 2001, p. 70). Meanwhile, Christopher Middleton, the translator of Gustafsson's *Elegies and Other Poems*, in which "Austin, Texas" is published, comments on Gustafsson's response to translated works: "when finally asked about differences in texture, [Gustafsson] replied that the Swedish often has stricter measures; that some poems sound grittier in Swedish" (Middleton 2000, p. 70). Furthermore, Middleton states that "it seems to me that the originals have a rugosity of texture which the English slightly attenuates" (Middleton 2000, p. 70). Beyond this discussion, beyond language, lies the image. Translation of poetry from one language into another becomes the translation of image into image. A writer relocated to another culture and language can discover a thought-system where other emotions and images can develop, and discover a language that transcends both the native and adopted languages and is adequate to the task of conveying the new experience—a language arguably dependent on expatriation. Gustafsson's exotic alphabet, when translated into this very alphabet, bridges another gap of the boundaries of expatriation, in some way closing the circle.

The poems with these explicit expatriate references and that also evoke the childhood landscape and selves, arguably expand the poetic landscape to encompass the 'whole picture'. They are examples of an important element of his poetics: that of the impact of expatriation on Gustafsson's production, and beg the question as to how the expatriation affected and effected his thematic choices, and whether

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<sup>9</sup> My translation.

his expatriation—literal as in during his American séjour, or metaphorical as in his time-based removal from childhood—are drivers for his work.

Though expatriation is a predicament, it may also make for fertile ground for creative production: alienation makes for a turning inward and for a development of the internal landscape, a construction and re-construction of space, place, and selves that may be more ‘real’ than the objective experience. It may allow the poet to inhabit the imaginary homeland more fully and genuinely. Gustafsson says in *A Memory Palace: Vertical Memoirs*<sup>10</sup> that “if you want a child to become a poet, put it in a box for a few years. The child will then, so to speak, begin growing inward” (Gustafsson 1994, p. 19) (my translation). The inevitable temporal displacement of the poet from his childhood and the removal of him from the native landscape may create an extension of such a box, one that is both cause and effect. Such a limbo may be creating the conditions for a poetry of imaginary homecoming. This partly resonates with Boym’s statement that

Reflective nostalgics are aware of the gap between identity and resemblance; the home is in ruins, or, on the contrary, has been just renovated and gentrified beyond recognition. This defamiliarization and sense of distance drives them to tell their story, to narrate the relationship between past, present and future. Through such longing these nostalgics discover that the past is not merely that which doesn’t exist anymore, but, to quote Henri Bergson, the past “might act and will act by inserting itself into a present sensation from which it borrows the vitality.” The past is not made in the image of the present or seen as foreboding of some present disaster, rather, the past opens up a multitude of potentialities, nonteleological possibilities of historic development. We don’t need a computer to get access to the virtual realities of our imagination: reflective nostalgia has a capacity to awaken multiple planes of consciousness. (Boym 2001, p. 50)

While there is in “Where the Alphabet Has Two Hundred Letters” a use of the past to “narrate the relationship between past, present and future,” and it “awaken[s] multiple planes of consciousness,” what Boym describes here does not account for an important aspect: for Gustafsson there is no simple dichotomy between past and present, no hierarchy between the two. They borrow their vitality from each other, and arguably cannot carry their full meaning without each other. Neither is the poor reflection of the other and, as such, their interplay is different from what would fall under Boym’s reflective nostalgia concept.

“Where the Alphabet Has Two Hundred Letters” is thus arguably partly driven by expatriation, inasmuch as it creates some of the prerequisites for its coming into being. Boym articulates this as “[t]he inability to return home [being] both a personal tragedy and an enabling force” (Boym 2001, p. 252) and that “[n]ostalgia can be both a social disease and a creative emotion, a poison and a cure” (Boym 2001, p. 354). A sense of displacement and homelessness, set up by the vast distances of and between the landscapes, as well as the gulf of time between them, could excuse an interpretation of the poem as more traditionally nostalgic, but that would only be part of the story. Since poetry, or, more concretely, the landscape of the poem, is able to include it all without hierarchically ordering this universe, it does not force selves or places to compete. The path it takes can arguably be one of homecoming within the space of the poem, in that it is the space in which it is all allowed to coexist. Rather than ‘trapping’ the poet in the past, as a traditionally nostalgic position would state, the metanostalgic view submits that, like Gustafsson’s view of metaphor, in which the metaphor is merely a cognitive step in the construction of the poem, not a goal in itself, nostalgia is here merely a tool, and a sharpened one at that, of many in the construction of the poem.

There are many examples of tropic change in the nostalgic tradition, whether it has been used as “simplistic, unthinking nostalgia” (Santesso 2006, p. 166) or as “mock-nostalgic pessimism”

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<sup>10</sup> *Ett Minnespalats: Vertikala Memoarer.*

(Santesso 2006, p. 169). Santesso points out that “to use pastoral at all is, to a certain extent, to be complicit with the idealization he [Crabbe] despises: not idealized, not pastoral” (Santesso 2006, p. 175). This statement is arguably only partially applicable to Gustafsson’s pastoral, which manages to engage with the pastoral without idealisation. Gustafsson’s use of nostalgia here is thus a different kind of application, one that engages with contemporary pastoral tropes and the nostalgia they elicit but without succumbing to the nostalgic: “Where the Alphabet Has Two Hundred Letters” does not strive to regain anything, but comments on the inevitable passing of time with laconic detachment. Nostalgia is used in a way that is a tropic reinvention in which the pastoral and the nostalgic tradition that it represents takes a new step in the nostalgic direction: the longing is rendered weaker or obsolete, and it is in the poem itself that the past landscape is salvaged—a meagre salvation, and one largely left without comment. Time itself is a vast landscape, and its language so large that its alphabet has 200 letters. The trains have neither beginning nor end, and leave little opportunity for reflection or remembering. Gustafsson creates here a feeling of *plus ça change* and, and as the train disappears into the sunset, this resigned mood is what lets him get away with this image, which could be interpreted as a clichéd metaphor. Because Gustafsson strips it of its traditional meaning, it is arguably no longer a metaphor at all (is it even a train)?

The debate about whether nostalgia is good or bad, or indeed about what nostalgia even is, is ongoing, and itself rather worn. Sean Scanlan notes that

In current criticism, however, nostalgia as warning, as pejorative marker of certain historical changes, has given way to nostalgia as a more ambivalent, more engaged, critical frame. Now, nostalgia may be a style or design or narrative that serves to comment on how memory works. Rather than an end reaction to yearning, it is understood as a technique for provoking a secondary reaction. (Scanlan 2004, p. 4)

In the same vein, Nadia Atia notes the drive to move past the deadlock and to “call attention to nostalgia’s critical potential” (Atia 2010, p. 181). Thus, settling for simple dichotomies of nostalgia no longer suffices—instead, it is time to draw attention to the highly complex ways in which nostalgia is at play. Scanlan submits that there is a growing “suspicion of previous conceptualizations of nostalgia” (Scanlan 2004, p. 5) and there are reasons to subscribe to such suspicion: it is time to view nostalgia in light of the complexities of contemporary literature. Gustafsson’s work lends itself to such attention as his work can move such conceptualisations forward. Rather than remaining nostalgic for the nostalgic, there is opportunity here to develop the critical discussion of these tropes, for the tropes themselves have already developed.

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## Appendix A

Gustafsson’s “Where the Alphabet Has Two Hundred Letters” is provided in the original Swedish below.

Där alfabetet har tvåhundra bokstäver  
Amerikanska godståg  
har ingenting av de europeiska tågens  
dramatiska, nervösa behov av att visa att de är på väg.  
De amerikanska är på väg ändå.  
Så långt att det ibland tycks tillbringa halva natten  
bara med att passera mitt hus,  
blir det amerikanska godståget ofta stående en förmiddag  
ute i gräset: besättningen spelar krypkasino  
under höga skratt i sin särskilda vagn

före den sista bromskuren.  
 De är inte olika min barndoms farbröder,  
 på sommarstugans veranda, glömska av världen.  
 När tågen i kvällningen gravitetiskt  
 fortsätter in i den texanska solnedgången  
 är det med ett episkt tålamod  
 som alldeles ger fan i om man ser dem eller inte,  
 inga barn väntas lyfta på huvudena i trädgårdarna för att  
 räkna vagnar; de är ouppräkneliga, och tankfullt  
 strövar dessa tåg som långa berättelser  
 eller kanske stora filosofiska system,  
 genom en kontinent som själv är en dikt  
 där alfabetet har tvåhundra bokstäver. (Gustafsson 1992a, pp. 26–27)

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