



Photograph: Ulla Montan

Care

- a Nobler Form of Love

A tribute to **Ragnar Thoursie** (1919-2010) – poet and civil servant – who died aged 90 on 12 July 2010. Less than a year earlier, he had published his last collection of poetry, *Sånger från äldreomsorgen* (Songs from Old-Age Care).

Brita Green

Translations by
Brita Green and
John
Charlesworth.

Sixty years ago, Ragnar Thoursie was a groundbreaking figure within Swedish modernism. His first two collections of poetry, *Emaljögat* (The Enamel Eye, 1945) and *Nya sidor och dagsljus* (New Sides and Daylight, 1952), became greatly influential, and poets like Tomas Tranströmer, Kjell Espmark, Folke Isaksson and Kristina Lugn have all acknowledged their debt to him. Espmark says, 'To his younger colleagues Thoursie passed on a surreal freedom - dreamlike visions and breakneck associations – but a freedom disciplined by a film-inspired visuality and a wish for rounded completeness learned from Gestalt psychology. – Common to us all is our admiration for the “visually strict” master who taught us to hold on to an image and allow it to develop with visual logic.'

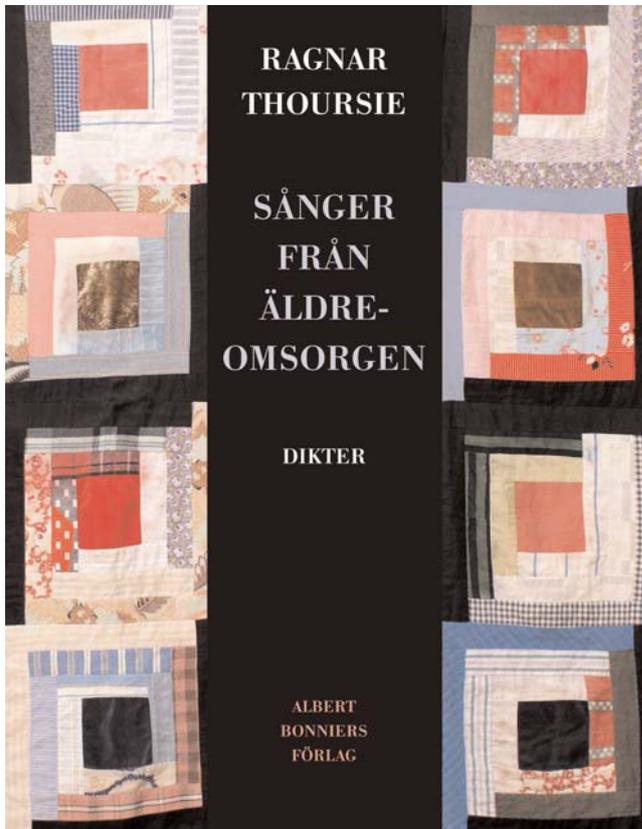
It was not only poets that Thoursie inspired: politicians, too, were in tune with his ideas. He grew up in a working-class home, which was religious but not political. It was his travels in post-war Europe, devastated and in ruins, that made him a convinced socialist and a supporter of his country's efforts to produce an ideal, fair society. This – the phenomenon that became known as 'the Swedish model' – was something that could only be achieved if everyone pulled together. Prime minister Olof Palme famously quoted Thoursie's lines from 'Sundbybergsplogen' (something the ageing poet admitted to being proud of):

<i>En öppen stad,</i>	An open city,
<i>ej en befästad,</i>	not a fortified one,
<i>bygger vi gemensamt.</i>	we'll build together.
<i>Dess ljus slår upp</i>	Its light flares up
<i>mot rymdens ensamhet.</i>	towards the loneliness of space.

Thoursie was not a prolific poet. After studying German, Psychology and Religion at Stockholm University, he had a long career in the Swedish civil service, working for the National Labour Market Board until his retirement in 1985. During those working years he wrote very little poetry. 'The two occupations were simply not compatible. I was fully occupied with my work, and I had neither the energy nor the time to write. It just was not possible to sit there polishing lines of poetry whilst I was engaged in labour market policies.' He returned to poetry after retiring, and *Kråkorna skrattar* (The Crows are Laughing) appeared in 1989. Twenty years later, he produced his last collection, *Sånger från äldreomsorgen* (Songs from Old-Age Care, 2009). He also wrote autobiographical novels, e.g. *Elefantsjukan* (Elephantiasis, 2003), a partly ironic description of the civil service.

In an interview with Annika Hallman in *Ordfront magasin 4/09* he said that being at the receiving end of old-age care had been a revolutionary experience for him, both positive and negative. He began jotting down notes in 2008, while he was still living in his flat with regular home helps and visits to a day care centre. He then moved to a care-home on the outskirts of Stockholm. 'When I had written about a hundred of those jottings, I began to see that maybe they could be turned into a book. They are not very pretty poems – the important thing is what I have to say.' At first he was struck by the commercial nature of the care, 'the large scale, the food that was delivered in boxes for a fortnight at a time...' But he did not set out to criticise society's care. On the contrary, he showed us that the people who deliver it – the 'brave welfare army' – are on the whole caring and kind. 'Somewhere I have defined it', he said in the interview. 'Care is actually a nobler form of love. Love, of course, – as opposed to care – has within it a fair amount of selfishness and calculation. In care, there is nothing of that. Everything centres on the other person.'

RAGNAR
THOURSIE



Sånger från äldreomsorgen is peopled by these carers, home-helps, drivers, and by the poet himself and his fellow recipients of care. But there are also memories, glimpses of his parents, his father Johan Algot, who was an engine driver, and his mother Signe, a housewife. On the wall of his room he had a patchwork quilt made by mother Signe when she was in her 80's. Details from it are also used on the cover of the book. In an introduction Thoursie likens his work to that of his mother, and describes the poems as 'a collection written in my extreme old age, a relaxed experiment, a kind of patchwork quilt. Its style is close to prose, observing, commenting, unconcerned about ambitions, with no great claims, mostly with a friendly view of things. Good-natured. But serious.'

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The book is dedicated to 'the brave staff of old-age care'. It consists of short impressions, thoughts and memories, some insightful, touching, some humorous, some quite mundane, all written in a simple, direct style. Topics range from peeling potatoes and the problems of reversing with a zimmer-frame to thoughts on life and the fear of death. The collection is divided into four sections, 'Another world', 'Childhood country', 'The smile' and 'Life's edge', which deal with, respectively, ageing and encountering society's help, memories from childhood, the fellowship of the elderly in care, and 'the last stretch of the road'. The chosen poems come mainly from the first and third sections. In one of the last poems in the book Thoursie asks himself, 'Where am I going?' He has already given us his answer a few pages earlier:

We came from nothing,
go to nothing.
In between is our life,
a streak of light, a poem.

Questions

Is that me?
I stretch my hand out
for a slice of bread. An old man's hand,
thick veins lined
dark blue against the pink-pale skin.

Is that me?
In thought, half a step behind, another
me. Healthy, young, in memory.
Sometimes lost but always returning,
just as fresh, as
young, untouched by the mould of years.

A fear stirs inside me
at the veined hand holding the bread
I'm about to eat. Why does my old hand feed
my old me, which soon will be extinguished?

Frågor

Är detta jag?
Sträcker ut en hand
till brödskivan. En gammal mans hand,
överdragen av tjocka ådror,
mörkblå mot den vitrosa huden.

Är detta jag?
Ett halvt steg bakom i tanken ett andra
jag. Friskt, ungt, i minnet.
Stundom utplånat men ständigt återvändande,
lika friskt, lika
ungt, opåverkat av årens mögel.

En skräck rör sig inom mig
inför den ådrade handen som fattar brödskivan
som jag skall äta. Varför föder min gamla hand
mitt gamla jag, det som snart skall förintas?

Suburban Babel

*Raja, Addis, Eva, Mirja, Nasi, Jami,
Abbi, Sirpa, Karin, Halimo, Jehosif...*
Names from the bewilderment of Babylon?
No, just from the Council – in Nacka, near Stockholm.
Some of the many
immigrants and natives who care
for us old folks living alone.
Home helps, welfare's brave army.

Nackas Babylon

*Raja, Addis, Eva, Mirja, Nasi, Jami,
Abbi, Sirpa, Karin, Halimo, Jehosif...*
Namn ur Babylons förbistring?
Nej, från Nacka kommun i Stockholms län.
Några bland de många
invandrare och infödda som sköter
oss ensamboende gamla.
Hemtjänstens tappra välfärdsarmé.

RAGNAR
THOURSIE**Inexplicable**

Ordinary ... inexplicable ...
 Three old people in their special bus leaning forward
 open-mouthed to watch the miracle.
 A day or two into May, spring's month,
 a time of wonder. Overnight, greenness has come to the trees.

For seventy, eighty years maybe, they've seen it return
 and are just as moved as on the first time.
 This sudden greenness of the trees on a morning in May.

Ordinary.
 Inexplicable

Det ofattbara

Det vanliga, det ofattbara.
 Tre gamla sitter framåtlutade i sin handikappbuss,
 med öppen mun åser de undret.
 Det är ett par dagar in i maj, vårmånaden,
 undrens tid. På en natt har grönska fallit över träden.

I sjuttio, åttio år har de sett det återkomma,
 ändå är de lika gripna nu som första gången.
 Den plötsliga grönskan i träden en morgon i maj.

Det vanliga.
 Det ofattbara.

Contentment

Invited out to have Sunday tea
 with children and grandchildren.
 I feel presentable:
 had a shower, hair been cut,
 shirt clean and freshly ironed.

That's life now,
 little things of great weight.

Välbefinnande

Inbjuden till söndagskaffe
 hos barn och barnbarn.
 Känner mig presentabel:
 fått duscha, klippa håret
 ren skjorta, nystruken.

Sådant är livet nu,
 små saker – stor betydelse.

Bird Life

Have you noticed all the little birds
 flitting in and out of the tree
 outside the window?
 No – my neck's too stiff.
 Can't turn round to look.
 But I'm glad
 to hear it, glad that they are there.

Fåglars liv

Har du sett alla småfåglar
 som flyger av och an i trädet
 utanför ditt fönster?
 Nej, jag är så stel i nacken.
 Kan inte vända mig om och se ut.
 Men det gläder mig
 vad du säger, att de finns där.

Care for Sale

The home-helps call the old man a 'customer'.
Kindness is something to be sold,
so many *kronor*, say, for pulling on his trousers.
Washing a back is much the same
as a piece of cheese in Tesco.
It's all a way of making money.
There's lots of backs and trousers,
lots of cheese on shelves.
Stand by for the take-over –
TescoCare
prepacked for the old.
Whatever became of the Good Society?

Distraction

There is in the elderly
a sort of distraction from life.
It shows up as a quiet absence
when younger folk are talking.
It's partly loss of hearing,
the difficulty of following a thread. But
partly that they have a different view now
of conversations that are worth their joining in
wholeheartedly.

Distraction från livet

Det finns hos de gamla
en slags distraktion från livet.
Den yttrar sig i en stilla frånvaro
när de unga pratar. Delvis
beror den på att de hör sämre,
har svårt att följa med. Men
delvis också på annan värdering
av samtal som det är värt att delta i
helhjärtat.

The strawberry thief

A thief in the strawberry bed
– me aged five, and devious – and
warned by Mum that I must not pick.
Then she spots me through the window
lying down and *biting off* the berries.
When I come in with my mouth all red
my telling off is only mild.

Försäljning av omsorg

Hemtjänsten kallar den gamle 'kund'.
Till kunden säljer man vänlighet,
t.ex. hjälp att dra på byxorna à kronor.
Tvättning av ryggen lika med
en bit ost på Maxi.
Allt lukrativ rörelse.
Det finns många byxor och ryggar.
Liksom många ostar på hyllan.
Nästa steg: att Maxi tar över och säljer
en helhetslösning
– färdigpaketerad äldreomsorg.
Vart tog Folkhemmet vägen?

Jordgubbstjuven

En förslagen tjuv i vårt jordgubbsland
– jag i femårsåldern – mamma
hade tillhållit mig att inte plocka.
Då ser hon genom förnstret hur jag
lägger mig ned och *biter av* jordgubbar.
Då jag kommer in med munnen röd
får jag bara lätta bannor.

RAGNAR
THOURSIE**Happy voices**

Anita defies the silence,
sings a few happy notes,
loudly, resoundingly, Kay perhaps
joining in. Between them they keep up
the happy mood. 'Hell's bells!'
shouts Kay. 'That's what these sad homes need. More singing!'

Glada tonfall

Anita trotsar tystnaden,
hon sjunger några glada toner,
högt och ljudligt, kanske Kajsa
stämmer in. De två bär upp
den lätta stämningen. 'Ja, djävlar!'
ropar Kajsa. 'Mer sång behövs i äldresorgen!'

Kay's cake

Kay has just turned 85
and treats us all to a piece of cake
with our afternoon tea.
'It's my son actually,
who's the host,' she says.
'He's the one who bought the cake,
and sends you all his greetings.'
Applause for Kay
and for her son.
'But,' she adds, 'I paid.'

Kajsas tårta

Kajsa har just fyllt 85
och bjuder alla på tårta
till eftermiddagskaffet.
'Egentligen är det min son
som bjuder', säger hon.
'Det är han som köpt tårten
och hälsar alla.'
Vi hurrar för Kajsa
och för sonen.
'Fast jag betalade', tillägger Kajsa.

A reprimand

The friendly staff
aren't always friendly.
One of the old folks had decided to swap places
at the dining table, and is being told off sharply
and loudly. We all listen.
'Understood? The seating at the table
is for us to decide, not you!'

Silence in the big room.

Uppsträckning

Den vänliga personalen
kan ibland bli ovänlig.
En av de gamla hade självsvåldigt bytt plats
vid matbordet, tillrättavisas
bryskt, med hög röst. Alla lystrar.
'Har du förstått? Bordsplaceringen
bestämmer vi, inte du!'

Tystnad i den stora salen.

The smile

There's an old lady
in a wheelchair opposite me at the breakfast table.
Every time I catch her eye
her smile's so friendly that it makes me glad.
What does it say, that lovely smile?
Does she realise that I am on the same road
as her? That both of us are travelling now
together on the last stretch of the road
of life?

Leendet

Det sitter en gammal dam
i rullstol mitt emot mig vid frukostbordet.
Var gång jag höjer min blick
ler hon så vänligt att jag gläds.
Vad säger hennes vackra leende?
Märker hon att jag är på samma väg
som hon? Att vi båda just nu färdas
tillsammans det sista stycket väg
i livet?

Twig against the windowpane

In my last home,
my simple two-room flat.
The twig of an ancient fruit-tree
taps against my windowpane. Reminds me
of the garden when I was a child, its richness,
and calls me.
Soon, soon!
Calls me to depart.

Kvist mot fönsterrutan

I min sista bostad,
en enkel tvårumslägenhet.
Kvisten av ett gammalt fruktträd
knackar mot fönsterrutan. Påminner
om trädgården i mitt barndomshem, den rika,
och kallar.
Snart, snart!
Den kallar till avfärd.