

## The artist through a glass darkly

Anna Laestadius Larsson's imagining of the life of Hilma af Klint

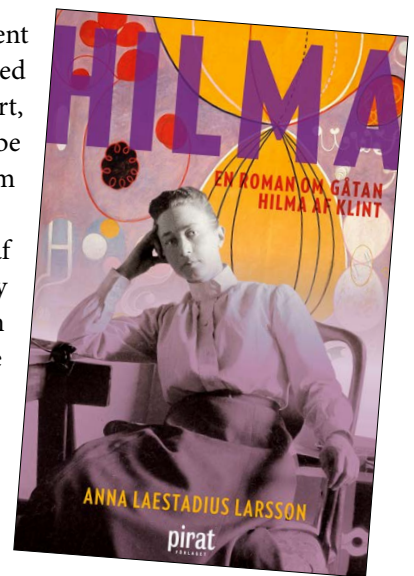
Anna Laestadius Larsson, *Hilma. En roman om gåtan Hilma af Klint* (Stockholm, Piratförlaget, 2017), 322 pp.

Once upon a time in the 1990s, I decided that I was going to rework Dostoevsky's *The Grand Inquisitor*. In my ingenious retelling, Jesus would be replaced by an ageing Elvis Presley who, years after having faked his own death, decides to give himself back to the world as the gift it did not know it needed. In hindsight, I can only marvel over this bizarre plan that thankfully remained unrealised, but, in my own defence, I was seventeen at the time and therefore prone to believing that every flash of inspiration must indiscriminately be recorded for the sake of posterity. After several failed attempts at starting, it dawned on me that trying to speculate about the behaviour of Elvis in any hypothetical situation, whether it be relatively realistic or downright outlandish, was like trying to figure out why bananas are yellow and not purple, or why they even exist at all. However, as an early exercise in creative writing, it taught me about some of the difficulties inherent in trying to breathe life into a historical figure, difficulties which become almost immediately apparent to the reader of Anna Laestadius Larsson's novel *Hilma. En roman om gåtan Hilma af Klint* (2017), or any other member of the rapidly-expanding 'biographical fiction' family. In this particular book – one of a number of historical novels written by Laestadius Larsson focusing on the situation of women in earlier times – we meet an abrasive and tragically self-absorbed version of the Swedish artist Hilma af Klint (1882–1944). In part influenced by her interpretations of esoteric teachings fashionable in the decades surrounding the fin de siècle, the works she created have long resided in the space between the forgotten and

unknown until relatively recent times. Today she is recognised as a pioneer of abstract art, and in 2018 her work will be exhibited at the Guggenheim in New York City.

Born in 1862, Hilma af Klint lived both the early and final years of her life in Stockholm, although the trials and tribulations the years held in store for her would lead her to settle down in other parts of Sweden for varying lengths of time as well. At the age of 20, Hilma was accepted as a student at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts. Here she would study from 1882 to 1887, mainly doing work involving drawing and the painting of portraits and landscapes. She was later awarded a scholarship in the form of shared studio space, and her conventional work would eventually serve to generate an income as well as bring her a certain degree of recognition; but what is more relevant for our purposes is the vein of her work that had an entirely different source of inspiration, namely, an interest in gaining spiritual insight and exploring the boundaries of existence.

Like many of her contemporaries, Hilma was no stranger to the séance chamber, and what began as adolescent attempts at establishing contact with the unknown blossomed in adulthood, after being tempered by a deep interest in such currents as Rosicrucianism and theosophy, and led to the formation of a group that that would be called 'the Friday Group' or 'the Five', an effort she undertook



with four other female artists. Their meetings combined such elements as meditation, readings from the New Testament, and facilitating a mediumistic message service which involved receiving communications from beings they called 'the High Ones'. Hilma would with time come to see herself as being the one to whom messages of a more important nature were directed, and after ten years of work within the group, she accepted a grand mission from her spiritual patrons: to produce what she would call the 'Temple Paintings', an enterprise in which she was engaged from 1906 until 1915. The result was 193 highly symbolic paintings that were divided into several series and subgroups and which now can be seen as some of the first examples of abstract art.

When Hilma af Klint passed away after a car accident in 1944, she left behind a massive body of work. Along with it, she left a directive that it should not be shown for at least 20 years following her death. Although she understood that she had produced something unique, she struggled with its meaning, as did Rudolf Steiner, whom she consulted about the matter. She was convinced, however, that the future citizens of the world would look at it quite differently, and while this is hardly a matter about which one would need to consult any High Ones due to its sheer obviousness, she was of course correct in several ways that proved to be quite auspicious for her posthumous reputation.

Following the artist through her early life, adolescence, adulthood and twilight years, the framework of Anna Laestadius Larsson's novel is a rather joyless narrative concerning an elderly Hilma's fretting about what will happen to her life's work and her indelicate attempt to place its massive weight on the shoulders of a largely uninterested relative. While it is interesting enough, due to the generous amount of speculation involved in its construction, to compel the reader to keep turning pages until the last one is reached, it also has a cringe-worthy quality potent enough to boil the blood of anyone who was ever been flattened like a pancake by the steamroller of someone else's grandiose visions and desire for self-realisation. It is, however, debatable whether or not the finished product would ultimately satisfy one searching for something more than a harmless way to spend a long wait at an airport or a hot summer's day at the beach. Those interested in esotericism, for example, will find that such currents and the environments in which they particularly flourished at the time in question,

rather than being depicted in the light of their relative commonplaceness and popularity, are instead exoticised. Furthermore, a strained artificialness pervades some of the scenes featuring other historical figures, and the overall effect is not unlike what one might experience upon viewing one of those versions of Edward Hopper's painting *Nighthawks* in which Marilyn Monroe, Humphrey Bogart, James Dean and John Wayne have all gathered together at the same sterile bar. In addition to the above, a number of social issues such as heteronormativity and misogyny are treated in a heavy-handed way; rather than subtly infusing the plot, they are instead indelicately piled on top of it. That women were powerful players in spiritual circles like the ones portrayed in the novel is of course a widely-recognised phenomenon, and asserting this today would hardly cause most people with an interest in the subject to raise an eyebrow. On the other hand, it has of course admittedly been the case that many of these female figures were overshadowed by their (sometimes less talented and less industrious) male associates.

Despite these objections, the novel does make several important points that could lead to new insights and interesting discussions. One of these is its depiction of an overworked and exhausted Rudolf Steiner who simply did not have the time or energy to accommodate each and every person who sought his advice. While travelling throughout Europe as a celebrity on the lecturing circuit, his life was a seemingly endless string of activities and meetings – a situation that was largely the same when he was stationed in those few places that he might have called 'home'. The spiritual scientist, it turns out, was a mere mortal who quite simply could not be all things to all people, and this imagining of him, set against glowing memories recorded by devoted admirers, is likely close to the reality of Steiner's day-to-day life. Another interesting aspect highlighted in the novel is the relentless self-absorption that sometimes accompanies the notion of being on a spiritual mission. From the person who uses their yoga mat as a battering ram to secure the last free seat on the subway train, to the group leader who spends decades ignoring their own partner and children in order to cater to their followers, in contexts having to do with religion, figures like these are ubiquitous, and Anna Laestadius Larsson's Hilma fits into this category with ease. Such a characterisation creates a situation for the reader in which they more or less passively participate as the

wants and needs of person after person are trampled upon by a seemingly oblivious Hilma, who, unlike Ebenezer Scrooge, never wakes up to the regrettable nature of her treatment of others. In the silence that ensues after the last letter of the last word on the last page is read, the one who has made it that far is granted a perhaps undesired opportunity to reflect upon the ways in which they themselves have been shoved out of the way and into oncoming traffic by others who were chasing their own dreams as well as the occasions upon which they were the ones doing the shoving.

My updated version of *The Grand Inquisitor*, had it ever taken form, would never have reached the status of 'modern literary classic', and, generally speaking, this will likely be case for the very real *Hilma. En roman om gåtan Hilma af Klint*. However, as touched upon above, it contains within it the seeds for prompting further inquiry and future endeavours. It could, for example, open the way for explorations of the connections between art and esotericism, an area which has much to offer someone looking for a new project to undertake. If nothing else, it could serve to inspire a larger audience consisting of a wider range of individuals to acquaint themselves with the impressive and diverse body of work left behind by a great, and until recently greatly underappreciated, artist. ■

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