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On reading John Cowper Powys's *A Philosophy of Solitude*

For Sven-Erik Täckmark

Only the lonely know the full vibration of a look, a touch, a word, let fall at the moment when most it is needed. If you want money, go to the poor. If you want sympathy, go to the lonely![1]

The Sacred Thorn
on Wearyall Hill

FOR SOME years during the 1990s I read everything I could find by the Carmelite monk Wilfrid Stinissen[2]. He wrote about solitude, so that for me his books became a refuge from social pressure. Reading them offered a source of wise advice at a difficult time in my life.

Amongst the flood of books offering more or less meddlesome therapeutic advice, the values propounded by the Catholic priest seemed to offer a much safer basis on which to advance. His postulate was to trust. Stinissen is a Christian counsellor; everything he says and recommends comes from the mystery of belief: "To confront the darkness in yourself is painful. But if the therapy is successful life becomes richer. To visit God for therapy is not less painful."[3] Whatever path you chose presents difficulties anyway.

Compared with John Cowper Powys, Stinissen looks like a classical therapist. His therapy is simply Christian belief, its rituals and collective patterns of conduct. The texts are loaded with Christian symbols: "We are born with an eternal, unspeakable hunger for love [...] that is why God is there."[4] The peace and tranquillity Stinissen wants to lead us to is always the peace and tranquillity of belief. The light seen in the tunnel of darkness that he describes could also be called baptism. Because it is to baptism and Christian submission his advice leads us. Stinissen's own everyday life is life in a monastery. When he writes and talks to us he does so from the experience of the monastery. That does not mean that what he says would lack relevance to people outside the monastery. But it means that every single word is a part of Christian belief, that every piece of advice is a part of the Christian system of dogmas.

Reading Powys one finds no belief, no system of dogmas or doctrines. He is in the best meaning of the word a walking philosopher, who during his walk

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[1] J.C. Powys, *A Philosophy of Solitude*, Simon & Schuster, 1933, pp.53-4

[2] Wilfrid Stinissen is a Swedish Carmelite friar of Belgian origin, a lecturer, a "retreat master", a philosopher whose works are based on theology.

[3] W. Stinissen, *Natten är mitt ljus*, (The night is my light), 1990, p.62

[4] W. Stinissen, *Vandring till sanningen* (Wandering towards the truth), 1987, p.90

develops his thoughts on the character of solitude. The walker formulates his words out of an inner development, not from a set of dogmas taken from others. He is not free from historical heritage, but is free from the apparatus of doctrines when he is pondering on solitude and being. He wishes to be free from the feeling of living a meaningless life, and at the same time not to put his life in the hands of an institution, worldly or supposedly divine. Where Stinissen says that solitude is relation with God, Powys says that it is a preparation in order to be able to relate to other people. Powys seems to mean that intellectuals may be forced to give up their loneliness because of love or lust, (and in that respect the thoughtful, developed person is no different from others), but that they will never give up their loneliness in order to take part in herd-pleasure. The need for kindness and intimacy is perhaps the trap that most of us fall into; the echoing emptiness of loneliness makes us sit in the pub, even though we detest tobacco smoke and the vulgar, throbbing rock music. So Powys does appear to mean the thoughtful person only gives up his solitude if love or lust has struck him.

To become aware of the healing power of solitude, one has to choose a life with a routine. Powys says that routine is an awareness of the cyclic course of nature itself. Without routine everything falls apart and seems as impossible as poems without rhythm. Where Stinissen talks about reaching the light on the road through a long, dark tunnel, Powys says that every day has to be built on a strict routine, he even talks about the rhythm of the universe. If you live your daily life in that way, life does not become a struggle against darkness and a longing for light, but a cyclic course where every part is important to the whole. Basing your life on rhythm enables you to affect your own thoughts, so that the negative and dark are replaced by what Powys calls “life illusion”, a kind of truth about yourself, a vaporous eidolon of yourself, a ‘shadow’ following you for the rest of your life.

Powys likes to speak about ‘opinions’ in a negative way. He seems to mean that there is something more profound, a kind of lifetime experience that has nothing to do with ‘opinions’. Opinions are no more than markers to be shown in public, so as to avoid being expelled from a group or to underline belonging to it. The parade of opinions is today the most common way of showing one’s political, cultural and social allegiances, in order not to be accused of homophobia, racism or other detestable attitudes. Apparently Powys means that these are the kind of opinions that are superficial and not thought through. The spirit of the time is always an opinion, while the insight that comes from experience goes deeper; it characterises a personality, and through that also a stand against the surrounding crowds. Solitude is, in that sense, character-forming and strengthening, while the race for ‘opinions’ always leaves a person alone as soon as his momentary friends have moved further on. Forced loneliness, after a divorce or because of difficulties making friends even with the ‘right’ kind of opinions, is therefore much more painful than voluntary solitude in a strong position opposed to the standards of the time. Maybe it is only then that the insight of our mortality becomes visible. Maybe this is the most important insight? Without it “life illusion” is impossible. Powys means that this illusion is the only way for man to feel that he is a unique person. Without this illusion he is interchangeable and devoid of a personality. Powys emphasises that every self-illusion is in some

sense true, irrespective of who we think we are. Might we no longer take life for granted if we combined this illusion with the insight of death?

Powys says that one of the main reasons for our unhappy lives is the fact that we always relate to others. You must retire to solitude, he says. What does that mean? For me it means the insight that far too many people have been ruling my feelings and thoughts. Meditating on other people's opinions is very much a creator of anguish. The more I liberate myself from other people, friends and family alike, the more I free myself from unnecessary reflection. What creates a profound and maybe lasting unhappiness is the delusion of not being good enough. If I have reached solitude, by arguing in a friendly but firm way with my family and friends, I can dissipate those delusions. I do not exist in solitude because I always want my door to be closed. I exist in solitude because I want to recover well enough to be able to meet the next social context, the next collectivity of people that will surround me or be close to me. If I retire in order to free myself from delusions I will also be better prepared for the next meetings. To walk out in life is to meet your inner abyss. To look someone in the eyes is to understand—or fear—something about your own personality. To some people this is not a problem. They can live a whole life taking care of their career and family without ever thinking it hard to achieve. With the same easy-going way they talk to anyone in cafes. They play games, stroll along, make love and travel together, always with friendly chats as the tool. But for others, both career and family become a hell of demands, achievements and anguish. What makes some people live their lives so free from care, while others fear every social context as if it were a physical threat?

Powys says that social pressure can make anyone unhappy. But is it happiness I look for when I retire to solitude? Maybe it is better to talk about an instinctive self-protection that makes me retire, a deep feeling of the destructive nature of social life? Maybe the "leisure" ideology combined with an intense social life can get a person to break down and seek isolation as a kind of revolt? What John Cowper Powys is telling us with his 'philosophy of solitude', is that it has nothing to do with dogmas or political movements. He always speaks to the individual reader. We have to listen one by one. He talks in a low-voiced manner, and is convincing to us just because he does not overplay his insights and reasons. In that sense John Cowper Powys is a philosopher for our times, the voice of the solitary man in a time of mass-distributed "opinions".

Thomas Nydahl

Thomas Nydahl, born in Malmoe, Scania in 1952. Autodidact, started as a factory worker when he was 17, and made his debut as a writer in 1974. Has published thirty three books (poetry, novels, essays as well as books on Portuguese culture and music), among them the novel *Simone och fjärilen* (Simone and the butterfly, on Simone Weil), *Ökenvandring* (Desert Walk), and *Kärlek och längtan* (Love and yearning) on fado. Editor of the magazine *Studiekamraten* 1987-1997, he published an issue on John Cowper Powys in 1992. His next book, to be published in 2005, deals with John Cowper Powys, Hans Christian Andersen, film directors such as Catherine Breillat, and includes reminiscences from the 1970s in Albania, where he worked as a journalist. A lover of red wines, Bach, fado and jazz—Chet Baker, Dave Brubeck and Paul Desmond—and of long walks along the coast of the Baltic sea with his wife Astrid.