

An Outsider's Way

Translated by Frank Gabriel Perry

Many people are born into deprivation and a few to plenty. The former envy the latter and the latter have no intention of changing places.

But there are always people who are born for deprivation, who will always feel that something essential is missing and long to be rid of all that is inessential and so find that something more easily.

Such people are pretty much alike whatever the circumstances of their birth. They all strive to attain their own estate, what they by right can call theirs and theirs alone. Other forms of property interest them less, often not at all. For such people deprivation is a condition of existence.

Deprivation, in this more general sense, is the only soil in which the artist's work can grow. If the work is to grow, if the seed has been sown, it creates its own soil from this kind of deprivation, where it does not already exist. Speaking for myself, I have loathed Beethoven for ages – simply from my longing to be able to begin at the beginning, inheriting nothing. An *embarras de richesse*, you might say. And yet for those fashioned in this way, there is a very real truth behind that expression.

I have always felt that I stood on the same side as the Autodidacts and, despite passed or failed exams, should like to count myself an Autodidact. What I have really learnt, I have learnt as a form of self-defence against what they wanted to fill my head with.

I cannot however call myself an Autodidact in the proletarian sense. But I have always felt at home with the proletarian writers, without being one of their number. Autodidacticism seems in many respects to have meant the same thing for them as for me: namely, a personal reappraisal.

I do understand the poverty-stricken and neglected childhood that is the precondition for a reappraisal of this kind. But if that willingness is there, then possible spelling mistakes, mistakes in punctuation or rather audacious neologisms become mere beauty-spots. My own childhood environment was well-to-do but so far from normal and so estranged from life that there was plenty of room for its own kind of deprivation.

I understand those complaints repeated to monotony about a lack of books, about lack of time and solitude in which to digest them and a lack of understanding for any expression of a thirst for education. I had books, music, paintings and beautiful furniture to surround me but they forced me instead into long and roundabout paths before I could feel any right to them.

My Odyssey became a long and adventurous one before I succeeded in avoiding the possibilities that were mine for the asking. Against that background I feel that I am also able to imagine the previous experiences of some of my fellow-writers. I have been a kind of spiritual vagabond. As for real adventures, it has to be said that they have had them in plenty, the deprivation is mine. I felt a dull grief over this long before I realized that that is how it was and had to be. Which is how I came three times to leave Sweden for ever, with the best and most solemn intention of never returning. It is not without feeling slightly amused that I think back on it now. I am really not a very practical adventurer.

I am going to tell the story of just a few pages from this lyrical autobiography.

It is music that has given me most of what's best. It was during the years of the first world war, in the company of a guardian at one of the big cinemas, the "Moulin Rouge", I think, that I first heard a real string orchestra. The "mournful" music made such an impression on me, that I refused for a long time, feeling afraid, to go along whenever the occasion presented itself. Music forced me to imagine the most dreadful things: that I was all alone in life, carried off or abandoned, with nowhere to go – this was the childish response of an inexperienced ear at an age when one cannot help but objectify all the stronger emotions, one tries in some way to explain them to oneself, to exemplify them, to furnish them with an imagined story. It is difficult to recall this simple experience in all its power.

It is as though it lay on the other side of an abyss of years, filled with precisely that which brought it into being. And so I found myself on guard against music and from that there gradually developed a suspicious interest until the final awakening came at some suitably adolescent age with Cesar Franck's violin sonata. I can still see before me the country-house drawing-room with its touchingly tasteless mixture of hunting trophies, Victorian and Baroque furniture, where I first heard it. In a sudden upsurge of their own youthful memories, the musicians had produced it from some neglected stack of scores and the bitter-sweet atmosphere of that evening still lives for me in the recitative. The other movements I keep more to myself.

Much later when I was reading Proust I suddenly felt a kind of recognition. I wonder if what is referred to as the "Vinteuil's sonata", that Swann so liked, is not identical with César Franck's. Proust's description tallies so well.

One of those strangely powerful early memories was of sunset. It seems only appropriate for a budding poet, but I do not know how I became a cloud-gazer. The setting of the sun lay heavy over my childhood, it even turned up in my dreams. The very bright brick-red colour of the church outside the windows – it was St John's Church in Stockholm – cast a feverish, sickly and somewhat enlarged reflection of the sunset a long way into the rooms. In this red twilight my father, who had been mentally ill for several years, would flit about like a shadow, mumbling, the life gone from his ravaged features, followed by nurses. When they had got him settled in an arm-chair, he would sit for hours, hearing voices, as they said, which meant that he mumbled monotonously, brooding endlessly and making no sense. The

apartment had long corridors and, at dusk, its remote corners were pervaded with a ghostly atmosphere, while outside the funeral bells could be heard ringing. In my mind red sunsets and the sound of bells are forever indistinguishable.

Later, with all the darning of the first years of the awkward age, I used to climb up onto the roof to see the sun go down. The roof was one of the highest on St John's Hill. I climbed up through the attic skylight and then upwards partly with and partly without the help of the fire-ladders until I was sitting astride the roof, where I smoked forbidden cigarettes and stared into the sun like an anchorite. The elevation, which was that of the hill as well as the house, made me dizzy, as the gable balanced precariously over an abyss, the bottom of which was the rear courtyard on Tegner Street. The whole city lay spread out below me and every now and then there were flashes of light from the windows far away on Kungsholmen, which were perhaps just at that moment being cleaned by equally audacious servants as part of the great autumn clean-up.

I did not do it to prove myself – and besides, no-one knew about it anyway. But I was filled with an overpowering thirst for beauty and was quite incapable of giving expression to it. Looking back, I cannot understand how I dared. Sometimes I get the most dreadful dreams of falling.

My sunset ascents went hand in hand with musical excesses. I used to lose myself in endless series of disconnected, often very discordant chords, which I listened to intently, one after another. By then I felt suspicious (in the widest possible sense) of what in family-circles are called "musical people" and I still do so. I have never, either before or since, felt able to see any difference in principle between harmony and dissonance and have never found it easy to submit myself to the demands of discipline – except with regard to Bach and the Italians. There was, as well, a kind of mathematical pleasure for me in listening to those chords, to the slow fading away of the strings. Tones and overtones and all the various reverberations pursued one another down there in the darkness of the sounding-board, pulsating with the rhythm of sequences of notes surging up in parallel, touching one another, intersecting one another, influencing one another – to make use of a graphic description. Sound-shapes were repeated regularly and cycles came full circle at intervals until the last, faint sound lost itself, as it were, in the universe. Mathematical series lose themselves in infinity in just the same way.

From every direction it was mysticism that led

me on during those years of gradual awakening and young mystics are really much more difficult and more peculiar than those somewhat older. I came to loath Europe and Christianity and taught myself to recite my "Om mani padme hum" under my breath as a protest during morning-prayers at school. But it was not until I had braved my way through the non-fiction catalogue and faced the ordeal of the issue-desk at the Royal Library, which was naturally a strain for a rebellious young man, rebels being on the whole the most timid of people, that I found a source of nourishment for my orientalism. There I stuffed my head full with useless facts about ruined cities, dynasties, oriental art, music and literature. One book that since that time has always accompanied me is Fox-Strangways' Music of Hindustan, and I would dearly like one day to learn how to play the drum, which, after the human voice, is the greatest instrument of oriental music. And yet I never could really find what I was searching for until I happened upon Tarjūman al Ashwāq of Muhyi'd Din ibn al-Arabī — I can smile at that encounter now — which for a long time was my favourite book. It was through Heidenstam's Endymion that I first took note of the author's name. Later I discovered that it was partly because of ibn al-Arabī that Ivan Aguéli started to learn Arabic seriously. It was there and nowhere else that I first learnt what is meant by symbolism and surrealism.

Time has since sifted through all that I then absorbed, although, despite everything, much has remained with me. I have learnt to look back with a sympathetic awareness of that Ancient Indian way of life, that was at one and the same time so subtle, so peaceful and so bucolic and which one encounters on the reliefs of the most ancient of the stupas and in the sutras and the jatakas. Nature plays a far more real and more active part in the lives of people there than it ever did in archaic or bucolic Greece. And I mean natural in a sense that is both more gentle and more grotesque. Ancient India was a Midsummer Night's Dream. At that great moment, when the atheist, Buddha, sitting under his fig-tree, discovered that final path beyond suffering — an event that is discussed from one divine sphere to another, despite the discoverer's atheism — it is not only Brahma and those other haughty gods who in amazement and with some suspicion note the fact in their respective heavens, but the whole of Nature is also filled with hidden echoes, again despite Buddha's atheism and skepticism: gnomes of every kind, Indian wood-nymphs, goblins and elves peer roguishly out from the trees surrounding the solitary one, take stock

of him and chorus: "Well, well, the holy man has actually arrived at Final Enlightenment." In all its profound gravity, this is a delightful scene. Delightful too, in their ingenuous reverence, is that manner the oldest reliefs have of representing the person of the Buddha: an empty chair, a seat where No-one sits.

Modern westerners seem not quite able to conceive of this primal state, which is both absolutely polytheistic and absolutely atheist. There is a marvellous little idyll The Shepherd Dhaniya, in which the shepherd and the Holy One pray in plain-song to the deity to send rain if he feels like it — as they are quite comfortably off themselves, the shepherd as a result of foresight, and the Holy One by virtue of his renunciation of all worldly values. Gullberg translates this idyll using a refrain that runs: "Let God's will come to pass" (with a capital G), which misses the whole point. The god in question is actually only a rain-god, who in this instance can stand for life's difficulties and the vagaries of fate.

This is what became my Gospel. It was India that first tempted me to leave Sweden "for ever." I firmly believed in this myself. One grey, puritanical Sunday I arrived in London, which seemed like a nightmare to me for ages. Later I learned to love the atmosphere of abandoned rootlessness that the big cities have, but the first impressions overpowered me. The School of Oriental Studies with all its trappings of Empire, its mummies and its engravings in the style of Champollion seemed more like a mausoleum than a school. On the staircase several of the casts of the Amaravathi reliefs had been hidden away, that in their formlessness were all too alive for the otherwise imposing dignity of the place. Then, I felt only hatred for the English monopoly of India and came to loath the elementary-school atmosphere of the text-books, the lessons, and of certain teachers. I sulked at having to plod my way for weeks through "the elephant is bigger than the horse" "this boy is very naughty" etc., instead of being able to throw myself straightaway into what was really important. Nothing was as I had imagined.

I was very lonely. I had only one friend, an Icelander at the same boarding-house, who was learning to display women's underwear in the West End and still does so no doubt in Reykjavik. He was one of the kindest human beings I have known. When he arrived he could speak a little Danish, but as he did not have much of an ear for languages, for every word of English he learned, he would lose a Danish word. There was a time when we would go (in total silence) to a Lyons tea-shop,

since his Danish sentences had no predicates and his English ones no subjects or vice versa. Later we began to talk again. His judgements of people were limited to: "I think he is a very good man" or "I think he is a very bad man", which was enough. I wrote to him several years later and obviously remembering my interest in music he sent me by way of reply the score of O Gud vors lands, o lands vors Gud, Iceland's national anthem. (I remember him with gratitude as a more earthy contrast to the young and ambitious fool I was then.)

From that first time out among people, there is one person, however, whom I remember with respect — one of my teachers, Mr Palmer, an old man who looked like an Arab. His lessons were small oases of long brooding silences, a sudden chuckle and then an entirely irrelevant story. I have, as it were, inherited one of these stories from him, it passed from being one of his youthful memories to being one of mine. His story went:

"I remember, we were travelling in Serbia, my father, my elder brothers and I. It was sometime in the seventies and we had to go on horseback. We had just ferried across a river when a couple of bandit-like creatures came galloping up to the other bank and screamed a word at us." (He uttered a consonantal yell, I think it sounded like "ammā.") "Just that one word, several times. I can still see and hear them. And I still do not know what that word means. I could have looked it up in a dictionary, but — I haven't done so. That's very funny."

The story was told without advance warning, a propos of nothing and was at first a complete mystery to me but has since become my traveller's proverb. We should not attempt to tamper with the butterfly-bodies of our clearest memories, nor realise our dearest dreams. The iron-bound chest we found under the apple-tree is perhaps full only of dead leaves — better not open it. Mr Palmer is dead now and I am sure he never looked up his word. Perhaps it was just some trivial swearword. He was a wise man and an old polyglot.

It was a great effort to abandon the dream of India — it is always most difficult with those first dreams one has, for one is still making such enormous demands on reality. But later when one has worked out the mechanics of existence it gets easier.

When I first came to Uppsala I was so shy of people that I did not dare go anywhere to eat but lived on coffee for quite a while. Then someone took me in hand and sent me brusquely to have my meals at the School of Domestic Science. As a kind of gradual transition to the Occident, I studied Persian (with Sanskrit beckoning in the background that drew further and further away). From this dead period I can remember nothing more than upwards of two thousand games of patience and odd lines from Firdausi, to the effect that "the world is nothing but a deception and an illusion."

But at last I am beginning to approach the point of this long introduction. Up to this time I had given very little thought to artistic creativity, perhaps the odd pastiche in the style of ibn al-Arabī, and I did cherish one or two musical aspirations. One summer I spent sitting at my window open to the foaming roar of the Dalälv river, making notes on my beloved Tarjūman, walking around with it in my pocket in the evenings. One evening I had an experience that I am almost forced to characterise as a form of ecstasy. It came upon me like a shooting star and I can remember that I staggered a little on my way home. As was often the case on such occasions I had a full orchestra playing somewhere at my back and I struck up on first one instrument and then another. This later became a poem, my first that could in any sense be called original. It is in Sorgen och Stjärnan, foolishly enough in a revised version, amongst much else that that book contains of smartened-up, sentimental value. It appeared later in the original version in Ord och Bild. More poems followed and to conceal them from the world I even devised a secret alphabet, one of my childish conceits, an example of which follows:

This was my start which later proved to be a false one. A long illness and convalescence killed off this beginning and I woke to quite different dreams of a coffee plantation in Kenya, that I constructed in my imagination on the spur of the moment. A habit I have retained and developed to a certain level of attainment: imaginative creation of new and different lives and settings. At the moment I am busy with a little, Swedenborgian, eighteenth-century pavilion, set in a large, old-fashioned kitchen garden with huge raspberry canes, where *utile* has come together with *dulci*. But now I have learnt from Mr Palmer and others not to demand realisation of life, but to live in my creations, only for as long as it gives me pleasure to build and improve them. Sometimes when I get tired of houses and fixed abodes, I get on with the building of the Boat of my Dreams.

However, this time the dream led me towards Genoa, where I did not take the Woerman-Line, my story being the story of the boats I missed and the trains I did not catch. I was too ill anyway, and would never have been able to play the native in Africa. Life made use of my poor health to acquaint me with a variety of modern mysticisms, analytic Cubism and some new poets, mostly French ones, new sources of material for my dreams. One summer I spent ten to twelve hours a day working at the piano, poring over scores and listening to the gramophone and that autumn I went to Paris to study music. (That was the last time I left Sweden "for ever.") Of course, I did the most stupid thing and hired a couple of rooms with walls so paper thin that I could not think of playing an instrument. So I sat there silently dreaming to the noise of the neighbours. The paper ashes in the open grate welled gradually out over the floor and the same went for the slop-bucket in the kitchen. When, later, I came to leave the little apartment, it took me three days to scrub clean the kitchen floor. I had to do it in five stages: with a knife, then pumice stone, scouring powder, a stiff brush and cleaner, and finally a polishing cloth. Encouraged by the aesthetic reappraisal going on around me, I determined to begin at the beginning, with words. I realised that I knew nothing. I took words one by one and tried to ascertain the value of each word, I placed word next to word and succeeded after much effort in arriving at a whole sentence – not, of course, a sentence that carried any meaning but one composed of word values. It was the hidden meaning I was looking for – a kind of *Alchimie du Verbe*. A word has its particular meaning, and another its own, but bring them together and some-

thing miraculous happens to them: they develop a meaning in between, while retaining their primary meanings. Many years ago, in a discussion about art, Grunewald said: "There is a drinking glass placed before me. I put an orange next to it. The glass becomes a totally different glass." One could quote from many sources, philosophers as well as artists who have said the same thing but better, Degas, for example, but the above has at least a certain visual quality, which is the one I want to bring out. The counterpoint of words is this, that seen in one direction a string of words means something obvious to everybody, seen in another, it means something hidden, shrouded in obscurity. Poetry is precisely this relationship of tension – *between* the words, *between* the lines, *between* the meanings. I really did teach myself to write in exactly the same way as a child learns to read, B-A becoming, strangely enough, BA.

Of course one has to have something to say, but it is a good beginning to begin at the beginning, learning how to say it. Many writers have ignored the ABC book they carry around inside themselves and of which only one copy exists.

Otherwise I spent much of my time in bars and cafes. I can still hear the echoes of the entry vault, when late at night I used to shout "Ekeloff" outside the concierge's little box. Some of the strangest figures from my gallery of human types, which I still have not exhausted, stem from this period and the worst thing about them was that they were in general either banally strange or strangely banal – products of that great city, *où le spectre en plein jour raccroche le passant*. But since I have restricted myself in these pages to the lighter side of things, I shall mention only one of them: Peter – she could always be seen at one of the three bars in Montparnasse. She had been born by the Arctic Ocean and, as soon as the law allowed, had got married to a sea-captain up there. She had seen nothing of the world until she came by mysterious paths to Denmark and then down to Paris (lovely as the day, according to what people said) at the age of twenty-five or thereabouts. In my day, she was living with a French antique-dealer and had over the years got rather fat, a bit faded and very ticklish. But she had kept her light, pointed, arctic smile and the cheerful and pragmatically humane temperament of a child of nature. She used to invite me to intimate suppers behind the back of the dear old antique-dealer and admonished me on a number of subjects. This helped me over many crises and much else of a difficult nature that I do not want to touch on here.

Sent på jorden is a suicide-book. Its major influence was Stravinsky's *Sacre du Printemps*, so gloomily solitary and so undisguisedly sensual, which I used to play all night long, the gramophone muffled with handkerchiefs and underpants. At that time, I knew nothing of Eliot and the Surrealists. It was not until the appearance of the ill-fated *Spectrum*, which began so well and finished so badly, when I brought myself at last to get some of my poems published, that someone told me I was a Surrealist. Accepting their authority, I believed them and was rather taken with the idea. But I never worked like a surrealist, I laboured with fifty or a hundred drafts of every poem. *Sent på jorden* was also my first and, for a long time, my only collection of poems that was truthful – speaking relatively and taking into consideration the moods I then found myself in and the means of expression I had at my disposal. I used to walk around with a revolver in my pocket, which is the literal truth, and was, what is more, in illegal possession of an offensive weapon. In my general despair, I grasped at all the means available that would allow me to remain in my dream-world, or quickly be ejected from it. I began to speculate financially and lost my money which made my temporary homecoming to Sweden pretty much permanent. Which as it turned out was the wisest thing I could have done since it forced me in some way to make use of all that I might have learnt and experienced and it made, as they say, a man of me.

I may have been a luxury item, perhaps even more than poets usually are, but behind what I had in plenty there was real deprivation, and it is that which I have lived on. Above all, there was a lack of resistance. If I had been less privileged with surroundings, that were (to be sure) totally without understanding but in return fairly tolerant, and had I been less fragmented and many-sided, the result might have been a weightier one. My way to literature has always and only ever been an outsider's. From the beginning I never wrote to be published, which is after all the only school open to a writer, that of being put through the ordeal, for better or worse, of the editors, the publishers, the critics and the public.

If I were to be asked today why I write, I would still reply – although with a different and more profound significance – for want of another occupation. There was a time when I thought that my writing had some end or other, close by or far away. Now I know that it is never the ends or the intentions one has, that turn poems into poems.

It is for this reason and not from any false bitterness, that Ekelund says: "I write poems for no-one . . ." and Hjalmar Söderberg professes – to take a couple of well-known examples from the pile – his belief in the incurable isolation of the soul and his longing to grow old. "It was bloody awful being young" – because it was then that everything had to surrender its meaning at once.

A poet's first task is to become himself, to become human. His first duty – or rather his best means of reaching it – is to recognise his incurable isolation and the meaninglessness of his journey on earth. It is only then that he can tear away all the scenery, the decorations, the disguises from reality. And it is only in that way that he can be of use to others, by placing himself in other people's – in everybody's – predicament. It is this absence of meaning that lends meaning to life. This, in brief, is my *credo quia absurdum*.