

all when others are living in hunger, poverty and ignorance on the other side of a fast-shrinking world. It may well be that we need to get our own values straightened out. When we do this, and make them clear for all to hear, the questioning young men and women with active social consciences may begin to turn to an authentic Christian social teaching for inspiration instead of to Marxism. My own experience leads me to believe that no normal man or nation will, all other things being equal, knowingly choose Marxism in preference to Christianity. The trouble is that too often the other things are not equal.

THE INNOCENT AUDACITY

An Approach to St John of the Cross

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IF one did not know their context, it would be easy to mistake many of the mystical poems of St John of the Cross for the most passionate declarations of profane love. Influenced in content and imagery by the *Song of Songs*, and in form and rhythm both by sixteenth-century Spanish court poetry and by traditional folk verse, the poems assimilate several traditions, several attitudes. In one of St John's songs between the soul and the Bridegroom, the Bride cries,

'My Love's the mountain range,
The valleys each with solitary grove,
The islands far and strange,
The streams with sounds that change,
The whistling of the lovesick winds that rove.

.....
Deep-cellar'd in the cavern
Of my love's heart, I drank of him alive:
Now, stumbling from the tavern,
No thoughts of mine survive,
And I have lost the flock I used to drive.'

If the reader did not know St John's own commentaries on his *Spiritual Canticle*, it would not be difficult to assign such verse as this to the plane of physical love. The poem shocks because it is so

intimate. This is as true of the original Spanish as of the English translation; the problems involved in conveying, without loss, the extraordinary intensity of the original poems into another quite different language are well stated by the American poet John Frederick Nims, who has himself recently produced a very vivid rendering of St John's poems: 'My venture', he says, 'the windmill I am tilting at, is to give some inkling of the poetry. That means that I have chosen the rhythms and forms of the original instead of turning the content into a slack free verse favourable, perhaps, to thought and imagery, but at what fatal cost to their pulsing blood-rhythms!—rhythms very different from those brain-rhythms that count beads on a wooden abacus. It means too that I have aimed at the kind of diction St John used: a diction direct and colloquial, sometimes rustic, sometimes solemn with echoes of the *Song of Songs* or the courtly pastoral. And, since "the sound", as Frost has said, "is the gold in the ore", it means I have tried to do something about sound values and special sound effects. . . . Ernest Jones has described how Freud translated: "Instead of laboriously transcribing from the foreign language, idioms and all, he would read a passage, close the book, and consider how a German writer would have clothed the same thoughts—a method not very common among translators." But a highly sensible way: otherwise one merely turns the poor content out of its comfortable home into the dreary winter of no-language. The translator of poetry has a far more ticklish task: he has to consider not just what to say but how to say it in certain images, rhythms and sounds. What this amounts to is writing a poem of his own, using as much of the material of the original as he possibly can. His doom is that there will always be parts left over and gaps he will have to caulk with inferior oakum.'

This is an admirable statement of method and approach; and, for this study, I shall use some of the results of Mr Nims's careful labours. What is most noteworthy in his remarks about the difficulties of translating St John is the complete absence of any complaint about having to transfer to another tongue a *mystical* poetry clothed in the language of profane love. The truth is that in this particular matter no serious problem arises. It is not St John's content that is baffling but his form. If the translator keeps closely and humbly to the original, he will convey, through his translation, the same literary *mode* which St John employs. There is no danger of misunderstanding his metaphors or tampering with his message—problems which arise when one is attempting to translate a mystical intensity which depends on concepts rather than images, on abstractions rather than on concrete objects or relationships. Vaughan, for

example, would be a difficult poet to translate because his intensity often resides in a verbal texture unrelated to ordinary human experience.

St John, then, that most austere and analytical of Christian mystics in his prose works, does not scorn human analogies in his poetic interpretation of divine things. The subject-matter of his poetry is the ecstasy of mystical contact with God; his expression of that experience uses the joy of human love, even though it transcends that love. St John himself never had any doubts about the religious aspect of making poems; he never felt that writing conflicted with his contemplative vocation. He trusted God but he also trusted language. He was a superb technician, a painstaking craftsman, and himself declared when asked if God directly inspired his poems, 'Sometimes God gave them to me, and other times I had to find them for myself'. It is, perhaps, the Puritan tradition, the passion to separate and demarcate, which are responsible for the inability of many writers of the last two centuries or so to believe in the efficacy and truthfulness of poetry as a medium for the expression of man's closest possible contact with God. With John of the Cross one senses no restless dissatisfaction with the limitations of language language and imagery; he does not seem to have *descended* from his mystical experiences to the laborious of describing them in verse. The poems are an essential part of the experience. And it is for this reason that his poetry has such a radiant unity.

Paradoxically perhaps, some of the most intense and sublime of his poems foreshadow not the exquisite clarity of Traherne or the light-pervaded stanzas of Vaughan, but the poems of Donne, and not so much Donne's divine poems as his love poetry. There is, for example, much in St John's mystical poems that recalls the following lines from Donne's *The Ecstasy*:

'And whilst our souls negotiate there,
We like sepulchral statues lay;
All day, the same our postures were,
And we said nothing all the day.'

This is startlingly like the last stanza of one of St John's rapturous songs:

'Lost to myself I stayed
My face upon my lover having laid
Fom all endeavour ceasing:
And all my cares releasing
Threw them amongst the lilies there to fade.'

St John's prose books and, indeed, his own commentaries on his *Spiritual Canticle* give a very different picture of the man from that

which his poems provide. It is the analyst, the dissector of the human soul, even the psychologist, not the poet, who informs *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, and *The Living Flame of Love*. And yet, because the subject-matter of his prose and his verse is the same, it is only the approach which is different, together, of course, with an intensity which only poetry can attain. The prose writings are, in a sense, the foothills, while the poems are the mountain peaks.

In the prose, it is the note of admonishment, of exhortation which is the most notable element. Pedantry and dogmatism are just round the corner, one feels; and this is only fitting and prudent since, in all Western European mystical literature, St John's prose is the most profound and subtle explication of the soul's struggle and search for union with God. Compassion and severity are perfectly mingled and St John will have nothing to do with the sham or the second-rate. At times, the urgent advice which he gives in, for example, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, seems slightly at variance with his own poetic practice. Thus he declares, 'Be assured of this: the more the soul clings to images and sensible motives the less will its devotion and prayers descend upwards unto God. When God grants graces and works miracles, He does so, in general, through images not very well made, nor artistically painted or adorned, so that the faithful may attribute nothing to the work of the artist.'

This bare statement would seem to be a denial of even the possibility of poetry being a medium which can both enact and contain a mystical experience. If, one may well ask, St John really believed that sensible images were of little use in the attainment of direct union with God, why did he himself try to express that union in poetic terms? Since so clear-sighted a man cannot be accused of self-deception, the only answer to this dilemma, I think, is to remember that in his prose St John is always speaking as a priest, a teacher, a director of souls; he is clearing the ground for the entire journey towards God. His thought and message are cautious, forward-looking, wary of the smallest sign of danger. His poems, on the other hand, are personal not didactic, a drawing together not an analysis. They are, as it were, the overflow of a vision, the expression of a consummation; they spring from an absolute certainty of the validity of his own mystical experience, just as all true poetry, whether secular or sacred, is an implicit affirmation of the reality and value of the various experiences from which it came. In his poems St John is not concerned to teach but to assert, not to warn but to invite.

If the personal element in his great prose works is largely con-

cealed, it is, nevertheless, still present. A man, after all, can only teach what he himself knows, and in supernatural matters this knowledge must be more than an accumulation of facts; it must be both an appropriation and a distribution of experience. Thus the sense of deprivation and obscurity which is so important a part of St John's teaching (but a part which has, perhaps, been over-emphasized in modern times) are experiences which he knew from personal suffering. This obscurity, these darkneses also appear in his poems but, since poetry leaps over analysis and explanation, the darkness is close to the light, and intuition bridges the gulf between desolation and ecstasy. The very essence of lyric poetry is, after all, compression and intensity; it does not concern itself with the plains, only with the high points. And we have a perfect proof of this in the lengthy commentaries St John feels disposed to give of those lyric moments which subsist by the delicate balance of music with image. The lyric hints, the commentary explains and elaborates. Thus the following five lines from *The Spiritual Canticle* are a purely poetic way of suggesting the wiles of the devil:

‘Catch us the foxes,
For our vineyard hath flourished;
While of roses
We make a nosegay,
And let no one appear on the hill.’

On these comparatively lucid lines, St John feels obliged to reflect at some length: ‘The evil spirits’, he says, ‘now molest the soul in two ways. They vehemently excite the desires, and employ them with other imaginations to assail the peaceful and flourishing kingdom of the soul.’ This prose comment is not an explanation on a *literary* level; the real illumination is all in the poem. The poem imparts the mystical experience, hands it over to others who have never had, or even perhaps wanted to have, a direct contact with God. The commentary, on the other hand, is designed for those who wish to follow St John's own journey, with all its snares and all its sweetness. Or, to put it another way, the poems arrive, the commentaries only approximate.

In the two streams into which the Western mystical tradition has divided, John of the Cross is usually said to represent the rejection, not the affirmation, of images. For myself, I would be inclined to say that his work embodies both traditions. In his prose, we are proffered the possibility of direct union with God by means of the rejection of images, in his poems, by the way of affirmation. The strict asceticism of St John's life, the stern directions of his teaching, flower into what one can only call the sensuous spirituality of his

poems. The poems absorb his careful and always orthodox theology and transform that theology into images taken from the intimacy of sexual love. What Dante said of God—namely, that he was ‘an intellectual light full of love’—might well be applied to *The Spiritual Canticle* and the other poems. The intellect provides concepts, ideas, definitions, and the poetry transmutes these things into imagery, but without in any way diminishing the intellectual meanings. Gerald Brenan has expressed this whole complex process very well when he says of St John’s poems, ‘It is true that love for created things plays only a subsidiary part in the action, but that is because it is describing a more advanced stage. Such love serves merely to raise the mind of the chief character towards their Source. But love for this source is the dynamic of the poem. . . . The distinctive thing about this class of poets [Brenan is here comparing St John with Coleridge and Rimbaud] is that they write from so deep a level, about things so essential to their inner nature, with so little dilution of secondary material that (1) their rhythms have an unusual penetrative power; (2) their imagery is symbolic; and (3) they exhaust themselves. . . . And although the two greatest of his prose works describe the Night, with its hushed suspense and its sharp stabs of longing, it is chiefly the coming of Day that the lyrics celebrate. The poet, emerging from the dim states that precede the ecstasy of composition, finds in the marvellous illumination of that ecstasy his best subject-matter. The poems are the explosions of a man whose ordinary condition had up till then been, if not *noche oscura*, then twilight.’

In other words, Brenan sees St John’s poems not simply as a re-presentation of his vision but as an integral part of that vision. The flame that burns in the vision also burns in the poems which follow, and burns without diminution. One is reminded of a remark one of his friends made to Yeats—‘Belief makes a mind abundant’. Belief, or faith, not only makes St John’s mind abundant, it also enriches his poetry. And belief is founded on truth not on dogma alone, since dogma is only a vehicle of truth. In his less directly personal poems, St John allows his imagination to play on the dogmas which his faith affirms, and in doing so he produces an almost metaphysical poetry. Thus in Romance XI, which is concerned with the relationship between the three persons of the Blessed Trinity, he writes,

‘He who in naught resembles You
Shall find of Me no trace or sign,
Life of My Life! for only through
Your own can I rejoice in Mine.’

Here the thought is intricate, the language almost entirely abstract. Paradoxically, when St John is trying to describe the ineffable experience of union with God, he makes use of a rich assortment of sensuous images; but when he is trying to explain a Mystery of Faith he uses a much more abstract terminology. This is an important difference of usage and it seems to imply that the most sensuous resources of language must be ransacked and plundered to depict a close relationship (and 'relationship' here is the key word) of man with God, whereas only more limited, more abstract words can be used when St John is trying to formulate an article of faith in poetic terms. Thus, when he is most personal, he is most sensuous, while when he is most objective, his poetry is most abstract.

These facts alone, I believe, tell us a good deal about the nature of poetry and the nature of mysticism. In the first place, poetry wishes to communicate and so to form a relationship; but, prior to this, the poet has himself formed a relationship with the subject which is the content of his verse. *Mystical* experience, which implies the highest kind of relationship a human being can have—namely, contact with God—would seem then, when the question of communication arises, to be best suited to poetry whose very basis and being are some kind of direct, intuitive, supra-rational relationship. St John himself certainly seems to make an implicit affirmation of this when he uses poetry to express the loftiest moments of his mystical experiences, while reserving prose for the explanations and preliminaries of those experiences. What an American critic, Mr Cleanth Brooks, says of poetry as a means of communication seems to have a very particular application in the case of the mystical poems of St John of the Cross. He writes, '. . . Our examination has carried us farther and farther into the poem itself in a process of exploration. As we have made this exploration, it has become more and more clear that the poem is not only the linguistic vehicle which conveys the thing communicated most "poetically", but that it is also the sole linguistic vehicle which conveys the things communicated accurately. In fact, if we are to speak exactly, the poem itself is the *only* medium that communicates the particular "what" that is communicated.' In the case of St John, this 'what' is his own mystical contact with God, an experience which he entrusts to the perilous particularity of poetic language.

In St John's poems, then, there is no sense of the poet using this particular form, music and imagery for lack of something better. Warnings, exhortations, reservations are thrust aside and the poems stand—assured, unique, unambiguous. They are assured because they are, in a very real sense, self-contained; they find an absolute

anchorage in imagery and so are not swept hither and thither in the necessary guesswork of conceptual thought. Experience is the only arbiter, and when experience has found its perfect image, the dialectic is over, not perhaps in the poet's mind but quite certainly in the poem he has just made.

If the dialectic is over, the questioning is not, but in poetry, even in the greatest, questions are always rhetorical ones. They are means of exploring, hinting, suggesting, they do not really want answers, certainly not direct ones. So, in one of the stanzas of his *Canticle* St John writes,

‘Why, after wounding
This heart, has Thou not healed it?
And why, after stealing it,
Hast Thou abandoned it,
And not carried away the stolen prey?’

These are not questions in the ordinary sense at all; they are a cry from the heart, a description of a particular condition of the soul, not a request for knowledge or even for reassurance.

It is not, then, that St John's prose is at odds with his poetry, but rather that the poetry transcends the prose. In the poems, we have the mystical experience in a pure form, in the prose it is always diluted, analysed, cautious. Like Eliot's 'first voice of poetry', the poems represent 'the poet talking to himself'; the prose, like 'the second voice', is a voice 'addressing an audience, whether large or small'. Indeed, what Eliot says about the first voice of poetry is highly relevant to the poems of St John: 'He [the poet] is oppressed by a burden which he must bring to birth in order to obtain relief. Or, to change the figure of speech, he is haunted by a demon, a demon against which he feels powerless, because in its first manifestation it has no face, no name, nothing.' Now, if we replace the word 'demon' here with the word 'God', we surely have a very accurate description of precisely what St John is doing in his mystical poems.

From the testimony of St John's poetry, it would seem that mystics, when they try, in verse, to express their direct contact with God, often go further than their rational, prose-inclined minds would permit. In the same way, poets such as Rilke and Hart Crane, who were neither Christian nor by any means certain what vision it was that their poetry seemed to be reaching towards, often hinted in their poetry at some transcendent experience that their prose drew back from. Poetry, in effect, seems to induce an audacity that prose alone can never attain. Every written poem embodies an act of faith in the validity of that poem; truth to experience is the only test.

Thus the mystic, by simply attempting to express his vision in poetic language, is asserting implicitly that such language is a fit medium to contain that vision. Uncertainty only arises *before* the poem is written; after it is written, the battle is over. And further, in both mystical and secular poetry, literary judgment follows, it does not precede, the reader's assurance of the poet's sincerity. If there is even a hint of the 'phoney', there is no need to examine technique, imagery or rhythm; the poem has already fallen apart. But where honesty is proved, then purely literary considerations can move in. If the poem in question does not stand up to such examination, it is, of course, a failure as literature; but it is also a failure as the expression of a mystical experience since even the loftiest of mystical apprehensions demand the perfection of artistic technique if they are to be expressed fully. This is a fact that is often forgotten by those who judge 'religious' verse simply by the sincerity of its content. A clumsy, ill-made mystical poem is, in a sense, a denial of truth, even though no moral blame can be attached to its writer. On the other hand, it is a culpable blindness on the part of the reader if he praises a poem for its good intentions and wilfully ignores its technical weaknesses.

The generous audacity of St John's poems, the directness of their approach to God are, perhaps, explained by the fact that they represent a consummation. When the soul has moved through the Purgative and Illuminative Ways, when it has been cleansed in the Dark Night of Sense and Spirit, when, in fact, it has attained humility, charity and self-forgetfulness—then, in the Unitive Way, it will find not a loss of human things but a new knowledge of them. Nature will not be thwarted but perfected. The Incarnation is the beginning and end of the Christian mystical experience; it represents a gathering together, not an act of discarding. And it is the Incarnation which explains and justifies St John's analogues of profane love.

Some students and writers on the history of mystical experience have been inclined to misunderstand the austerity of St John's teaching; they have tended to interpret such lines as the following from *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* as more in accord with Eastern mysticism than with Western Christianity:

'Strive not to desire anything but rather nothing.
Do those things which bring thee into contempt,
and desire also that others also may do them.'

Such words as these can only be understood properly if they are seen in the context of Christ's Crucifixion and Resurrection. They connote a sacrifice which is made in order that a greater good may be achieved, not an abandonment of self into some sort of pantheism.

If St John's teaching is austere, it is also joyous, and to obtain a perfectly balanced picture of his conception of mystical experience we must set beside the lines I have just quoted, the following reflections from his *Spiritual Canticle*: 'It is the property of love to place him who loves on an equality with the object of his love. Hence the soul, because of its perfect love, is called the bride of the Son of God, which signifies equality with Him. In this equality and friendship all things are common.' Thus, far from advocating a vague species of pantheism, St John sees, at the very height of mystical contact, an experience which is a relationship, a love which is both received and given. And so his poetry too is a poetry of reciprocity. In it, St John is speaking both to himself and to God. His lyricism enacts and perpetuates the love which his prose can only adumbrate.

A LETTER TO SOME COLLEAGUES

DEAR MEMBERS OF THE GUILD OF CATHOLIC ARTISTS.

I'VE just been to see the exhibition you're holding at the Building Centre in Bloomsbury, and I'm writing this in the homebound train; using, for want of anything better, the sort of crepe paper that British Railways give you to dry your hands on. . . . I went at the behest of the Editor of *BLACKFRIARS*, who emphasized that this year the Guild had made a determined effort to raise the standard of exhibits: and also that the Building Centre had lent their premises rent-free for the occasion. So let's begin with a warm vote of thanks to both parties, the first for their praiseworthy intentions, the second for their generosity and goodwill.

What did I think of the work on view? Well, if I tell you honestly and unequivocally (as it is presumably my brief to do), please bear in mind that it is human to err, and that in this respect I am quite as human as most people. So you must regard what follows as a well-meant, if at moments irritable, contribution to the general polemic on Sacred Art, Art and Catholicism, etc., in which we are all very much involved. Also please note that nothing that is said here applies or refers to the church furnishings and pottery which were shown and concerning which I don't feel qualified to make pronouncements.