

The Transformation Theme

by Geoffrey Webb

We have already considered¹ William's eleventh meditation as a sort of examination of conscience, designed to enlighten him about his major problem, namely his vocation. One cannot help feeling that he went on thinking about it for too long, since the passage in question recalls something he had written probably ten years earlier, in his *Nature and Dignity of Love*. Between the ages of about thirty-five and forty-five, he seems to have been thoroughly bugged by the noonday devil, and there were still five years to go before he was finally to make up his mind and transfer to the Cistercians at Signy. The big problem was one of responsibility, for he felt a failure as a superior, and even more than that, he felt it was stupid that he of all people should be in charge of a monastery, when all he wanted was peace and quiet. The fault, naturally, was with those who had put him there.

In the *Nature and Dignity of Love*, he had written . . . 'In this school (the monastery, his *schola charitatis*), those who are tired by their journey lose nothing by taking a rest: neither did the two hundred of David's men who were so spent that they could not cross the brook at Besor (1 *Samuel*, 30, 9). If anyone will sit and "tarry with the stuff", as these did . . . if anyone sits by the baggage and faithfully guards it, he will hardly be worse off than his companions who go on ahead and win the victory, for he shall have an even share of the spoil'.

The middle-aged feeling comes across more pointedly, as might be expected, ten years later, in the meditation already mentioned. '“What am I to do?”', I asked, and you answered me: “Go, sell all you have and give it to the poor, and come, follow me”. I went, I sold all I had, my body and soul, for I had nothing to give to the poor. Lord, I sold you everything I had, and you are the price I paid for it. You know I kept nothing back . . . Here I came, here I stay, I can go no further. I sit by the path where you go, a blind beggar, calling out to you “Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me!” And I will go on sitting. I shall not leave . . . for perhaps he will come back, and there will be no crowd with him this time, and he will see me . . . and he will pity me!'

Trying to resign himself, year after year, to being a Benedictine abbot against his will, it is small wonder that William used with

¹Cf. *New Blackfriars*, June 1965.

particular intensity in his writing the traditional Augustinian ideas and images that speak of waiting in an interim dimension, now tense and forward looking, now relaxed in a present moment that cannot absorb one's interest. Constantly he describes his perfect Christian, the *simplex*, as a person somehow transfigured, with the glory of the future life already shining through him. He compares the soul's state in this life to the moon, suspended halfway between earth and heaven. We are half removed, through our Christian profession, from the earthly sphere, while yet we are no more than halfway to heaven. 'And we, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness, from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the spirit.' This transformation, *a claritate in claritatem*, which he develops in his later work, the *Mirror of Faith*, commands a whole perspective, in which the vocabulary of *forma* provides an interesting clue.

The development begins, suitably enough, with an exegesis of Genesis ii, 7, 'Then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life'. In his treatise *On the Nature of Body and Soul*, William speaks of the form of man as his beauty (*formositas*), because he is made by, and in the image of, the Trinity, *forma formatrix* – the form which is responsible for man's form. The soul, when it beholds the Trinity, delights less in its own beauty and form than in the beauty and form of God. As it beholds God, the soul becomes more beautiful (*formosior*), and to contemplate the Trinity thus is to be formed (*formari*), to become more and more what it essentially is, an image of God and of the divine beauty. Everything that the soul is conscious of in creation, beneath itself, is less beautiful than itself, because less formed (*minus formata, minusque formosa*). When the Fall happens, it comes as a *deformation*, and the Redemption that rights the original wrong is a *reformation*. The soul is reformed to the image of its creator, its mode of beatitude, and is transformed gradually into the one it loves. William's 'simple soul', the Christian in love with God, does not 'form and conform God's love to himself by subtle investigation, rather he lets it form him, and conform him to God in every way'. Reason is conformed to the divine wisdom. Love is the transforming sixth sense, the feeling-and-knowing sense that brings soul and God into unity through the one being an image of the other. 'We are transformed', William says, 'not into the nature of God, but into something more than human if less than divine, the form of blessedness'. And the form of blessedness is to find oneself in the midst of the Trinity, loving and being loved to the full as the centre of the divine triangle, no less.

There are only three factors involved in the question of transformation. *Tres sunt, corpus, anima et Deus*. This simplest of formulations comes from another Cistercian, Isaac of Stella. By *corpus* the Cistercian authors tended to lump together everything in the physical

order but not, be it noted, in a merely pessimistic and dualistic sense, as opposed to 'the spiritual'. The corruption of things physical is ordained by nature – *lex est non poena perire*. 'The spirit returns to its maker, and the body is put back into the earth where it is resolved into the elements from which it was originally formed'. A sinful man is one who defies nature, by identifying his spirit with the elements. A true Christian is one who allows the Holy Spirit to possess his spirit, and thus the total image, body and soul, so that glory already begins to shine through the elemental composition of the body.

The theory of the four elements gives to twelfth century thinking something fascinatingly dynamic, always in movement. Earth, air, fire and water compose a universe in which things hold together through similarity of qualities, and disintegrate through the counteraction of opposites. Man, as a microcosm of the universe, reflects the universal laws. His seasons, from youth to age, are determined by the same heat and cold, the same moisture and dryness, working on his blood, bile, phlegm and spleen, that make trees grow or rivers freeze. The same cycle affects the whole of time and creation – *annus, mundus, homo*.

The soul is central, between the world and God, and that soul itself, already in transit between the two terms, has a precise point for the twelfth century psychologist where you can touch the demarcation point (or merging point, it makes no difference) between the physical and the spiritual. This is the *phantasia*, translated usually as imagination. Between sensation and intellection (as in Aristotle) it provides a theory of knowledge. But thanks to its use in an important work of Nemesius of Emessa which circulated in those days under the more illustrious name of Gregory of Nyssa, it could be used further as the vital nexus of body and soul, to explain how two things as diverse as flesh and spirit could be joined together. Body and soul were each analyzed as a range of functions, some more physical, other more spiritual. The sense faculty of the body was considered its highest, most spiritual part, and the *phantasia*, having to do with the images of corporeal things, seemed to be the most physical part of the otherwise spiritual faculty of mind.

The moral implication of what would otherwise be a question of physics, for the Cistercian school, was that the soul took stock of itself at this point, and made its momentous decision between the two ways, the upward and the downward, which are not really two, but one, as Saint Bernard demonstrated in his *Steps of Humility*. The humble man simply goes the proud man's way in reverse. He can do so, however, only because the Holy Spirit has come already to marry his will to the will of God. In his treatment of the theological virtues, William always makes it clear that the human will and the Holy Spirit always work together. There is a *consensus*, not only an agreement, but a feeling and knowing and loving together with the Spirit.

The constant affirmation of this 'yes' to the Holy Spirit is the whole of the monastic life, viewed in the way that William, Bernard, Aelred set it out. They make much of the laboriousness of it, the repetitive dullness, the need for constancy. And exactly the same may be said of what underlies the monastic life, and any and every Christian life. Faith, hope and charity require exactly this same persistence because they are things that can only grow in time, slowly, gradually, in order to take root and become real, vital principles in living. These are the transforming virtues, and the Holy Spirit is the transforming agent. We have to be willing to be transformed, and we have to go on and on being willing.

The climate of this interim life of persistent waiting and striving, is summed up in William's little Augustinian pun, *spes in rem transit*. *Spes* and *res*, hope and the reality of what is hoped for, are not so much contrasted as identified. Only the identification is a slow process, a whole lifetime in fact, during the course of which the reality is coming nearer and nearer, as it were a distant light which grows more dazzling as one approaches it, until one's whole being is blotted out in the brightness of it. 'We shall not be asked in heaven whether or not we believe', William writes in the *Mirror of Faith*, 'for we shall contemplate God, seeing him face to face. There will be no need to hope when that which we have hoped for all our lives is revealed to our very sight. And yet faith and hope will not exactly disappear. Rather will they turn into the things which they have foreshadowed for us throughout our lives. Things we believed in we shall actually see. Things that we hoped for, we shall in fact possess . . .'

The virtue of hope, which is all tension and desire, provides a framework in which mind and heart can develop through faith and love. We have already seen William's treatment of the five senses of love, a development through various stages, a hierarchy of loves which is a complete chord, requiring that all the notes should sound together. Faith, likewise, is a development, beginning with knowledge and increasing from notional to real assent, from 'the faith that flesh and blood reveal' to the faith 'revealed by the Father in heaven', *intelligentia fidei*. Here again, the state of fulfilment subsumes, rather than leaving behind, the initial 'carnal' stages.

The movement is through time into eternity, through the material world into God, where 'sacraments are bodily, visible signs of sacred realities . . . towards which the spirit of man is guided by the Holy Spirit in person'. He is the 'master and initiator of all the sacraments and mysteries of our faith'. It is often difficult to know, when William uses the words *sacramentum* and *mysterium*, whether one is to translate them literally or treat them as synonyms. 'God came down from heaven to share our human nature, so that we might share his nature. He ordered our flesh to be washed in the waters of baptism, and our soul to be made pure and holy by the Spirit'. Yet 'all the deeds per-

formed on earth by the word of God made flesh, are words spoken to us, and it is in understanding these acts of his that we attain to the knowledge of Christ himself'. The whole point of William's mystagogical catechesis is to introduce his reader to the idea that 'our Saviour is himself the greatest, the most wonderful of the sacraments of our salvation, ordained for the remission of our sins'. 'It is in the person of the Mediator, the sacrament of all sacraments, that one can see most clearly the twofold action of sacraments, whose influence is exercised both in time and in eternity'. 'Christ's work was done in the context of time, but what came to be in Christ was with God from the beginning, was life with God from all eternity.'

The object of hope, love and faith, these inseparable virtues, is always Christ. From the carnal to the spiritual it is always, ultimately, the soul's beloved God made man that is the one thing sought after. And this divine person is experienced in the contemplative life, let it be remembered, in exactly the same way for the monk as for the 'ordinary' Christian, Indeed one cannot help feeling that what are called the contemplative graces go most logically to the layman. Living in conditions 'probably more conducive to muddle', he has the greater need, and the greater right to them.

It is good to enjoy and make the most of the sacrament of the present moment, as in the school of de Caussade, but understandable enough if some people spend – and perhaps overspend – their lives in longing for a future experience, that is promised by the interim experience of here and now. It is understandable and natural to be on edge, tending toward the full vision of something already glimpsed partially and fleetingly. It is very painful too. And if William gives so often a yearning, plaintive feeling to what he says, it is always because he has experienced Christ deeply, and misses him when he seems absent, and longs to feel his presence. 'Thou art my loveliness, my life, my light / Beautie alone to me . . .' The famous sequence *Jesu dulcis memoria*, a Cistercian manifesto irrespective of its authorship, will take us to the heart of the matter.