

THE MYSTIC'S LOVE

ST JOHN OF THE CROSS

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THE Mystic, says St John of the Cross, is a loving an enamoured, soul—*alma enamorada*. And he describes this love as the 'labour to divest ourselves and to detach ourselves for God's sake from all that is not God' (*Ascent.* ii, 5,7). When we come to analyse the immense and complex meaning of such sentences as this in the work of the Mystical Doctor we discover the two great influences that went to make up his theology, as in a lesser degree they made up the theology of nearly every Christian mystical writer. The first tradition may be called the philosophic background which was earlier in history, coming from the far East and from the purity of Greek thought, and the second, the fundamental Christian theology of love was explained rather than implemented by the former tradition of thought.

Going back to the experience of the East we see that the main theme of all the greatest Eastern religions was to become purified from the entanglements of the world, to be divested of all things in order to become one with the Absolute. It has been suggested by Otto Karrer that the passive nature of this kind of contemplation of the Absolute came about when the forceful Aryans had crossed from the hard life of the north into the lush surroundings of the East. There they found that they were surrounded with vegetation and animal life of all kinds and that they no longer had to make the fighting, hunting effort to keep alive. So their sense of direct and immediate dependence upon the hidden powers relaxed and, instead of turning outwards towards their gods, satiated they turned from creatures and sought the divine within themselves. There was an air of disillusionment in their desire to escape from materiality, suffering without sacrifice, a reaction from human physical success. And this flowed back like some hidden underground stream into the Black Sea and so to the Hellespont. In Greece, too,

there arose the same spirit of disillusionment as the Greeks began to philosophise; when their greatest achievements in conquest and art had reached the height of the wave just as it was breaking the thinkers began to realise the vanity of the world and all it had to offer. But with these men the ascent back to the Absolute became intellectualised to the purest degree. The soul, the divine spark in man, must return to the pure abode of the ideas whence it had descended into the lower creation of matter. And though Plato considered the Absolute in terms of the Good, he stressed the activity of the mind rather than that of the will and of love. He looked towards the ideal, straining beyond the confines of his earthly prison, willing to escape the body and its tedium in order to view the world of ideas in which matter was not mixed. The stream, however, watered its most fertile soil later, in the mind of the great neoplatonist, Plotinus. The Absolute no longer for him remained an inert and pure Idea of Good. The One, God, is love (cf. the *Enneads* VI, iii, 15; vii, 15). Four times at least he experienced himself the mystic union with the divine One. Yet in those heights he necessarily found himself withdrawn from the limitations of the body. He too lived at a time when the physical life of men was on the wane. He would not despise the body, but the body and its physical nature was only an instrument which like a lyre should be laid aside when the singer had found the pure song which needed no accompaniment. The soul alone ascends above Mind, above Beauty to the One Source which is absolute simplicity. 'The man who has attained to contemplation of the beauty of the world of *Nous*, and understands the beauty of the true *Nous*, will be able also to bring into his mind its Father.'¹

The contemplative lover is carried beyond Beauty, beyond the choir of virtues, and enters into a divine rest, in fact *is* a kind of rest. (id. p. 158-9.) 'This is the life of gods and divine and blessed men, deliverance from the things of this world, a life that takes no delight in the things of this world, escape in solitude to the Solitary' (id. p. 160). Thus the

¹ I quote from the admirable volume of Selections in a new English Translation—*Plotinus*, by A. H. Armstrong, recently published by Allen and Unwin; p. 147.

soul, distinct from the body, accepts the union with the One, the divine, the Source, in a sort of infused passive contemplation.

Such a system naturally had a profound influence on the thought of the Christians who tasted the vanity of the world and were anxious to search in the desert for the Father whom our Lord had preached to them. The system as it stood left little room for Incarnation, for the divine to become human. As Dr Armstrong has well written: 'The fact that orthodox Christians, from St Augustine and the Cappadocian Fathers to our own times, have been able to find a very great deal in Plotinus that has been of value to them should not prevent us from realising that his system as it stands is in many ways incompatible with Christianity and belongs to a different type of religious thought' (op. cit., p. 25). Yet influence he did have and particularly upon the Syrian monk in his desert whose writings were taken to be those of the Areopagite who was converted by St Paul at Athens. And from the ninth century the Pseudo-Denis worked the neoplatonic system into the thought and experience of almost every great Christian lover of God.

And so the stream flowed into the mysticism of St John of the Cross—not as the experience itself which could only be perfected in and through Christ the Incarnate God but in the analysis of the transports of love which grace brought to him. Yet a system of explanation inevitably affects the tenor of the experience. Just as the aristotelian system was not only used by St Thomas to explain the order of the divine work in creation but helped him to approach reality in the concrete, so the platonic system helped St John to realise that he must leave everything that is not God in order to love God and to be loved by God in the purity of union. He must reach out to the absolutely pure in a manner well described for him by the pagan philosopher through the works of the Areopagite and the long tradition that had followed. Following Plato, Plotinus had described the way of liberation from lower creation: 'How then is one to escape? Not by movement in place, Plato says, but by winning virtue and separating oneself from the body; for this is the way one separates oneself from matter as well, since

the man who lives in close connection with the body is also closely connected with matter' (id., p. 119). In order to enter into the holy of holies, he says, we must leave the images and statues behind and so discover the reality that these images only represent.

There are many passages in St John of the Cross which reflect this same spirit—not that he was drawing directly from the neoplatonic works of the pagan philosopher, but simply drinking from the stream that had been flowing ever since the disillusionment of the Aryans in the East. Listen then to his words: 'All the being of creation, then, compared with the infinite being of God is nothing. And therefore the soul that sets its affections upon the being of creation is likewise nothing in the eyes of God. . . . All the beauty of the creatures, compared with the infinite beauty of God is the height of deformity. . . . And thus the soul that is affectioned to the beauty of any creature is as the height of deformity in the eyes of God' (*Ascent*, i, 4, 4). We might sum up the simple approach to the absolute purity of God by the phrase 'the destruction of images' since it is not merely the statues that have to be left behind but everything belonging to the senses—even the interior sense of the imagination. Those who seek union must put to silence the exercise of the senses, 'disencumbering and emptying the soul, and causing the natural jurisdiction and operations of the faculties to be denied them. . . .' (*Ascent*, iii, 2, 2.) The lyre of the poetic imagination and the memory, the storehouse of all the scenes and scents of life, have to be laid on one side for the pure song of love. The images are neglected if not destroyed.

But this manner of analysis has always proved difficult when it comes to the love of God per *Christum Dominum nostrum*, the love that is uniquely fostered by the Sacrament of the Body of Christ and all the other sacraments, the sacraments of the liturgy and the world. The English mystics, who owed as much as St John of the Cross to the writings of the pseudo-Dionysius, often express their difficulty regarding the 'human love' of Christ which seems to be left behind when they reach up to the heights of the union of love. Mary Magdalen, they say, had to be shown that she must

love our Lord purely and spiritually after the resurrection and that the human love she bore him was only a beginning that had to be discarded. The first editors certainly wrestled with this difficulty when they came to publish the works of St John. They removed a paragraph that insisted that all must be forgotten in the Cloud and memory must be emptied of all its impressions. In place of these words, which seemed to leave so little room for the memory of the passion and resurrection of Christ which is formally invoked in the heart of the liturgy, they inserted twenty lines of praise for the memory of Christ. 'And this care, they wrote, to forget and set aside knowledge and images is never applicable to Christ and his humanity.' (cf. Peer's edition of the Works, vol. i, p. 232, n. 3.) And the sacraments and parables and images of the Scriptures, where do they come in when every single external sense must be purified of any rejoicing in regard to their proper object, and even the fashioning of imaginary reflections? (cf. *Ascent*, iii, 24).

Following then along the banks of this stream which rose in the damp and lush woods of India, we come to the destruction of all the natural imagery of those woods and rivers as the soul wends its pure way to the divine purity. And the lover might seem to be passing by the Beauteous Son of Man as he stood on the banks of the lake stirring the appetites of his apostles with the gentle wafts of frying fish. But that is only one stream in the love of the Christian mystic—a systematising and analysing mood which may influence the experience of that love but which does not form it.

The second tradition is the creative reality of the life of Christ generated through his cross into his family, the sons of God. This is not a system of thought, nor a manner of analysing experience or reality, nor yet is it an organisation. Indeed it is the sort of thing that made the Greek mind impatient because it cannot be satisfactorily set out in a brilliant array of ideas and relations. It is a mystery; it is a life. The biologist works on the fact of life, and the mystical theologian works on the fact of the supernatural life, but neither of them can produce that life nor yet entirely explain it. The life of the Christian is a participation in the

most hidden and wonderful of all lives, the life of God. And God first by his creative love gives man his life in the Word, rooted and grounded in love, in such a way that man may co-operate and, in living, both naturally and supernaturally love God in return. Man therefore receives his life and his love, not in isolation, but as a member of the whole universe and as a member of the Church; he is a part of the whole of creation and a part of the supernatural creation that is the Church. As he lives he grows towards union, a union which is certainly not an identification, a union that grows more and more intimate in his mind and will as he takes on in this way the being of others without losing his own being. He takes on the Being of God, the being of the rest of the Church and the being of the whole of creation. This is his life. And it is not a separation, it is not a rejection of other being. As he lives, man does not leave anything behind him. In short, therefore, as man lives through the Cross in Christ he is joined first and foremost to Good by love, and this is not a restricting act of the will alone. It is an act which comes from God and is expansive gathering more and more of being within its embrace. It involves the activity of man's mind as well as of his will, it draws the imagination and the whole of the sense life into the Centre in which All is found and experienced according to the different levels of being and of experience. It draws man closer to other men and to the whole of creation.

We have to outline the trend of this tradition of life because on the face of it there is such a contrast between this life and the philosophical analysis by which St John describes love as a way of divesting oneself of all things that are not God, and because this was in fact the life that he led. To read the writings of St John of the Cross without seeing them in the context of his life of love would give an altogether one-sided view of the love of God in the saint. We find that in fact he loved God intensely in union with the natural creation around him. In 1568 soon after he entered St Teresa's reform he found great consolation and support for his prayer in the ilex grove at Duruelo. Four years later he is in the most wholesome natural surroundings

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of his convent at Granada, looking across to the mountains and overlooking the rivers, a natural scene that entered deeply into his love of its maker. And finally in his maturity at Segovia in 1589—‘At the bottom of the convent garden’, writes Fr Gabriel of Mary Magdalen, ‘there is a rocky little mound in which nature has scooped out a cave. It was the chosen haunt of “God’s Linnet”. . . . There we see the towers of the city, but especially the plains, the mountains, the sky—beautiful nature calling up the thought of God.’ (*St John of the Cross, Doctor of Divine Love*, p. 92.) Within the rock, then, in which the first spark of life was created by God, the saint of divine love rises to the Creator with all his creation about him. ‘Contemporary testimonies’—this is Professor Peers’s summing up—‘too numerous to be disregarded, bear witness to his affection for the creatures. He would spend whole nights in prayer (we read) beneath the trees, or rise before dawn to walk for long hours in the garden until the heat of the sun drove him indoors. In his ‘heaven’d walks’ about the countryside he would usually stop to choose a place for prayer ‘near a spring surrounded by trees’, while he would lead his fellows to ‘some delightful stream or pleasing crag’ and thence send them into the hills to pray.’ (*St John of the Cross and other Lectures*, p. 30.) And his writings leave the way open for this union with nature (cf. *Ascent*, iii, 24), though his system makes him see this in terms of the lower stages of prayer and love.

Again we find that his way of love in fact has not left his fellow men behind in its attempt at divestation. It would seem that even in his maturity he had not quite reached the perfection of this union with his neighbours. At least when he was called from his solitary cave by some importunate visitor he could only leave it with a groan—‘Let me stay, for the love of God; I was not made for intercourse with the world’. And St Teresa found him rather too retiring and lacking in the drive that pushed her out and about among the poor and the great. Yet he did devote his life to his friars and to the nuns in the convent scattered across the face of Spain by his co-foundress’s activity. The sisters, the friars, the folk around the convent, none of them found themselves rejected or despised—for the saint was living the life of the

body of Christ. And though he turned to the pseudo-Denis for confirmation of this, he stressed in his teaching the thirst for souls—'It seems to them a small thing to go to heaven alone, wherefore they strive with yearnings and celestial affections and the keenest diligence to bring many to heaven with them.' (*Spiritual Sayings*, Peers, vol. iii, p. 312-3.)

Destruction of images might have seemed to be necessary for the pure love of God in the theory of his explanation, but of course the poet within him never died. Indeed the vigour of his poetic imagination increased. The English hardly gives the depths of vision but it can be sensed in the words:

You forest, thicket, dene,
Which my beloved set in close array;
You Meadow-land so green,
Spangled with blossom gay,
Tell me, Oh tell me, has he pass'd your way?

Reply:

Rare gifts he scattered
As through these woods and groves he pass'd
apace
Turning, as on he sped,
And clothing every place
With loveliest reflections of his face.

His hymns on the loveliness of the dark night—'O night that made us, Lover and lov'd, as one, Lover transform'd in lov'd, love's journey done'—issued from his imagination with such intensity that they had to be explained in long treatises in order to draw out all their meaning. He told one of his nuns that not only did they come to him on a sudden from God, but that at other times he sought them, so that he might thus the better express his love of the Beloved.

A glance at the poems and their explanations shows that his imagination was steeped in the symbolism of the Bible, principally for the poems from the Song of Songs, but in the other works he quotes from all the books of the Bible, in particular from the Psalms whose vivid imagery appealed to his sensitive mind. Almost every line has some words directly quoted from the Word of God in such a way that

it is obviously not worked out self-consciously as a patch-work of tests to prove a point but rather a stream flowing out of a mind and sensibility flooded with the Scriptures. We may safely say that his love gathered together all the poetic powers of his soul and all the vivid images stored in his memory; these it purified but in the end did not reject. We cannot however speak with the same assurance when it comes to the essential prayer of the one body of Christ; for St John refers little to the liturgy although into this form of prayer the Church has poured all the riches of the world and all the treasures of sense and mind. He says, following perhaps the lines of this way of analysis, that images and sounds and the like may be used by beginners in the love of God, but that they should be no longer necessary when the soul has progressed. Sacramentals such as the crucifix are to be unattractive or at least crude in their artistry lest they should distract by their material beauty and human skill. He would not, perhaps, have said the same about his verses which assume the role also of a type of sacramental; and he could not out of obedience to the Church say the same of the divinely appointed sacraments and manner of worship in the Church.

And when, finally, we consider the essential nature of the union with God in love, St John of the Cross loves God in himself, desiring to love him without form and without any sort of limiting means on his part. Yet he remains a man with body as well as soul, a compound and complex being made of many parts all of which in the end share in this supreme union without identification. Until the Christian reaches the beatific vision he cannot in fact think on God and love him however purely for his own sake without some medium of thought and idea and human movement of love. And the medium itself is God given and divine, for the medium by which the Christian loves and is united to the absolute purity of God is the medium of Christ the incarnate God. Despite the tendency of the philosophical tradition to short circuit the humanity of Christ, the saint is of course an intense lover of our Lord since indeed he lives by the very life of Christ. Even when he advised the renunciation of all and every desire he turns in his 'maxims' to the person

of our Lord. 'Another maxim for conquering the desires. Have thou an habitual desire to imitate Jesus Christ in all his works, conforming thyself to his life, whereon thou must meditate in order to be able to imitate it and to behave in all things as he would behave' (Peers' vol. iii, p. 257). For nothing in this life can transcend the nobility of the faith and all the highest experiences of the union of love occur within the Church.

Here at last we find the final point where the living reality of the life of Christ preserves the manner of analysis from running into any true iconoclasm. The images are not destroyed; they are purified and gathered into one through the Cross of Christ, the darkness of faith in which all the dross is forgotten and all the perfections of the various parts of man are brought together in the perfection of the life of man. After writing that the perfect spiritual life is the possession of God through the union of love and that this is attained through the complete mortification of all the vices and desires and of the soul's entire nature, he goes on to say that in this new state of life each of the faculties of man has its own perfection—the understanding is moved by the divine light, the will has been changed into the divine life, the memory has now within it the eternal years. Thus death through the cross brings life and perfect union to the whole as we see in the risen person of the Lord. (cf. *Living Flame*, st. ii, Peers iii, 157-9.)

There is of course a centre point of this unity, since man is himself such a complex creature, and in that centre the love of God is 'without any form' in the apex of the soul. For it is rather the touch of God upon the substance of the soul. 'This is a touch of the Divine in the soul without any form or figure whether intellectual or imaginary.' (id. p. 144.) The loving and simple intuition of truth is to be found in the apex of the soul given by the uncreate and infinite God, and that is as Moses seeing God on the summit of the mountain—but he could not reject the great mass of the mountain beneath him which supported him and which to that extent participated in the vision. Love cannot stand still, nor can it simply rest in a single point of man. It is essentially expansive and diffusive. So that from this utterly simple

touch it spreads out again into the whole of his human person. Creatures are not left behind as stepping-stones that are merely used to get us across to the other side. Nothing that God has made is despised, nothing finally rejected, but all is drawn into the living stream of the real life of God through Christ.

For the soul feels as it were a grain of mustard seed, very minute, burning and full of power which sends out from itself to the circumference a powerful and burning fire of love. . . . Herein it feels its heat to be increasing and to be growing in strength and its love to be becoming so refined in this heat that it seems to have within it seas of loving fire which reach to furthest heights and depths, filling it wholly with love. Herein it seems to the soul that the whole universe is a sea of love wherein it is engulfed, and it can descry no term or goal at which this love can come to an end, but feels within itself the keen point and centre of love. (*Living Flame*, st. ii, 10.)