Poet, Mystic, Reformer

by Giles Hibbert, O.P.

A strict ascetic mystic belonging to a religious reform movement in the heady atmosphere of counter-reformation Spain; a writer of treatises on the techniques of contemplative and mystical prayer; esoteric, strict, demanding, even dry and humourless—strange for a close intimate of the great Teresa, so human, witty and compassionate—but undoubtedly at the same time a man consumed by the love of God. This is most probably the image conjured up by the name of John of the Cross.

And yet he is also well known, even famous, for his poems—you will find them tucked in at the back of Professor Allison Peers' magisterial presentation and translation of the *Complete Works,* though you will also find them published in the *Penguin Classics* series. What sort of poet is he? A real poet, or one of those religious versifiers who present their ideas on the life of prayer in this superficial, yet attractive, form for the sake of their simpler listeners? There were many of these to be found in 16th Century Spain.

A real poet many will claim; but those who take this side of him seriously and acclaim him as one of the peninsula's greatest poets are more likely to be found amongst the unreligious, the secular, students of Spanish literature than amongst those who follow his doctrine.

John of the Cross was indeed a poet of stature, together with being most of the other things mentioned; but not many people have attempted to present this so that it can be seen as a whole, so that we can get what he has left to posterity in perspective.

John of the Cross was an ascetic religious reformer, he was a very great poet, and he wrote works on mystical prayer. These are the facts (if not quite all of them), and they are the facts in their *right historical order*—something which is often forgotten.

Perhaps his history as a reformer is the simplest part of him. He set out to reform his own life as a religious committed to God; he set out also to help those who wanted to reform themselves. He was not one of those reformers whose primary aim is to force their ideologies and reforms on others. There have, however, been so many of these latter that the reaction of his own Carmelite brethren, who persecuted him vilely and atrociously, can perhaps be partly understood.

His history as a writer of ascetical and mystical works is in some ways equally simple. He wrote them to help those whom he was trying to lead in a life of real devotion and prayer, a life of renewal. But these works did not come out of the blue, they came, as it were, out of his poems. At a critical point in his life it was these latter which made him noticeable, which drew attention to him; they were intense, real, and yet, perhaps for this very reason, puzzling, and his followers wanted him to explain and expand on their meaning.

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It is, however, when we thus come to him precisely as poet that all simplicity (except perhaps the simplicity of genius) vanishes. He is hard to account for, he is hard to place, and it is not easy to say wherein exactly lies his greatness. Above all else, however, it is hard for us to appreciate how central is his poetry to everything that he stood for. Usually we escape from this dilemma by leaving his poems to be taken seriously only by experts and connoisseurs of Spanish literature, and spend our time with the rest of his output,

It is in this context that Gerald Brenan's book *St John of the Cross: his life and poetry*[1] is so welcome. It presents John of the Cross, perhaps for the first time in English literature, in his correct perspectives. The author is convinced that John of the Cross' significance is primarily as a poet, which does not mean to say that he detracts from his religious significance; on the contrary, this becomes all the more real. It emerges from the musty volumes on contemplative prayer, and comes forward from the shelf as living witness.

The book is divided into three sections: first of all a presentation and description of his life. This is the most lucid and compelling description that I have come across, and I think that the reason for this is that the author, having first met John as a poet, and having taken him seriously as such, went on from *there* to discover the details of his life. The historical facts are thus set in their true context and become a living reality in a way which is uncommon in the biographies of men like John of the Cross—men who have been allotted a niche in the history of the development of this ideology or that.

The second section, of about half the length, is concerned with the works: first the poems (some forty pages), then the prose (half a dozen). This is certainly the right order and probably the correct proportion (possibly in any presentation of John of the Cross). Of course it need hardly be said that word for word the prose works outweigh the verse many times over, and they contain a wealth of conceptual complexity which has given rise to endless exposition. In his attempt to present John of the Cross in his true perspective, which means to redress a considerable inbalance, Mr Brenan wisely concerns himself with little of this.

The book ends with a presentation of the poems in the original, together with their translation into English by Lynda Nicholson.

My only complaint so far is that the unfortunately inevitable price of £3.90 for the Cambridge University Press' splendid production of it will prevent this book from reaching the hands of many whom it might liberate from traditional misconceptions on this subject.

If, however, I now go on to comment on what I feel is missing in this work, I hope it will be seen that I am not carping at the author so much as suggesting what areas have now to be developed if what

[1]Cambridge University Press. 1973. £3.90.

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he has started is to be satisfactorily continued, namely the reappraisal of a remarkable, and universally valuable, figure.

The first point at which I felt that not all had been said that could have been is in the account of John's intellectual formation at the university of Salamanca. The age was one in which there was a fantastic flowering of literary and linguistic interest, and of course the author is particularly concerned with the development and spread of poetic sensibility in this context, and how this came to influence John of the Cross. All this is handled excellently.

But it must also be realised that there were concurrently tremendous changes taking place in theology, especially at Salamanca. In the generation immediately preceding John of the Cross, Thomism, of a sort which might not easily have been recognised by Thomas, swept into Spain. And John of the Cross took to it like a duck to water; he became a highly competent scholastic.

One of the most notable lacunae in this scholasticism, however, was its treatment of poetical expression. Metaphorical symbolism is seen to be valuable only as allegory; it is at root only a way of presenting ideas to those who are not sufficiently intellectual to operate easily with abstractions. This attitude does in fact derive directly from much of what Thomas himself has to say, and behind him it has its roots in Aristotle and Plato.

To say that John of the Cross' personality was seriously split would be to exaggerate, but there are considerable tensions and ambiguities within his life and literary output which arise out of the clash between his physical and poetical sensibility and the 'metaphysical' framework within which and with which he attempted to interpret himself and present his experience to others.

Brenan is not sufficiently aware of this tension, and uses John's commentaries on his poems (the so-called treatises on prayer) rather too uncritically, though he is clear enough that for the most part they do not add but subtract from the poetic achievement.

The sources of poetical inspiration and imagery are excellently presented and so are the advances made by John in poetical technique: the effectiveness achieved, for example, by his tendency to suppress verbs, or by his rare use of adjectives except where a particularly weighted use will produce a special or heightened effect. The 'musical' and structural developments in his verse are also presented effectively, but there is insufficient analysis of the sort which shows how the symbolism which is being used and developed actually moves in relation to its origin, how it is gaining reality by extension or alternatively losing it by tending towards sheer fantasy, though this latter does not occur in any of the finer poems.

I think it is a weakness in this area that makes the author pull his punches, for example, in his comments on the doctrinal *romances* on the Trinity and Incarnation. He seems to be saying that although the

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symbolism here is weak and the language basically conceptual he cannot judge the quality of these poems because he is not fully competent to enter into the doctrinal arena.

But these 'poems' must be judged as *poetry;* it is as poetry that they stand or fall as expressions of an incarnate faith in a God revealed to us precisely in his incarnation. They are very interesting witnesses to the ambiguity within John's poetical and scholastic personalities, they cannot be exempted from the most rigorous poetical analysis.

All the poems, including both versions of the *Spiritual Canticle* are presented in parallel translation in the final section of the book.

These new translations are competent and accurate, and welcome for the help they give in appreciating the originals. One cannot help comparing them, however, with those of Roy Campbell which are so readily available in the *Penguin Classics.* In many ways the new translation comes out favourably; it is undoubtedly more literal, and its terseness adequately matches the original, whilst it is far from being unpoetical. And yet something is missing.

I do not think that what is most important in this poetry is exact representation of particular symbolism or careful presentation of the metre or the interrelation of the words; what is important is the 'blood-rhythms', the actual physical relationship of the movement of the imagery to the people and the land out of which it springs—the intensely strong, harsh, light and dark land of Spain, which yet has its melancholy and its fire.

Roy Campbell's translations are not really translations, they are poetical re-presentations which may at times go too far in interpreting the originals; there may be too much of Campbell in them, but in some way they represent the strength and movement, the context from which these spring, and the point to which one is taken by them, more effectively than do these more careful translations by Lynda Nicholson.

The intensity, the ambiguity, the inspired development of St John's expression, the piety and the utter commitment to what was from some points of view a narrow way of life, all these as well as an intensely sensual realism, go into these poems; and what emerges from them, what they can say of man to man, and of God to man, has its quality because they are so human.

What Gerald Brenan has done for us is to show us how human John of the Cross was, and how great a reality sprang from his humanity and his faith, whether it be judged in literary or theological terms. He has done this in a way which is without artifice, and it is all the stronger and more compelling as a result.