

MOSAIC AND MYSTERY

ILLTUD EVANS, O.P.

IN Ravenna, on a spring morning, it is easy to believe that the untroubled achievement of the early Christian mosaics reached a point of fidelity to the Christian mystery which was never to be matched again. The immense volume of medieval carving in the round, the seven centuries of religious painting in the West, the whole story from Duccio to Matisse: it would be fantastic to deny the religious meaning of such a *Benedicite* of the things of men's hands. But, confronted in Ravenna with the unique evidence (in the West, at least) of a representation of the Christian mystery that has known no later modification, here in the empty basilicas with nothing to interrupt the full impact of those eloquent walls, one is led to a simple acceptance. Here, it seems, is the nearest men may come to representing the mystery *as such*, for the medium itself demands nothing less or more than this. And, as it happened, there were in this place and at this time (the fifth and sixth centuries) men who worked to the pattern that mosaic art demands.

The mystery can never be adequately told: the infinite gradations of word and meaning are in the end an approximate comment *about* the truth they seek to declare. But the artist is not concerned with the rational justification of a transcending truth. He can only penetrate the mystery within the limits his art allows: he seeks to say 'as if': his final account must be the symbol which hides—but reveals. And so it is that the realistic representation of, shall we say, the sacraments (which are a *sign*) can move us to wonder or pity or peace. But most often it is not the mystery itself that is served: it is the effect of it in terms of our response to it, another form of the preacher's homily.

The art of mosaic can make no concessions to the easy response of emotion, of the *after*-effect. These cubes of coloured stone and glass, cemented into a unity to fill apse or transept, demand a formality, an impersonality even, that must go beyond an event recalled, a figure drawn. Realism is grotesque within this ordered hierarchy of colour and considered forms. To impose ecstatic gesture or facial torment would be as barbaric as, say, to sing plain-

chant with the personal hyperboles of an Italian opera-singer. Thus in Ravenna, the severity of style, the deliberate sacrifice of realistic representation, is in fact demanded by a faithful understanding of what the medium of mosaic can properly achieve. And it happens that such an economy is the truest artistic account of the sacred: the truest, because it is the least embarrassed by the insurgent demands of 'self-expression'.

The simple use of symbol—sheep and sheaves and the monograms of Christ—is the extreme expression of this abstraction from a realistically-conceived account of the mystery. But, even, as in San Apollinare Nuovo, where the mosaics recount the events of Christ's life they do so most formally. The Last Supper is a circle of apostles' heads, with Christ reclining, about a table on which loaves and fishes are laid. There is no strain, no comment; and strong beneath it lies the hidden reality. Or again, the martyrs, white-robed and triumphant, proceeding on each side to the central triumph of the enthroned Redeemer, have no pain or passion: the mystery they exist to declare is beyond any human attempt at re-enacting it. And the supreme mystery of the Baptism of Christ (in the Arian Baptistery: there is another version in the Baptistery of the Orthodox) is conveyed with stillness and an almost liturgical solemnity. The half-submerged figure of Christ governs this scene with infinite authority: and beyond the circle of Father, Son and Holy Ghost (with John the Baptist plunging Christ into the waters) there is the wider circle of the Apostles bearing their crowns in triumph. Here are alpha and omega: the central mystery of our incorporation in Christ, and the widening circles reveal its reach beyond anything that a mere narrative art could explain.

The symmetry of forms, hierarchic and grave, is a purely symbolic account of the mystery in terms that do not intrude upon its hiddenness. And the splendour of colour—the green of the pastures in San Apollinare in Classe, the blue of heaven in the mausoleum of Galla Placidia, and the abiding effect of regal purple and the white of martyrs—all this is an assertion of mystery *as such*: it encloses a depth beyond the surface we see. And this is inherent in the massed use of mosaic: colour lifts the myriad fragments into a wholeness that is so much more than the sum of their parts. For that is what the plastic representation of a mystery must mean: not a copy, not a story, not a moral, but the attempt to translate

the symbol itself (the truth, supernaturally far beyond our analysis) into a form that acknowledges its limits, and in acknowledging them so far transcends them.



THE MYSTERY REVEALED

AN ANTHOLOGY

What we look for beyond seeing
 And call the unseen,
 Listen for beyond hearing
 And call the unheard,
 Grasp for beyond reaching
 And call the withheld,
 Merge beyond understanding
 In oneness
 Which does not merely rise and give light
 Does not merely set and leave darkness,
 But forever sends forth a succession of living things as mysterious
 As the begotten existence to which they return.

Laotzu *Book of Tao*

(Translated by Witter Bynner, n. 14).

The great wastes to be found in this divine ground have neither image nor form nor condition, for they are neither here nor there. They are like unto a fathomless Abyss, bottomless and floating in itself. Even as water ebbs and flows, up and down, now sinking into a hollow so that it looks as if there were no water there, and then again in a little while rushing forth as if it would engulf everything, so does it come to pass in this Abyss. This truly is much more God's dwelling-place than heaven or man. A man who verily desires to enter will surely find God here and himself simply in God; for God never separates himself from this ground. God will be present with him, and he will find and enjoy Eternity here. There is no past nor present here, and no created light can reach unto or shine into this divine Ground; for here only is the dwelling-place of God and his sanctuary.

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