

## CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF ANOTHER KIND

GILES HIBBERT O.P.

It is not so long ago that mysticism was a **dirty word**, the Reformation was regarded as a 'good thing', and a **scientific education** was seen as having more value than one in the 'humanities'. But fashions change, and even genuine perspectives alter. The current fortunes of St John of the Cross are an example of what can happen and will repay examination, for this mystic, poet, and outstanding representative of Counter-Reformation Spain is again becoming popular and arousing interest. Lectures about him are attended eagerly and received with enthusiasm; books once again are being published about him.

But there is danger in this if what is happening is simply a reversion to earlier perspectives. One suspects this, for example, with regard to the reappearance from the early 1950s of Thomas Merton's introduction to and presentation of the Maxims, Cautions and Counsels of St John of the Cross (*Counsels of Light and Love*, Burns & Oates, 95 pages, £1.50). Perhaps this book represents the most attractive of old-style presentations of John and his teaching, based as it is on a liberal humanism tailored to the inadequacies of modern urbanised man; but whether it really represents what John stood for is another matter. Apart from anything else, as with so much that has been written about him, it suffers from an almost total failure to take account of the appropriate context. The lesser writings of St John of the Cross presented in this book, as also his letters, arose from a very particular cultural and social situation which must be appreciated if the nature and significance of his 'advice' is to be understood. Even more perhaps than with his major works it is necessary to realise that these writings were addressed to particular people, or groups of people, in very special circumstances, and are dependent upon a very close relationship between him and them.

The reform movement among the Carmelites of Spain, started by St John and St Teresa, took place at a time when Spain was undergoing radical expansion both cultural and imperialistic in form. A new type of consciousness, secular as well as religious, was emerging, and the reform movement soon became associated with it, its members forming the first rank of the new 'establishment', conforming to the fashionable clerical image. Within this context

John of the Cross was fighting for the life of the original reform movement as he had envisaged it, and as a result suffered a persecution and rejection almost as fierce, and certainly more wounding, than that which he had experienced from the unreformed brethren much earlier.

If taken at their face value, and in one sense they must be taken in this way, these works show John as a very hard man; he had to be to survive and maintain his integrity, as well as to help others to do the same. Merton, however, tries to show that John is not really as hard as he would seem, and in the process reduces him to a shadowy abstraction. As a result his presentation has none of the bite or conviction that the originals have in their context. This is not the real St John, and this reissue will not help us to discover any deeper perspectives; the publisher is merely climbing on the band-wagon with a piece of out-dated popularisation.

But there is another side to John, and ultimately a more important one, in which what emerges above all else is his tenderness and sensitivity. He is one of Spain's greatest poets and it is in his poetry that one finds the expression of his intense love of God, the reality of his mystical experience, and its relationship to other aspects of his human sensibility and affection. The imagery of the poems is delicately but intensely, even blatantly, erotic whether he is describing the search, the chase, the sense of loss, the heart being wounded, the healing caress and final peace achieved in love, as in the *Spiritual Canticle*, or the intimacy of the embrace of a lover, the delicacy of the relationship involved and the ecstatic empathy with one's physical surroundings, resulting in both loss and rediscovery of self, which goes along with it, as in the *Dark Night* (*En una noche oscura*.)

It is no good explaining this imagery away in terms of 'copper coins standing for gold' and maintaining that what is being talked about has 'nothing to do with' what he is actually describing as Martin D'Arcy does in his introduction to the Penguin Classics edition of John's poetry (Text with translations by Roy Campbell, Harvill 1951, Penguin 1960.) The poems stand by the authenticity and integrity of their form and imagery, and the theological implications can only be drawn out by way of genuine literary criticism, not by the imposition of theories derived from elsewhere. It is for the most part totally forgotten that these poems are the *first* expression of John's mystical experience and that the magisterial works on asceticism and mysticism, for which he is chiefly known, started out as commentaries upon the poems in an attempt to explain their meaning to people who had been startled, puzzled and yet immensely inspired by them.

For English readers the balance was redressed a few years back with the publication of Gerald Brenan's *St John of the Cross: his life and poetry* (Cambridge University Press, 1973; see *New Black-*

*friars*, March 1974, pp. 132-5) which set out to present the poetry in its actual context. Brennan is convinced that John of the Cross's significance is primarily as a poet, which does not mean to say that he plays down 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.

As well as considering his poetry Brennan presents us with a short history of his life. This is in fact the most lucid and compelling account that I have come across, and I think the reason for this is that the author, having first met John as a poet, and having taken him seriously as such, has gone 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, such as John of the Cross, who have been allotted a niche in the history of the development of this ideology or that.

With regard to presenting John's poetry Brennan is excellent in showing us its sources, its development, its literary form and musical quality. He relates it to the Renaissance in general and to its peculiarly native development in Spain, and shows its relationship to and dependence upon the popular love songs and literature of the day. At the same time he shows its dependence upon specifically Christian traditions. But I feel it is a pity he does not offer more in the way of actual analysis of the poetic movement of the imagery, for to understand what John is effectively getting at, what he has experienced and how he is communicating this, one needs to see its organic build up and balletic movement. This, rather than any allegorical reduction of the imagery, is what will reveal the poetry's significance.

I think it is Gerald Brennan's reluctance or inability to pursue this line of thought very far that makes him pull his punches with regard to the lesser, and more doctrinally orientated, poems. He claims that he is unable to judge them on account of his theological limitations, but in maintaining this position he seems to me in fact to be betraying his own principles. These verses are to be judged primarily on the effectiveness of their poetic form and the use of the imagery which they employ in relationship to it; it is only after such judgment has been made that one can consider their worth from a more specifically theological point of view. Brennan is, however, right to recognise the serious limitation imposed upon one by ignorance of theological principles here, because this poetry is essentially religious poetry for all its naturalism and eroticism.

Thus it is within this context that we particularly welcome Colin Thompson's theological monograph on St John and his poetry: *The Poet and the Mystic, a study of the Cántico Espiritual*

of *San Juan de la Cruz* (Oxford University Press, 188 pages, £8.50). That it represents the venture of a Nonconformist minister into Roman Catholic history and spirituality makes it all the more interesting not only for its ecumenical value but because an 'outsider' can easily throw new light upon a tired subject, just as Gerald Brenan from his very different position has so effectively done. In fact, although it is probably unfair, and certainly unfortunate for it, Colin Thompson's work inevitably invites comparison with Brenan's.

At a purely material level, in contrast to Cambridge University Press's beautiful presentation Oxford's printing is of such poor quality as to be a serious impediment to pleasurable reading. (It is in fact perfectly possible to produce far better results with the cheapest available production techniques.) At a more significant level *The Poet and the Mystic* lacks the élan so characteristic of Brenan's work. As befits a doctorate thesis it is a genuinely serious study, but suffers from the artificial limitations of this sort of research; detailed examination of the trees seldom leads to a convincing picture of the wood as a whole. The research material here adds up to very little more than its sum and does not really come together as a whole; whereas with John of the Cross what is needed more than anything else is an appreciation of him as a very complex, but essentially human, whole—a person.

I think that in fact this is what Colin Thompson is trying to achieve, but a number of things stand seriously in his way. He may have been restricted to studying the *Spiritual Canticle* and the commentary upon it, but in order to draw conclusions about the nature of John's mysticism, and indeed about John himself, it is essential that the *Spiritual Canticle* should at least be related to and compared with the *Dark Night*, and that the commentaries on this latter, and I personally think greater, poem should be examined in relation not only to the poem with which they are concerned (this cannot be taken for granted, it is frequently left undone) but also to the commentary on the *Canticle*.

It seems to me that Thompson is inadequately aware of the highly complex inter-relationship between the poems and the commentaries; his dismissive remarks on Freud in the context of this relationship (p. 143) indicates a failure to recognise the depths of the cultural tension here, for this, rather than just intellectual complexity is what is involved. Thompson's 'here we meet San Juan the philosopher and theologian working on the material provided him by San Juan the poet; he becomes his own interpreter' (ibid.), said as if that is all that needs saying, is hardly adequate as a conclusion to what is being discussed at this point.

The author would also seem to be insufficiently clear about the conditions, either cultural or intellectual, under which young Juan de Yepes, later John of St Mathias, grew up and received his

education. To say that one 'must suppose that his exposure to secular literature would have been minimal' (p.3) is alarmingly naive; certainly no such supposition can safely be made. The actual situation at Salamanca when he was there as a student, the style of life of the as yet unreformed religious orders, and the evidence implicit in his actual writings, would all in fact strongly encourage the opposite supposition. But even more important is the actual theological training that John received there. The theological faculty had been entirely 'taken over' a few years earlier by the new Thomists under the influence of Francisco de Vitoria and his followers. The rigorous Thomism of the Commentators, faithful perhaps in letter but hardly in spirit to Thomas Aquinas, is what formed the intellectual framework with which John was later to attempt the interpretation of his poems and their genius.

The disastrous consequences of this development were only to be seen clearly much later, but for the moment what concerns us is the effect it had on the development of John's mystical 'teaching'. Although this philosophy had, at least in principle, a realism with regard to the inter-relation of body and soul—a realism to which John was not always faithful—it nevertheless exhibits a near dualism with regard to understanding, language and communication in general. It had no place for poetry within its metaphysics, seeing it as little better than a pretty way of dressing up more complex ideas.

The resultant tension in John's writings, and surely that also means in his life, is plain for one to see, though it can all too easily be mistaken simply for sophistication. This tension was never resolved by St John though at times it produces an outburst such as: 'These verses have been written in love, under the influence of immense mystical understanding, so they cannot adequately be expounded . . . the sayings of love are best left in their fullness' (Prologue to the Commentary on the Spiritual Canticle.) Nevertheless for the most part, true to his philosophical training, he reduces his poetic imagery to allegory and extracts from it its conceptual content.

It is clear that the most valuable thing in John's literary output is quite simply his poetry, and next to that the actual tension exhibited in, rather than the conceptual content of, his commentaries—though these two factors cannot of course be separated out. Neither is the tension simply intellectual, it is at the same time cultural and deeply personal, as the poetic imagery itself indicates if we are prepared to take it really seriously. By not adequately understanding the limitations of the philosophy with which John attempted to interpret his insights, or equally the strength which it also to a certain extent exhibits, (and to judge from his bibliography this is due to having consulted at best only third rate experts in this field,) Colin Thompson goes along too easily with St

John's own explanations of what he is doing. This leads him, like John himself, into talking about 'cashing the value' of the images and the symbolism (pp. 59, 60, 121), though he points out that occasionally John uncharacteristically refuses to do this. To do it, however, amounts to denying the serious quality of the greater poems precisely as poems. In a similar way I find it questionable to talk about the 'experience out of which the poems grew' needing to be 'clothed in words and concepts' (p. 60); it begs a number of questions with regard to the inter-relationship between experience and expression which are never brought up by John himself but which must be raised in considering what he is effectively doing.

Colin Thompson would seem to me to have set out to take St John's mystical poetry really seriously, but, possibly as the result of the restricted perspectives imposed upon him in this thesis, he seems to have succumbed to the pressures of a tradition which has for so long misrepresented, or at least mis-appreciated, John's significance and achievement by falsely approaching it. He does not seem to have been aware that basically the same tradition which limited, whilst forming, John's intellectual ability has been at work ever since reducing, and in effect further obfuscating, his achievement. The light which one had hope an 'outsider' might bring with him to cut through this darkness has not been sufficient, and I fear that he might even have been taken into its ambience. As a result the work of John has not been brought out still further from the dark corners of the shelf by this book, nor have we really been given any glimpse of the close encounter between the saint and his God which the poetry and his reputation would seem to hold out for us.

It is a pity; but Colin Thompson's work cannot simply be dismissed as ill-conceived, as Merton's contribution to the subject can be, for as well as having thrown light on a number of details which we have not really had the scope to consider here, it has shown up very powerfully the need for further exploration in this area. It has also shown us what kind of work is necessary if John's current popularity is to become more than a passing fashion.