

BLESSED HENRY SUSO

'You must not think that you shall take leave from love. Behold, they who said they loved you could not love. And if your heart were as full of love as the bottomless sea, it would all be drunk in by the love of the Beautiful Lover.'—HENRY SUSO.

THE fourteenth century may justly be called the classic period of German mysticism, for it gave birth to the great triad of Meister Eckhart, Henry Suso, and John Tauler, all of them Dominicans.

The conditions in which they lived were, indeed, almost ideal for the development of a Christian mysticism of the highest order. Their time was a time of widespread and intense suffering for Church and people alike. The Church, in the person of the Popes, was persecuted by the Emperors; epidemics were rife in town and country, and frequent interdicts deprived the faithful of the consolations of Religion often for years at a time. Thus, in the desolation of a life whose insecurity and transitoriness were only too apparent, souls sought and found stability in a personal relationship with God which the vicissitudes of earthly existence could not affect and death itself would but transform and fulfil. This close intercourse between God and the soul was cultivated, especially among the nuns and lay communities of women whose direction was entrusted almost exclusively to the Dominicans. This contact between the highly strung spirituality of the nuns and the theological austerity of the disciples of St. Dominic produced a wonderfully enriched mystic life. Securely rooted in Thomistic doctrine, the flower of Dominican mysticism drew from the Angelic Doctor all his learning, sanity, and balance, developing his own mystic elements in the less restrained atmosphere of feminine tenderness and devotion.

When this combination of sound theology and spiritual sensibility took root in the temperament of a poet and artist great things were to be expected. This happened in the case of Blessed Henry Suso, one of the most lovable

of medieval friars. His very life seems to be a cycle of poems or a series of delicate miniatures painted on the gold ground of a deep faith in God and his Church. And as in the case of every real artist nothing but his heart-blood can give his work its finish, so in Henry Suso's life, this spiritual work of art, suffering 'even unto blood' was needed for its perfection.

'There was a preacher in Germany, a Swabian by birth, whose name be written in the book of life. This man desired to become and be called a servant of Eternal Wisdom.' Thus opens Suso's autobiography, the *Vita*; and to complete his self-description he adds simply: 'He had, from his youth, a heart full of love.' He soon learned that 'suffering, by old right, belongs to love,' and willingly accepted both as the foundation of his spiritual knight-hood. For there are perhaps no terms more expressive of his mystic life than that of the Knight-Errant or Minnesinger. Of noble birth, he had inherited the ideals of medieval chivalry so intimately connected with the Christian life, and he transferred them quite naturally from the court to the cloister. He consecrated himself to the service of Christ, the Eternal Wisdom, in much the same way as a knight devoted his life to the service of his lady. But instead of fighting tournaments and battles in her honour, the Dominican friar wrestled against flesh and blood, against principalities and powers, subduing his body by a relentless asceticism. He held that if the knights of this world are willing to suffer so much for the small reward earthly life can bestow, much more should men be willing to suffer for the eternal prize God will give them. Suso was keenly aware of the difficulties besetting the soul on her way to mystic union. 'The mount is high,' he wrote, 'and the way slippery; it cannot be gained in a moment, it means trying again and again until it be conquered.' And the first task he set himself in the service of his divine Master was to conquer the love of this world in his own passionate heart.

Perhaps the most painful renunciation was the first: the breaking away from all his friends and the sympathy they could give him. This separation, so bitter yet so essential to the contemplative life, as the experience of St.

Theresa clearly shows, cost his sensitive nature more than we might gather from his shy admission: 'Therefore he walked miserable and without love.' This rejection of human society, however, was but the beginning of a life of the most vigorous ascetic discipline. 'The dusk of the senses is the dawn of truth,' for 'so long as one drop of blood is still unmortified and unconquered, so long art thou lacking.' This was the guiding maxim of the young friar, and in its light he set out on his spiritual pilgrimage.

He showed, indeed, from the first that he was both a poet expressing his love in symbols, and a lover filling these symbols with the fire of his passion. To remind himself continually of Him to Whom his young life was consecrated (he was eighteen when he began his ascetic practices) he cut the holy name *IHS* into the skin above his heart, so that the blood ran down his body 'as a sign of love.' He was far from contenting himself with the normal ascetic practices. He increased their pain and yet filled them with symbolic meaning, displaying the ingenuity of the artist in devising ever new tortures for his body. He scorned the mere hair shirt, and wore iron nails inside it, and round his waist an iron chain, which he did not take off even when he slept. For eight years he bore a wooden cross on his bare back with sharp nails in it, and at least twice a day he 'took a discipline with it,' hammering the nails into his flesh with his fists. At another time he used to sleep with his arms outstretched in the form of a cross by a complicated mechanism, and gave it up only when his hands began to tremble so violently that he was in danger of losing their use altogether. Once he went without drink until his lips were parched and his tongue swollen; and during two cold German winters he made a vow not to go near a fire until he could hardly walk for chilblains and ulcers. These things he practised until 'his nature was devastated,' and he had either to leave off or die. He was told in a vision to give up these exterior mortifications, since all he had done so far was only 'a good beginning.'

Indeed, he never let these austerities become ends in themselves. They were but the means to lead him to the goal of mystic union with the Eternal Wisdom. 'All else,

be it poverty, fasting, watching, and all other mortifications thou shalt direct to this end, and have as many of them as may bring you thither.' And when one of his spiritual daughters tried to imitate him in these ascetic practices he reminded her that Christ did not say 'take my Cross upon you,' but 'your Cross.'

Upon this ground of self-inflicted martyrdom Suso's inner life began to spring up and bear blossom and fruit. *Per Christum Hominem ad Christum Deum* was the *Via Regia* which the disciple of St. Thomas meant to travel to the land of his heart's desire. Two landmarks stand out on this way, guiding the wanderer, the two great subjects of all Christian art and devotion: the Crucifix and the Madonna.

'Lord, mine eyes gaze upon thy dying face, my soul kisses thy fresh wounds full of blood, all my senses are nourished by the sweet fruit under this living tree of the Cross. All my consolation, all my hope, lies for ever in thy Passion.' His was no easy, morbid revelling in blood and wounds. He even confessed that he found this contemplation of the Passion very difficult at first. 'I sought the Godhead, and found the manhood. I desired sweetness and found bitterness.' For Eternal Wisdom himself spoke thus to him: 'No man may come to Divine heights of contemplation and sweetness unless he be first drawn by the picture of my human bitterness. My humanity is the way by which man must go, my Passion is the gate through which he must pass who would come to the goal thou seekest In my open side thou shalt be lovingly united to my wounded Heart, and there shalt thou make thy abode.' *Intra vulnera tua absconde me*, this eternal mystic prayer was lived by Suso to perfection. For all the powers of his soul, his imagination, his intellect and his will he threw into this task of living through the Passion. As his master St. Thomas had set out the sufferings of the Sacred Humanity one by one in the austere Latin of his *Summa*, so Suso tried to reproduce in himself all the bitter sorrow felt by our Lord and his Mother at every minute of the *Via Crucis* and on Golgotha, until at last he prays to the *Mater Dolorosa*: 'Now I desire that thou layest the dead form of thy tender child on the knees of

my soul, that I may obtain in spiritual contemplation what thou didst hold in the body.'

But when he had filled his soul to overflowing with the sorrowful mysteries of the Passion, he turned to that other mystery: *Vita, dulcedo, et spes nostra*. 'Now behold her,' he addresses the Christ Child, 'now see those dear eyes that often so lovingly looked upon thee, the beautiful cheeks which she so often pressed to thy childish face. Oh, behold those sweet lips which often so tenderly kissed thee, the pure hands that worked in thy service.' In the childlike simplicity that is so characteristic of him he went out to gather the first spring flowers and laid them at our Lady's feet. On the first of May, when the young men used to bring flowers to their girls, he made a crown of roses to put on the Virgin's head, and heard the angels sing hymns in her honour. To him, as to that other Dominican Saint, St. Catharine of Siena, the most commonplace actions became symbols of heavenly truth: so when he divided an apple into four parts he would eat three in the name of the Holy Trinity and the fourth in the love of the Blessed Virgin. For to him Heaven was a reality come down into his everyday life, and he lived with our Lord and his Saints as naturally as if they were walking with him on earth. His heart was indeed wholly given to his Divine Love, as he himself describes it in an entrancing vision: 'And behold, his body above his heart became as pure as crystal, and he saw the Eternal Wisdom sitting quietly in his heart in a beautiful likeness, and with him was sitting the soul of the servant in heavenly desire. And she was bent on his side, and encircled in his arms, and pressed to his divine Heart.' So vivid was the impression made on him by this vision of union that he made a drawing of it which, though not an artistic master-piece, yet in its simplicity and holiness reminds one of Fra Angelico.

But he paid the price for this close relationship with Eternal Wisdom, treading the way that his Lord showed him: 'Suffering makes man lovable to me, for the suffering man is like unto me. Suffering is the surest way, it is the shortest and the nearest way. It mortifies the body, which must rot away, but nourishes the noble soul,

which lives eternally. Suffering draws and forces man to God.' When his twenty years of ascetic discipline were over, God took him into his own school, and all self-inflicted tortures seemed as nothing before the trials that now awaited him. He was still 'like a frightened young hare lying hidden in a bush, afraid of every falling leaf.' And the leaves were falling thick and fast indeed. He was exiled because, in the struggle between the Pope and the Emperor, he took the side of the Pope; he was accused of heresy; some knights whose daughters and mistresses he had induced to take the veil sought to murder him; his sister, who was a nun, escaped from her convent and fell into sin; and, worst of all, one of his penitents, a woman of loose living, who had feigned a conversion in order to obtain material help from the Church, accused him of being the father of her child when he had discovered her deception. This slander was widely believed even by those who had formerly revered him for his sanctity, and though he had no difficulty in disproving it, it took several years to re-establish his reputation. To this sordid tale we owe one of the most touching episodes described in his *Vita*. When the excitement about the slanderous accusation was at its height a woman came to Suso offering to kill the child. Filled with horror at this abominable suggestion, Suso rebuked her vehemently, and then had the child brought to him. He took it on his knees, and when it smiled at him innocently he burst into tears and promised to care for it if nobody else would: 'Oh, you tender child, what a poor little orphan you are. But I will have you as given me by God, and you shall be my dear little child.' Then the child, too, began to cry, and 'so they wept both together.'

It was through these trials borne with all the serenity of which his passionate nature was capable that Suso's spiritual life was brought to its perfection. 'All the time,' he tells us in his autobiography, 'while I was only talking about abandonment, I found it sweet to speak of. But now my inmost heart is wounded, and my bones and brain are pierced to the marrow. How then can I be calm?' Here comes to light what is perhaps one of the deepest differences between Christian mysticism and such doubtful

growths as quietism and other more or less pantheistic systems. The Christian, indeed, demands and seeks detachment from creatures, but to him this does not mean Stoic indifference. 'Abandonment,' this great watchword of the Dominican mystics, is not the same as insensibility. On the contrary, to feel the pain to the utmost and yet to submit to it is the Christian way, since it was the way of Christ. For Suso, therefore, 'A perfect life means giving up one's own will unto the will of God, whether it be bitter or sweet, in subjection and humble obedience.'

And so through suffering love was made perfect. Here again Suso takes up the tradition of the knight and minnesinger. For perhaps no other time knew so much of the deep connection between love and suffering as the Middle Ages. All the great secular poems, *Tristan*, *Lohengrin*, the *Niblungen*, sing of love that must end in suffering. Only to the friar suffering was not the end, but the way. It was not the dreaded outcome of inevitable separation, but the means of union gladly willed and accepted. Again and again he compares suffering to red roses, the flowers of love. 'For even if there were no other good in suffering than to become more and more like the beautiful clear mirror of Christ, it were well worth while.' And so by heavenly alchemy suffering is transformed into joy, and the soul pours forth her delight and thanksgiving to the heavenly Lover: 'Behold, how tender, how lovely, how sweet and infinitely good it is to love. Oh, all ye hearts, why do we not love the lovable Lover who cannot but take away sorrow, deliver our hearts, and bring us joy? Blessed, blessed is the soul that thou, tender Lord, hast chosen to rest in thee.'

Rest in the Lord did, at last, come to him, *Unio Mystica*, the goal to which all his service was designed to lead. For Suso was not for nothing the disciple of Meister Eckhart, the metaphysician of the Mystic Union. He knew, as all great mystics before and after him, that all his visions, all his loving intercourse with the heavenly beings was but a 'prelude of Divine consolation with which God sometimes entices the beginner.' The consummation of the mystic life lies much deeper than in this realm of imaginary visions. It is, in Suso's own words, 'a medium-less

beholding of the pure Godhead, and a vision is the nobler the more intellectual and image-less, and the more like this pure beholding it is.' For 'the highest end of devout prayer is an immediate union of the soul, when all her faculties are recollected, and when, with pure vision, ardent love, and sweet fruition she is drowned in the pure abyss of the eternal Good, forgetting all things except this pure good.' Here we are in the realm of the *Ineffabile*, where words fail and images become meaningless. 'In the mode-less darkness the manifold vanishes, the spirit loses itself, the reality of self is extinguished.' All his sufferings, all his loving meditations on the Sacred Humanity were but a preparation for this, the Ultimate Reality. Here emotions are stilled, the will is at rest, and the intellect satisfied, for man has at last attained to his true end. God and the soul have found each other in the Union which must for ever defy explanation this side of the grave.

It is from here, from the sublime heights of intellectual vision, that Suso's life derives its full meaning. Without this, his companionship with Saints and Angels might seem the sweet but fanciful play of an artist's imagination, and his rigorous ascetic practices and his love for the red roses of suffering but the outcome of a morbid desire for pain. But before he died, just at the Biblical age, he had reached the peaks of the spiritual life. And we must look to the peaks if we would understand the life of the mystic, for only if seen from these will all the diverse parts fall into place. The *Per Christum Hominem* must be followed by the *Ad Christum Deum*. And conversely we shall never attain to *Christum Deum* unless we have first taken our share in *Christo Homine*. Every other way but The Way leads the mystic to pantheism, as is only too apparent in the debased mysticism of a Jacob Boehme, for example, that has broken away from its moorings in Christ. For Suso, therefore, the Manhood and the Godhead are the two poles of the mystic life. The Crucifix that begins to speak and the last illumination that leaves man dumb came to him the knight-errant and minnesinger as they came to his master, the *Confessor et Ecclesiae Doctor Communis*.

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