

## THE MYSTIC INSTRUMENTS

IN the course of a work on glorified bodies, which St. Paul calls *spiritual bodies*, the author, passing from the domain of sight to that of hearing, has been led to examine the mystical meaning of the various instruments enumerated in the psalms: strings, trumpets, organs, cymbals, flutes.

---

*Now let the apple of thine eye cease!* says the Book of Lamentations (2, 18).

The texts last cited are themselves an invitation to cross over from the domain of sight to that of hearing, from the domain of proportion to that of modulation, and from that of values to that of tonalities. *Nothing in this world, says Saint Paul (1, Cor., 14, 10) is without voice. Even soulless things, be they flute or dulcimer, if they give not a distinction of sounds, how shall it be known what is piped and what is harped? And if the trumpet give forth an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle? Likewise you, except you utter by the tongue plain speech, that tongue which the Holy Spirit for evermore has put into our mouth, so that we might at last express ourselves, yield to the loving invitation (Arise, speak, my beloved, let me hear thy voice—as I have taught thee to hearken unto mine—for it is sweet). Canticle. The soul is become entirely praise and the daughter of music, after the phrase of Ecclesiastes (10, 2, 4), of that song, that resonant and melodious breath-control or neum (pneuma) of which the craving came to her at night (Job, 25, 10). Entirely is she herself the harp, in herself covering the gamut, and by octave upon octave the means of attaining from the lower to the higher. Arise, says David (Ps., 56, 9) Arise my glory, psaltery and harp. The flutes and psaltery make sweet melody, but a pleasant tongue is above them both (Ecclesiastes, 40, 21). He hath disposed ascensions in his heart, says the eighty-sixth Psalm. Not for nothing do we speak of man being just or a lute being true. Justice dwells in those*

stretched strings, and undertakes attack and phrasing according to the word of the Forty-eighth Psalm: *I will open my proposition on the harp*. The word of God has found that heart no longer a heart of stone, but of quivering flesh, on that frame of taut nerves it has awakened a twofold response. (*On the ten-stringed psaltery will I sing praise to Thee*, Ps. 143, 9.) One might say by refinement that those strings, to be resonant, must be wholly stretched as between two tuning-pegs, between desire and interdiction; that the bow of love may go to and fro upon them. Or they might be likened to the warps on which the ringing shuttle sets up its woof. Anyhow, what is the psalter to-day, what all that cunning array of Divine Office but a framework set up for the ingenious insinuations and all the patient come-and-go of prayer?

But the golden scale of that liturgical triangle, the harp, does not exhaust, for the soul is prey to the spirit, the whole potentiality of sound-effect. Side by side with the eloquent, skilled, concerting strings, is outcry, the shock of inspiration breaking in, and in the words of Psalm 38, *interrupting the fiery flame*, and the trumpet is the vehicle of that lightning raid, the trumpet that from Exodus to Apocalypse goes with theophanic manifestations, of which the prophet Zachary tells us (9, 14) that *the Lord God will sound in the trumpet*. The bracing enlivened trumpet, imperious and precise, forthwith clears the soul of all its past and reveals to it an order new. *God is ascended in jubilee* (says Ps. 46, 6) *and the Lord in the voice of the trumpet*. It is fitting that at every stage of our spiritual growth we receive that strident order the shriek of that trumpet which rouses our buried mettle and calls it to that violent uplifted state which can be likened only to a burst of flame. *Cease not*, says Isaiah (58, 1), *lift up thy voice like a trumpet*. The gospel trumpet which throws down the battlements of the soul and on that blank space erects in a blinding flash the new business of life.

All that we need now to examine the instruments of our mystical orchestra, as the Psalms show them pulsating to the hands of King David, is to speak of organ and cymbals.

## THE MYSTIC INSTRUMENTS

The organ is the instrument which reigns over the diffusion of sonorous atmospheres. It makes accessible to the ear the cubic space about us, it impregnates space with sound. In contrast with other vessels of music, it expresses what endures rather than what passes, it deals in the continuous. It is that exhalation of the breathing soul, that long insistence on a self-same thought, whilst on different planes separated by the stratification of tonality, fugitive structures and streaming stairways limn or dislimn themselves in the clouds. It gives space, it orders the planes, it makes the mountains dance about it, it sets a whole crowd gigantically going, it brays to God like land and sea with all the power of its storeyed lungs.

Last of all, the top-knot on the peak of the pyramid, tsing, tsing, tsing! those are the cymbals! At base of the orchestra at symphonic performances, behind the crowd of strings, behind the line of oboes and bassoons, flanked on one side by the kettle-drums, on the other by the double-basses, behold the heavy artillery in reserve, bombardons and big brasses, the whole pack of the noise-beasts. When the crescendo of the musical ode is emphasized and sharpened, when from every corner of the orchestra the lines converge and culminate, when the gradual fainting of the ground-tones leads in the threatened fulminations of the column, the battery begins to bestir itself. *Thou hast clapped thy hands, thou hast stamped with thy foot* (Ezekiel 25, 6). With mallets uplifted, lo the Corybant ready to tap his tune and waken with the manifold hail of his strokes the deep echo of subterranean presences. The drum starts rolling, the ass-skin in full practice tames the whole orchestra to its resistless beat. But you quite feel that the event, the decisive flash is still to come, it is in the hands of that male Bacchante, who suddenly gets up at the end of the hall, flourishing at arms' length a double golden sun! When from a lofty promontory one watches the great waves in mighty lines coming on one after another under the breath of the North Wind, only to break on the unshakable wall of the shore, the first idea they beget in us is that of the impotent wrath of the elements. But it is not wrath,

## BLACKFRIARS

it is enthusiasm! The liquid creature, as it were, one, two, three, four! ponderously poised on the arms of the Sea-Gods and by them flung point-blank at the blinding curtain of basalt, the plummy giants rearing suddenly fifty feet in air and breaking with glowing rainbow to an explosion of snowy rage, are not vexed, they are drunk! they sing, they dance, they are pleased to find their limit something solid to foam on, and the frenzied ecstatic cymbal stays at the summit of that sea which tosses it to the stars, Selah! to break itself to bright dust! But the cymbal is not only at the triumphant apex of the choir a clatter, a resonance, a clap, it is also something in our soul's most silent attentive region that suddenly starts shuddering. Is it the beginning of an earthquake? Is it the infant Zeus awakening in the leafage of Dodona? What has been startled beneath that slow wand topped off with sponge and cork? *Mine ear*, says the ninth Psalm, *hath heard the uprisings of thy heart*.

I was near to forgetting the flute, the tempered flute, whose rambling and whose infinite flight, like flowing water sparkling, guides us into ways of peace, at once refreshing and paining like the glimpse of a childish cheek and the candid beaming of loving eyes. As the Spartans erstwhile made over the training of their troops not to the trumpet or the fife, but to the flute, judging their warriors to need excitement less than self-expression, so our shepherd addresses our ears with counsel of smoothness and lets us come to ourselves with the ways of light and azure at our feet. Such are the *fields of verdure* which an angel showed in dream to the Martyrs of old on the eve of their suffering, dreams in which the far-off clarionet blends our sense of bygone time with keen anticipation into a home-sick longing.

PAUL CLAUDEL.

*Translated by John O'Connor.*