

A TECHNIQUE OF SPIRITUAL LIBERATION*

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I

THE LIMITS OF ANY SPIRITUAL TECHNIQUE

A TECHNIQUE of freedom? The expression is, quite certainly, too strong. A title says what it can, as briefly as it can. Properly speaking we have no right to hope from our own efforts anything but *conditions* favourable to the play of our freedom—let that be clearly understood from the start. Nevertheless we shall see better what we ought to hope from the means, and what cannot be expected of them, if we take up the matter in several different ways.

The word 'means' is wholly valid only when applied to material things. You hit a nail with a hammer and you (who are not clumsy) drive it in, and even do so in such a way that the effect is exactly proportionate to the communication of your energy to the nail and the resistance of the wall. The 'means' is sufficient to the 'end'. But when you ask yourself what you are going to do to become more vitally, more fully free, no-one will teach you the great means of all the means: it is simply to be free. There is no other means, and all that you can do will be worthwhile only in order to vary this means according to the particular case. For what can one find in this world to correspond to freedom if it is not freedom itself? And what can buy or capture freedom? It is free; and grace alone is sufficient for it.

We are warned then at once that we must not expect too much of spiritual techniques. If a technique of this sort pretends to succeed infallibly that is enough to make it suspect. To succeed infallibly is not to make the success a truly spiritual thing. The more sure it is, the more fallacious it is. In saying this we are not amusing ourselves with a paradox, we are using terms in their strictest sense.

And we must say this in respect to all the degrees of the spiritual life, from the most external to the most hidden and sublime.

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To pretend to get by the simple application of rules the exactly right expression in which this life should be made concrete, is to have nothing more than a decorum, not a truly spiritual expression, not works and an action which are the fruits of the spirit, of the Spirit itself. It is simply to have an *academicism*. When it is a question, more deeply, of an inner style of life, there is no success more horrible than the pose, the spiritual gait (even the mastery of psychical and spiritual powers) which certain persons obtain by their disciplines.

In our own time, more than ever, one must be on one's guard. In everything, in the spiritual sphere as in others, we live under a regime of *experiment*. Dr Thérèse Brosse writes,¹ 'The thirst for a conscious realization outside our habitual mechanisms of thought (by which is meant rational mechanisms) is the fundamental note of the contemporary era.' Our time, to be sure, has other 'fundamental notes', but this one is very important indeed, especially for those who try to live by the spirit. We ought to listen carefully to that unpleasant warning of Jung:² 'Modern man wants to experiment with the spirit as the bolshevik experiments with the economy. Confronted by this tendency of the modern spirit every ecclesiastical system, whether it be Catholic or Protestant, Bhuddist or Confucian, is at a disadvantage. . . . (Normal people today) feel, by and large, that our religious truths are in some way hollow, emptied of their substance.' Empiricists and experimenters will always be inclined to judge the realities of faith to be *empty of substance*. For it is the *substance* of things *not seen* (Heb. II, 1). The new esoterics promise 'the practice of the second state, in the conscious manipulation of a new spontaneity. We wish to be able, they say, to replace the thing given, by a thing constructed, a structure of our own. We do not want to receive, but to do.'³ They will make only a sham, as false as it is bewitching. As for the free giving of the soul to God in its ineffable depths, what worse imposture could there be than to pretend to do that? If you really count on any means, whatever it may be, take care! It will bind you down more and more as its effect seems to you more and more certain and desirable.

¹ In *Yoga*, edited by *Cahiers du Sud*, 1953, p. 126.

² *Psychological Healing*, p. 285.

³ Abellio in the weekly *Arts*, March 23, 1955.

Two things wholly gratuitous are facing each other here, the grace of God and our freedom. One of them is a mystery beyond our grasp—and to lose oneself in it is healing for it is the mystery of infinite pity, of love which never fails us, of faith never broken.⁴ The other is the riddle of what we are, inscrutable until our eternal 'name' is revealed to us. (Apoc. 2, 17).

This mystery of our freedom, which is that of opening our spirit to the infinite, will suffice to make any means, any technique whatever, inadequate to the only ends worthy of us, the spiritual. The means we make use of will have value only in so far as the end is already present in them, acting in them, by intention. The effect is of the same order as the technique; it is for that reason that an infallible technique is not enough.

If making a book is only a *métier*, 'like making a clock', according to La Bruyère's celebrated *môt*—he well knew that it was much more—the book will be no more alive than the clock. When it is a question of producing works of spiritual freedom, what chance do we stand?

The ancients used to say that art proceeded by determined means.⁵ That is they used to envisage art strictly under its technical aspect: one used to say, 'the art of weaving'; one still says 'arts and crafts'. They were not taken in by this. In any *art*, they supposed always a living presence, a 'genius'. Boileau himself begins his *Art Poétique* by invoking 'the secret influence of heaven'. Nevertheless the poetic creation most open to the unpredictable play of inspiration, and most deeply lived by its author is still not itself in the order of *life* pure and simple, in the order of freedom and free choice in which the person makes his destiny. From the beginning and during the whole course of our existence here below, a *shunting* is necessary, a shifting of the points in the choice which Kierkegaard perceived⁶ so profoundly, between a life which is, in the last resort, merely aesthetic, even *ironic*,⁷ and life as such. One is the life of pure knowledge, of techniques, of *works*

4 Here we recognise the fundamental theme of all the themes of Holy Writ, which the Hebrew expressed by the word *Berith* (too partially translated by *Covenant* or *Testament*).

5 *Per certas vias*.—'Every true technique is in itself infallible and necessarily produces the result it aims at, supposing all the conditions are fulfilled.' (O. Lacombe, *Revue thomiste*, 1951, p. 136.)

6 *Either this good or that good*, particularly the last study of this collection: 'The balance between the aesthetic and the ethical in the elaboration of personality'.

7 I shall be excused for directing attention again to my old article, 'Irony and the Christian sense', *La Vie Spirituelle*, December, 1937. I should today bring to it certain siftings and ramifications, but at least it exists.

at which one aims; the other is the life of love. Love has need of light, and of disciplines, and of a certain experience of that which it loves, and of some experience of itself, and it needs to bear fruit.⁸ But without love, existence is only vanity, whether it remains flat and spiritless or whether it gains in intensity.⁹ Love does not need to be illumined by the Christian faith to know by experience that no experience can satisfy it, that no technique therefore can suffice for it. It tends always beyond what it touches, beyond what it does, and that is enough to disqualify, as far as its value as a life goes (because witnessing to a lack of love), a life which proposes as an end, the simple realization of itself in beauty. But there is something more serious involved here; for true love has always the nature of an *oblation*: it cannot rest in the spiritual effects which it experiences; for to be satisfied in them is to shut itself up in their pleasure, however spiritual that may be, whereas it tends always to open out in the pure *gift*. *A fortiori*, charity offers the whole of its supernatural vitality, in contrast to techniques which would aim at procuring a conscious realization of the self. The fulfilment of the Christian can be only in faith and hope. It is that of one still unknown to himself, accomplished in God, infinitely mysterious. It takes place in the realm of the perishable, in the instability, the precariousness of life here below. Any hope in spiritual techniques is illegitimate if, at bottom, it is not accompanied by *abnegation*, which is the very entrance to the play of Christian life (Lk. 9, 23-24), and if it does not dissolve in the supreme hope of being 'known by God'¹⁰—beyond the joy of every conscious knowledge.

Underlying this problem of spiritual techniques one is aware of the problem of spiritual experience. Whoever says technique in effect says experimentation. Decisive enactments on the subject

⁸ One of the major themes of the Gospel. So Mt., 3, 8, 10; 7, 19; 13, 8, 23, 26; 41; Lk., 8, 15; 13, 7; Jn, 12, 25. Must not our Lord's last miracle before his Passion be as significant in its intention as his first, as a conclusion in action of his teaching? Now this is the drying up of the fig tree on which he found no fruit—a miracle intentionally bizarre, after the manner of the prophets, in order the more to strike the imagination; it was not the season for figs: Mk, 11, 12-14 and 20-14 (where one sees also that this fruitfulness is obtained by prayer in virtue of faith). Cf. Spicq: 'The Christian must bear fruit', *La Vie Spirituelle*, June, 1951.

⁹ For Gurdjieff, for instance, there are three men in us, but none of them loves spiritually. The first is the *psychic* man, the second the *emotional* man, the third the *intellectual* man. The higher states are reached by 'labour' starting from one of these three. There is no love except the emotional (or sensual). (Oupensky, *Fragment of an Unknown Doctrine*, p. 113.)

¹⁰ Another great theme of the New Testament: Cor., 8, 2-3; Gal., 4, 9; 2 Tim., 2, 19.

of Christian experience have recently been made by M. Jean Mouroux in a great book.¹¹ It is apparent there that Christian experience, and even any spiritual experience which is so, cannot be reduced to the verification of what one experiences—to the *empirical*—or to what one obtains voluntarily—to the *experimental*. It is 'the experience of the person in his contact with the God who is Person.'¹² It allows then in two ways of a passing beyond itself. M. Mouroux is thus led to coin a new word for a case equally confusing in the facts of experience, the word *experiential*. This term is applied to experience 'taken in its personal totality, with all its structural elements and all its principles of movement, an experience founded and laid hold of in the clarity of a consciousness which possesses itself and in the generosity of a love which gives itself.'¹³ It is essential to Christian experience that it go beyond the experimental.

There is therefore something of an injustice in the pretence of so many spiritually minded people, who complain of the insufficiency of techniques of liberation in our western world, equipped as it is with so many material techniques. We are going on to say what foundation there is in this regret, in this complaint. But at bottom it is unjust, because the desire frustrated is itself radically illegitimate. The complaint is that religion no longer offers 'any method, any concrete discipline for attaining that state of plenitude of which the saints and mystics speak'.¹⁴ But the saints and mystics have never taken for an end this plenitude itself. They are unanimous in preferring the least act of love in darkness to all the illuminations and all the experiences, in preferring the communion itself to the fervour which one can feel from it, unanimous in repeating that the 'happy encounters', as St John of the Cross called them, are unforeseeable graces of love, of God, never the success of our efforts.

II

THE NECESSITY OF A RENEWAL OF TECHNIQUES

Nevertheless we must pay attention to what there is, so to

¹¹ *L'Expérience chrétienne*, Aubier, 1952 (v. particularly ch. I, II, IX, X, XI).

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 21.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹⁴ The words are Paul Sérant's, in Pauwels's *Monsieur Gurdjieff* (reviewed in *La Vie Spirituelle*, May, 1955), pp. 295-6. How significant is the title of Keyserling's book, *From Suffering to Plenitude*.