

texts are safely published, some of those who are drawn to the ardours of textual criticism will turn their eyes in the direction of the Lollard Bible, A and B.

## THE MYSTIC AND THE WORLD

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THE 'ordinary Christian' who is attracted by the magnetism of the 'mystics' is baffled by a problem that is hard to solve from a scrutiny of the lives of some of these contemplative saints, either because, like the Fathers of the Desert, they are virtually unknown to us in any intimate sense, or because their natural personalities, before their supernatural development takes place, do not appear to have experienced the need out of which this problem arises. A Saint Rose of Lima, for example, or a Saint Mariana of Quito, seem, from the usual accounts of them at least, to have had that capacity for living in an almost vacuum, the incapacity for which on the part of most people constitutes the problem here in question. St John of the Cross preaches his *nada*, and the admiring but ordinary Christian feels that even supposing he had the courage to deny self so consistently, how in fact would he carry out the programme of annihilation short of, in fact, ascending to the top of a very tall column and quietly settling down to starve? A temperament really directed to love of creatures, however many ounces of ash are sprinkled upon the dish of spinach, will always leap forward to delight in the grey and green colour-scheme. Solitude can never be absolute, and the kind Romanus who brings the hermit his food will surely be rewarded with his love. Is it possible to examine the lives of any mystics in sufficient detail to discover whether there is a solution to this difficulty, and even one which the ordinary man may, in due proportion, make his own?

In the correspondence,<sup>1</sup> preserved in 458 letters to a great variety of recipients, we can see something of the outer life of St Teresa of Avila. This remarkable woman is possibly the saint about whose inner and outer lives we have the greatest amount of information—at least, among those whose natural personalities

<sup>1</sup> *The Letters of St Teresa of Jesus*, translated by E. Allison Peers. Two volumes, 3 guineas. (Burns, Oates & Washbourne.)

are of the kind to pose and perhaps solve the ordinary man's problem. It is true that, had she not been a saint, she would still have been a remarkable woman (though how far one may say that and how difficult it is to say anything like it and mean anything worth meaning, Miss O'Brien's recent book<sup>2</sup> made us pause to think)—even in the natural order, she was a personality far above the ordinary. Nevertheless, no saint is without kinship with the ordinary sinner. Teresa de Cepeda was a woman of great charm, capacity for enjoyment and of lively human affections. Omitting the charm (but, of course, the lack of it may impair capacity for enjoyment and curtail affections, so that it is important for our purpose to choose a saint on whom no suspicion of human deficiency rests), the other two things are really what we mean when we feel the conflict between mystical annihilation and the actual process of living, even for the annihilated saint himself and *a fortiori* for ourselves. What becomes of Teresa's gift for the enjoyment of life and her love for her family and friends when she enters the course that leads to union with God?

We have abundant and enchanting evidence for Teresa's capacity for enjoyment of life in her correspondence. For example, she was highly susceptible to scenic charm:

Poor and small though the house is, it has lovely views and grounds. (I, 30.)<sup>3</sup>

I think I shall be less disturbed here [Alba de Tormes], and I have a hermitage which overlooks the river, as the place where I sleep does too, so that I can enjoy the view when I am in bed; and I find that most refreshing. (I, 130.)

... But a house in which they have only well-water, as they say the other one has, will be unhealthier still, and they will not have the views they get from the present one, which are most refreshing for them. (*Letter to Fr Gracián*, II, 685.)

Try occasionally, when you find yourself oppressed in that way, to go to some place where you can see the sky, and walk up and down a little: doing that will not interfere with your prayer, and we must treat this human frailty of ours in such a way that our nature is not subjected to undue constraint. We are seeking God all the time, and it is because of

<sup>2</sup> Reviewed in BLACKFRIARS last February.

<sup>3</sup> The numbers at the end of each quotation refer to the volume and page of Professor Peers' translation.

this that we go about in search of means to that end, and it is essential that the soul should be led gently. (*From a letter to the future Archbishop of Evora, Don Teunio de Braganza, who had complained of a feeling of wanting to leave off in the middle of prayer, I, 147.*)

She is not above the pleasures of taste:

Talking about *aloja* [a kind of spiced mead], they say it is very good here [Valladolid]; but as I have no Francisco de Salcedo, we don't know what it tastes like and there is no way of finding out. (I, 53.)

Elsewhere she mentions her enjoyment of sweet things. She admonishes her brother for proposing excessive austerity in the running of his household:

My confessor, Dr Velázquez, was here today. I discussed with him what you said about wanting to give up the carpets and silver, as I should not like you to cease making progress in God's service because I was not helping you, but there are things in which I do not trust my own opinion. In this, however, he agreed with me. He says it is of no importance one way or the other; what matters is that you should try to see how unimportant such things are and not become attached to them. It is right that you should have a suitably appointed house, as you will have to marry your sons one day. So just be patient for now: God always gives us opportunities to carry out our good desires, and He will give you a chance to carry out yours. (*To her brother Lorenzo, I, 430.*)

She often has occasion to talk of money to her family:

I am not sure if it would not be better for the money to remain at Seville, for you used always to say you needed it for the chapel, and you will only spend it all. May God direct the matter, as you want the money for Him, and I hope this sheep-deal will be profitable. (*Letter to her brother Lorenzo, II, 730.*)

We are charmed to learn that not every word she uttered was intended to be for edification:

Occupy yourself as well as you can and as you can. I wish I were with you, for it would do you good to hear a little entertaining chatter. (*To the Valladolid prioress who was not well and suffering from what she deemed interior trials, I, 327.*)

It is indeed people rather than things who constitute the larger

proportion of causes for conflict; flowers, stars and natural beauty are easier matter to persuade the austere or worldly (and perhaps there is such a thing as the austere worldling) as, rightly taken, helps, not hindrances, to God. But personal relations more easily provoke their snub or sneer. We can see something of St Teresa's approach to this element in her world, from a letter to Francisco de Salcedo (a lifelong friend, one who had helped her in the spiritual life, and a benefactor to the order):

... after writing seven or eight business letters, which I couldn't avoid, I have a little time left over to take a rest from such things and write you these lines to tell you how much your letters cheer me. And don't think you are wasting time by writing to me, for I need your letters every now and then, provided you don't say so much about being old, which really shocks me—as if young men could have any kind of certainty how long they were going to live! May God grant you to live until I die, and then I shall ask Our Lord to take you quickly, so that I may not be parted from you in Heaven. (I, 52.)

A conventional occasion for condolence brings forth this:

May the grace of the Holy Spirit be ever with you, Doña Inés, and give you the physical strength to sustain this heavy blow which you have received from our defeat at Frisa. I, too, was grieved, and almost stunned, at the news, for I was extremely fond of your sons Don Diego and Don Juan, and they went off to Flanders so gaily. My own distress is so deep that I do not know how to comfort you; but I am sure you are well aware how miserable is this life, so I hope Our Lord will give you light to realise what a favour His Majesty is bestowing on anyone whom He delivers from it; and, according to our Faith, the souls of those who died for their King and our holy religion go to dwell with God in glory and so receive the best reward which we creatures can desire. (I, 56.)

Shall she indulge family affection when an unexpected courier presents himself?

It would be foolish if I were to deprive you of the pleasure of reading a letter from me by not making time to write when I have so good a messenger. Blessed be Our Lord, Who has done this so well. (*To her sister*, I, 69.)

Clearly, she had no scruple in cases like this. More interesting

cases are those of Casilda Padilla and Fr Gracián. Casilda Padilla was a young adolescent of aristocratic and wealthy family for whom Teresa conceived a great admiration and affection. What is interesting about this example, as in that of Gracián (for whom it is obvious, from a reading of the letters to him and the allusions to him in letters to others, that Teresa had a very deep affection), is that her judgment was at fault regarding her. Casilda, against the wishes of her family, entered the Valladolid Carmel in 1573 (in circumstances which today would be impossible and even then must have been widely considered imprudent) full of enthusiasm and determination, but about seven years later secretly obtained a papal dispensation to transfer to a Franciscan community where she was made abbess. St Teresa did not disguise her vexation at this development, and her disappointment at the defection in one she had so esteemed, indeed, overestimated. A few examples of Teresa's intensity in matters of this kind:

My spirit was drawn to hers even before I spoke to her. . . .  
(*Of Casilda Padilla*, I, 138.)

I only wish I were sure this person is not offending God, for that is what I chiefly fear, as I have seen so many perils and falls in such cases, and I am very fond of that soul—I think my anxiety about her comes from God—and the greater is her simplicity, the stronger are my fears; so that I am glad she is content to be in a safe place. . . . (*Of a person unknown, to the prioress of the Valladolid house*, I, 142.)

Remember me warmly to my dear Casilda—I am disappointed at not seeing her too—and to Maria de la Cruz. (I, 153.)

Oh, how Angela would have loved to get Paul a meal when he was hungry like that. . . . (*A = Teresa; P = Gracián; the letter is to Gracián himself.*) (I, 141.)

I sometimes wish I had Teresa here, especially when we take walks in the garden. (*To her brother Lorenzo; Teresa is her niece, Lorenzo's daughter*, II, 683.)

One of the most charming phrases that aptly sums up Teresa's uninhibited idea of what constitutes an attractive human personality is this:

All the same, I have been very appreciative of your kind thought in sending things for the nuns, and the same applies

to Isabel, who seems to have grown into a person full of courtesy and love. (I, 142.)

In the contact between the Christian soul and its world, however, it is not all a question of beautiful things nor of persons to whom it is attracted. There are the persons by whom it is repelled or at any rate to whom it is not drawn:

It irritates me to see how such nuns rise to positions of seniority. I am referring to that Prioress of yours. . . . (*Letter to Fr Gracián*, II, 687.)

Ana de Cepeda [a relation] thought a great deal of the alms you sent her too, so with this she will be quite rich. There is no lack of places for her to go to, but she is a curious character and not at all companionable. That is the way God leads her, but personally I have never dared to take her into one of our houses—not that she is wanting in virtue, but because I realise that her present mode of life agrees with her best; she will not stay with Doña Maria, or with anyone else, and she gets on very well as she is. She is a sort of hermit, and she is just as good as she always was and lives a life of great penitence. (*Letter to her brother Lorenzo*, I, 74.)

The Princess of Éboli as a nun was enough to make you weep. (I, 128.)

If your Ladyship should see the Father Provincial of the Dominicans, scold him from me, for he was a very long time in Salamanca and never came to see me. True, I don't care for him a great deal! (I, 93.)

Worse yet: there is the problem of dealing with the difficult:

I really find that relative of ours who has been here very tiring. Still, that is how one's life has to be spent, and, since those of us who ought by rights to live apart from the world have so many duties to fulfil in it, you will not be surprised to learn that, all the time I have been here, I have not yet talked to the sisters—I mean individually. (*Letter to her brother Lorenzo*, II, 681.)

I find a puerility in that house which is intolerable, and the Prioress is shrewder than befits her vocation. So I am afraid she will not [*word erased*], for, as I said to her when I was at Seville, she has never been frank with me. She is very [*word erased*] I assure you I had a lot to put up with from her while I was there. . . . To keep telling the poor nuns how bad the

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house is for them is enough to put the idea into their heads that they are ill. I have written her some terrible letters, but you might as well talk to a stone wall. (*Letter to Fr Gracián*, II, 685.)

And worst of all, there is the case where the difficult person is a close relative. The Cepedas had a brother, Pedro, obviously very neurotic, who was a great plague to the rich nabob, Lorenzo, back from the Indies, and embarked, as we have seen, on a devout and even contemplative course of life under his sister's direction. She advises him on this problem:

I declare God seems to be allowing this poor man [her brother Pedro] to try us so as to discover the extent of our charity. And really, brother, I have so little as far as he is concerned that it quite distresses me. For, even if he were not my brother at all, but only my neighbour, I ought to be moved by his necessity, and yet I feel most uncharitable towards him. I try to get over this feeling by reminding myself of what I ought to do to please God, and once His Majesty enters into it, I find I would go to any lengths to help him. Were it not for that, I assure you I would not do a thing to hinder his going away, for I was so anxious to see him out of your house that the pleasure his departure gave me greatly exceeded my regrets at his trouble. So I beseech you, for love of Our Lord, do me the kindness not to take him back again into your house, however much he begs you to, and however great his need, and then I shall have some peace of mind again. For really, though he is sane enough in other respects, his desire to be with you is quite an insane one, which I understand from learned men is perfectly possible.

There follow details as to the financial help Teresa thought Lorenzo should give their brother—including an injunction: 'If you give him anything next year, it is important you should not give it him all at once, but pay it by instalments to whoever is boarding him, for my belief is he will not stay in any one place for long. . . . But, as long as he is not in your house, I think it is all to the good.' She then concludes:

I assure you I have been wishing for a long time that Don Pedro were not in your house. I have been so sorry every now and then to see you tortured in this way and I have also been apprehensive in the way I have described to you

[that Pedro would have a mental breakdown]. (*Letter to Lorenzo*, II, 740-42.)

Throughout these letters, the examples crowd one another out of this great contemplative dealing with her world, not in a spirit of grim renunciation of everything attractive to nature and of accepting everything unpleasant, but of rational discrimination, of seeing one's personality as part of the circumstances in which God has placed one and therefore to be accepted and reckoned with. We are led to an attitude that turns out, in fact, to be very much harder than a mechanical renunciation or a depressive acceptance of the unpleasant, for it is the exercise of ultimate, perfect sanity: there is a judgment as fine as it is possible to reach as to what helps the love of God and what hinders; even if we overrate Casilda, we must know whether our love for her impedes our or her love for God. Of course, in any absolute sense, it is impossible ("The truth is we never really know ourselves", I, 334), but at least we can be truthful and not pretend to reach a final statement. And the required infallibility is behind the judgment, in the will:

I must confess that the people in this part of the world are not my sort, and I long to find myself, please God, in the Promised Land [Castile], *though if I thought my staying here would please Him better, I know I would do so willingly*. Still, the abominable sins that are committed here are enough to break your heart: they would appal you. (*Letter from Seville to the prioress of Valladolid*, I, 230.)

The will is mounted on a swivel, ready to turn this way or that, according as the will of God is made known to us. The swivel is the love of God.