

What We Do Not Know in the Exploration of Limits

Human experience is rich in singular bursts and flashes that not everyone can participate in, that can only be the doing of a very small number of persons, and yet which, exceptional or strange as they are, have the capacity to enlighten us all. The extraordinary has something to say about the ordinary. Sometimes individuals travel alone along divergent paths, seeking a destination that perhaps only they can anticipate. In such cases the method used is not one that proceeds from the unknown to the known, from what the infant or newcomer doesn't know to what science or society considers as established knowledge. For those who travel to the zenith of experience, discoveries are of a different order because the person is transformed by them.

Take, for example, the poet absorbed in his verbal substance, the writer who lives in a world lengthened in time, engaged in a long-term process that is simultaneously composition and the perpetual accident of composition. What does this artist know about what he or she is doing? And what is happening when the canvas that Pierre-Marc de Biasi is in the process of painting is also a cognitive mystery, a semblance of writing, a game of signs that no one will ever be able to decipher?

Although mystical knowledge is perhaps no less cerebral than intellectual knowledge, it does demand a very concrete act of conversion. From Mount Athos to Nicolas Da Cusa, from the masters of Sufism to Master Eckhart, the same response to the same call: "Cast off your murky and noisy "I," learn to direct your gaze differently. In so doing you will obtain a different vision and a true intuition." Roger-Pol Droit analyses both the preaching of Buddha, which is devoted to silence and a hoped-for beyond of speech, and Buddha's silence, which is the omniscience of emptied thought.

Mysticism, however, can degenerate into mere emotional agitation, and scientific curiosity has certain borders it considers impure and would like to ignore: clairvoyance, spiritism, parapsychology ... As Michael Pierssens shows, it is not enough merely to dismiss these phe-

nomena as aberrations; we must try to understand how the desire to grasp the unknown, the hope of extending the limits of the knowable, can also take on such intemperate forms.

What can the scientist's knowledge mean in a moment of crisis, in an extreme situation, in the face of suffering and death? At such times what is the difference between knowing a lot and knowing nothing? Enrique Lynch writes from this perspective—a perspective more existential than cognitive. As the need for metaphysics does not itself provide metaphysical means, perhaps images can be of help here, in particular the image of the wild child who suddenly appears among us without knowledge of humanity or of human affairs, and yet who is no more removed from what we need to know than we ourselves are.

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