

## COMPLICATING SIMPLE THINGS<sup>1</sup>

H. C. GRAEF

THERE is a sarcastic German saying of which I am often reminded when reading certain German books: 'Why do it simply, if it is also possible to make it complicated?' Dr Urs von Balthasar, the distinguished thinker, who has unfortunately already complicated the simplest of saints, St Teresa of Lisieux, now does the same for another modern Carmelite, Elizabeth of the Trinity; and his friend, Adrienne von Speyr, even succeeds in giving us a book of highly involved and not a little pretentious meditations on our Lady. There is no doubt that we are in need of thoroughly theological and unsentimental treatment of 'devotional' subjects, and both these books supply this. But they are unhappily vitiated by this deadly tendency to read non-existent profundities into the most normal events and attitudes, and to bandy about concepts of Kierkegaardian 'dread' and existentialist 'vertigo' where they have no meaning whatever.

Dr Balthasar's book has been 'translated and adapted', and this means presumably that some of his more recondite observations have been cut out, which is all to the good. But unfortunately the translator, A. V. Littledale, has kept far too close to the author's highly idiosyncratic style and frequently reproduces even his word order and his substantival adjectives and verbs, an inadmissible procedure that makes the reading of the book unnecessarily exhausting. To give but a few examples of this 'translation-English': 'The man of faith lives from the standpoint of his eternal election by God.' (p. 27). 'Faith . . . is the making present to the mind of our origin and end . . .' (p. 28). 'Her perception that the execution of the Father's eternal plan is the work of the Holy Spirit, is the angle from which Elizabeth came to view the whole of revelation; her perspective directs itself primarily to the Spirit.' (p. 107.)

Alec Dru, on the other hand, has rendered Adrienne von Speyr's—it is true less difficult—style into almost impeccable English. Nevertheless, it is a strangely unsatisfying book. Despite its very

<sup>1</sup> *Elizabeth of Dijon*. By Hans Urs von Balthasar. (Harvill; 12s. 6d.) *The Handmaid of the Lord*. By Adrienne von Speyr. (Harvill; 16s.)

intellectual tone it does not avoid giving way to fancy, and time and again the reader is tempted to ask: How does she know? 'Joseph's special contribution to their union is poverty. He . . . was never to attain security or a settled home, and the fact of his being excluded from ordinary relationships hindered the normal unfolding of his life.' (p. 65.) This is imagination from start to finish; there is not a word in the New Testament about Mary and Joseph having no settled home in Nazareth and of the latter's life not unfolding normally. But Frau von Speyr is trying to force the relationship between Joseph and Mary into the pattern of the religious vows, Mary representing obedience, Joseph poverty, the relation between them chastity, and the angel's words providing the . . . enclosure! (p. 65.) It just will not do to be too clever about sublimely simple relationships.

Or take Balthasar's interpretation of Elizabeth of the Trinity's simple request to a priest: 'Pray to him that I may rise to the height of my vocation, and that I may not misuse the grace he lavishes on me.' The author comments: 'Being beyond the veil may cause a feeling of dizziness . . . owing to the too great light that pours out from the revelation of the mystery. They (the saints) are oppressed with a sense of overwhelming responsibility, of an absolutely excessive demand that this light brings.' (p. 45.) The whole apparatus of Kierkegaardian dread to account for the so natural, almost trite, desire of a nun that a priest may pray she should show herself worthy of the graces God has given her!

Frau von Speyr, too, operates with the apparently indispensable concept of dread in season and out of season. 'The unbounded self-renunciation demanded by the Angel of God of a virgin was something so tremendous, so transcendent, that her unaided nature could only answer full of dread.' (p. 22.) 'Thus Mary's expectation drew together the anguish and dread of the world's hopes.' (p. 73.) 'And as the darkness in which she was forsaken grew and imprisoned her, a dread that was no longer human, a dread utterly absorbed in the dread of her dying Son, enabled her to endure that state of impotence. . . . As her dread increased it increased her readiness, and the greater her dread the further she entered into and participated in the dread of her Son, and being in that dread she wished to make her sacrifice still greater. . . . Nor did she turn from dread, in her dread and anguish. . . . Flight from dread flight in dread, is the consequence of original sin, and of that

she was ignorant. She did not shield herself against dread.' (p. 119f.)

Coming finally to the end of this symphony of dread, the reader may well ask what it all means. Is this really an authentic meditation on the simple statement of St John: 'Now there stood by the cross of Jesus his mother'? And why exactly is fleeing from dread a consequence of original sin?

Perhaps it is due to this craze for profundity and complication that Balthasar should show himself extraordinarily uncomprehending in his view of Sister Elizabeth's great prayer to the Trinity. He finds fault with her, because in it 'the words I and mine occur forty-three times' and because there is no explicit mention of the Church (p. 19). But if these are faults, then surely the *Anima Christi* is to be considered inferior because the word 'me' occurs in every line; and, beginning with our Lord's own prayer, there are prayers without number that fail to mention the Church.

Balthasar is above all what, for want of a better term, may be called a theological philosopher, and one who tends to approach his subjects with preconceived ideas; thus, as in the present case, he is easily led to misinterpret just those simple, wholly uncomplicated personalities who approach God in a childlike way. Thus he can write: 'Her particular merit is certainly not to have raised a speculative structure on the thesis of predestination. . . . It is rather that she ingeniously withstood man's irresistible love of speculation on this point.' (p. 36.) The author seems to assume almost naively that everyone must be as much tempted as himself to raise speculative structures; surely this would never so much as enter the head of Sister Elizabeth, who had never studied theological systems.

Notwithstanding the defects of the books under review it is not surprising that both the works of Adrienne von Speyr and those of Urs von Balthasar should have been admired by critics of the highest repute. They are, indeed, in a way refreshing after so much 'devotional' literature that has flooded the Catholic market in this country; and in those of his works that deal with contemporary problems rather than with spirituality Balthasar has much to teach us. But it seems not altogether healthy that to make Christian spirituality acceptable to our more intellectual contemporaries, it should have to be presented in concepts borrowed from modern philosophy and psychology which are simply not applicable to it, and which therefore cannot but falsify it.