

eye penetrating into the secrets of nature would be required to do justice to them. Only personal contact with Theresa Neumann can give a pure picture of the sublime happenings there. Therefore, I am grateful to my good fortune in having been there, particularly as a physician.

ENTRY INTO THE NIGHT OF THE SENSES

BY

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IF we are right in supposing that when Richard Rolle describes the third and highest degree of love he is really considering the illuminative rather than the unitive way, we can fit him very neatly into a pattern of spiritual development. Thus we discover his own personal experiences of burning love and heavenly sound entering into his description of 'Singular Love' which is in his own eyes the most perfect state. The special but accessory favours which he had received from God at the beginning of this new way of life were the love in his breast, which was so fervent as to convey even a physical sensation of heat, and an interior sound of heavenly music. And these we find as part of the permanent state of love which he calls 'Singular'.

Singular love is when all comfort and solace are closed out of thy heart but that of Jesus Christ alone. It seeks no other joy. For the sweetness of him who is in this degree is so comforting and lasting in His love, so burning and gladdening that he or she that is in this degree may feel the fire of love burning in their souls . . . then the soul is Jesus-loving, Jesus-thinking, Jesus-desiring, only breathing in the desire for Him, singing to Him, burning for Him, resting in Him. Then the song of praise and love is come. . . .
(*The Form of Living*).¹

But although this way of love seems to be very permanent and very comfortable 'so that the soul is so much comforted in the praise and love of God, and till death comes is singing spiritually to Jesus and in Jesus and of Jesus' (id.), nevertheless there are many sins which are still lurking in the soul even after the hardships of purification and which are still hindering the completion of the process of supernaturalising the whole man. There are times when the soul is given some special assurances as to the pureness of its love, but never can a man be satisfied or complacent about his state. He is always in danger, however many graces God may have poured out upon him.

In this degree of love thou shalt over-come thine enemies, the

¹ Selected writings of Rolle edited by Heseltine.

world, the devil and the flesh. But nevertheless thou shalt always have fighting whilst thou livest; and till thou dost die it behoves thee to take care to stand so that thou fall not into delights, neither in evil thoughts, nor in evil words, nor in evil works (*Ego Dormio*, Heseltine, p. 95).

And he says elsewhere that no man can completely slay 'engendered concupiscence' nor live so as never to sin in this life. (*Fire of Love*, Misyn, p. 158).

This is a salutary observation at all times and helps to explain how the really devout Christian is never the complacent one, and how the further advanced a man is on the way to perfection the more conscious he is of the danger of sin and of his own weakness. But it is a lesson which must be most urgently dinned into those who have passed through the initial stages of purification, have been given perhaps some of these 'experiences' which from time to time announce the beginning of a new phase, and are probably at the gateway to this singular way of love which St Thomas calls 'proficient'. For it is very easy to remain at the very gate and yet to miss the opportunity of pushing it open and stepping forward. If a man has progressed so far he will be tempted to feel that he is fairly 'safe', that the peace and virtue that have come to him are proud possessions, that any experience of God's presence he may have had was as though God had said, 'Well done thou good and faithful servant' and that he may definitely class himself among the elect. The result of these temptations if they are yielded to—and they are subtle and insidious temptations which easily deceive—is that progress ceases, and the man relapses into a pride or conceit which is very self-satisfied and which leads him to patronise others. The sign of this pride is a certain unteachableness in matters concerning the spiritual life; he holds on to his own opinions with a vehemence altogether out of proportion to their importance; he is unwilling to accept a contrary opinion even from his director or other authority. He feels so secure in the gifts that God has given him that he begins to act as so many heretics have acted, basing his certainty on an interior inspiration which he regards as of the Spirit, instead of on the outward judgment of authority.

The proud, truly, says Rolle, and those full of wrath seem to themselves so worthy that they can suffer nothing. . . . And that they have taken up they always defend, though it be false or untrue; and neither with authority nor reason will they be overcome, that they should not be seen to have said what were unaccording. And when they are untaught—and that they wot well—yet they will behave as if they were inspired in all things that belong to God. (*Fire of Love*, Misyn, p. 43).

There are surely many heretics who have begun well and have arrived

at this second main stage of their life and then fallen into pride of intellect and confidence in their own 'spirit'.

By now the grosser sins have been overcome and even the more fleshly and sensual temptations will have ceased and the good Christian may have become so accustomed to that type of sin and temptation that the new forms catch him unawares; if he is not still conscious of the deep-rooted self-love which remains even through all that previous era of purification he will be easily led into conceit. Indeed the conceit of the 'pious' and the 'devout' is almost proverbial; and they never recognise it in themselves being too occupied with their experiences and interior states to be conscious of their over-bearing attitude towards the rest of the world:

Wherefore they change the joy of incorruptible cleanness to waned beauty which shall not last. This soothly would they not do unless they were blinded with the fire of froward love, the which wastes (away) the burgeoning of virtue and nourishes the plants of all vice. Forsooth many are not set on womanly beauty nor like lechery, wherefore they trust themselves saved, as it were, with sickness (security); and because of chastity only, which they bear outwardly, they ween they surpass all others as saints. . . . (*id.* p. 16).

Strangely in contrast with this sense of eminence and security there sometimes appears also an envy of others' spiritual well being, an instinctive feeling of bitterness when a neighbour shows signs of holiness or of divine favours. This is a strange temptation in one who has been seeking the good and desiring to love God wholly, and often it is only a passing feeling which is quickly recognised for its ugly character. Nevertheless sometimes it does provide a very real obstacle to entering into this new way. In contrast to 'the true soul' who casts out pride and wrath, Richard Rolle describes the envious man who raises ill reports about his neighbour, who feels down-hearted when others are praised. 'But the soul the which is but a little kindled with heavenly contemplation cannot seek that vainglory of slipping (i.e. passing) praise. . . . For where any are that love God, they truly desire the profit of their fellows as of themselves'. (*id.* p. 123).

Perhaps the most inevitable obstacle to a full entry into the illuminative way is the continual existence of weakness of character and of personal idiosyncrasies. For although the purifications have cleansed a good deal of the dross, a man's character has not been transformed or changed in any fundamental way in the first stage. He still lives and acts in a very human way and his own personal characteristics will still be present. The quick tempered man will not give way to his temper wilfully, but he will remain irascible and easily riled. The sentimental man will find himself carried easily away by en-

thusiasm for passing things, such as the latest miracle or the sayings of some new ecstatic. Rolle himself does not show what would now be called psychological insight in this matter. He was not in danger of turning into himself; his spirituality was very objective so that he is mainly concerned with deliberate and outstanding sins on the one hand and the love of God on the other. But certain it is that these weaknesses appeared to him as the great stumbling block to progress (cf: *Fire of Love*, Misyn p. 168). The constant failure in one particular direction will often keep a man for long in the first stages of the spiritual life. It is only when he is willing to be plunged into the night of the senses that he releases himself from these imperfections and this very human mode of life. Especially, too, in the matter of the virtues—he must be ready to relinquish his habitual attitude towards them; he must not continue to exercise them as though he were only just beginning. He has to be generous and ready to be open hearted and magnanimous, for otherwise he will gauge his actions by what he is used to being instead of by what he is called to be. St Thomas, in speaking of the increase or lessening of charity, points out that it is of the nature of charity that it can itself never diminish without wholly being extinguished. If you love God, you cannot then proceed to love him less. Of itself the virtue brings a total love or none at all. And yet by a continuous lack of generosity the soul can be weakened and put in a state where what is contrary to charity may easily prevail. The reason is that venial sin itself is concerned with the things which lead to God rather than with God himself. Any sin that is directed against God himself would be serious and destroy charity which is concerned with him alone. Therefore venial sin is not directly against charity; but venial sin does diminish charity indirectly by removing the means through which it usually works. Love of God will be shown in acts of obedience, consequently constant venial sins of disobedience will hamper the exercise of charity. In this way a man without falling into grave sin, which is not so likely at the end of the purgative way, will perhaps remain ungenerous and even careless in the matter of venial sins. He will hesitate to step any further forward.

Père Garrigou Lagrange, writing of those who are shy of this new invitation of Christ, says: "The proficient, who is content to behave as a beginner, ceases to progress and becomes a "retarded soul". There is a considerable number of such souls and we do not take sufficient account of it. How many there are who set about developing their minds, extending their knowledge of their external activities . . . and yet take little trouble to grow in supernatural charity, which should have pride of place and inspire and enliven

our whole life. . . . ' (*Perfection Chrétienne et Contemplation*, i, p. 230.) There will be many priests and those in charge of the spiritual welfare of Christians who will agree with this author with regard to the number who make a certain progress and then fall back into the uncertain state of the beginner because they are not ready to live really supernaturally but cling on to their old human ways.

Rolle for his part makes a continual plea for a complete turning to Christ. It would be a hopeless task to begin to quote him on this topic. He never ceases from urging his readers to hand themselves over completely to the love of Jesus. He is, too, principally concerned with contemplatives and even solitaries and he gives the impression that even many of these men and women hesitate on the edge of this new sea of love, not being prepared to plunge in. The third degree of love is contemplative love, which seeks solitude and if his readers want to open their hearts to this love, which is in God's gift alone, they must seek only Jesus with unstinted generosity.

And therefore it behoves thee to forsake all worldly solace, that thy heart be bound to the love of no creature nor to any business on earth; that thou mayest be in silence, ever stable and stalwart, with thy heart in the love and fear of God. (*Ego Dormio*—Heseltine, p. 98.)

Always he is urging these solitaries to prepare their hearts for true love of Jesus.

Through the activities of spiritual exercises and the possibilities of mortification in the purgative way, the individual has learnt sufficiently how to subjugate his spirit to the human mode of Christian prayer and action. Now his spirit needs to be wholly surrendered to the Holy Spirit in order to live in the fullness of Christian life. It is therefore necessary to open the door which leads out into the darkness of the night of the senses. This new form of purification, which proceeds from God's own activities, is evidently necessary to overcome these tendencies to satisfaction and tardiness. This night of the senses is the first characteristic of the illuminative way and it follows the easy dalliance of the soul by God at the conclusion of the first stage.

The unsuspecting reader may at this stage throw up his hands in despair: what! more purifications, nights, darknesses, hardships, crosses: one would have thought that after the first stage of purification the Christian might be able to find some peace and joy somewhere. It would be an understandable mistake to regard these nights in terms of the hardships of the first stage of the spiritual life, for one who knows only that cross of striving to be virtuous

and mortify his passions and vices. But the 'purifications' to which the soul is now submitted are not to be compared with those that have gone before. It is almost a mistake to use the same word. That is why Richard Rolle is such an excellent guide to this new period, for he speaks always in terms of the love of Christ. And the dark night of the senses is first and foremost a new state of love. It is in fact a very positive thing. A recent writer thus distinguishes its principal characteristics: 'It is essentially a state of infused contemplation. . . . It is secondarily, and as an accessory, a state of suffering and purification' (*La Pratique de l'Oraison Mentale*, by Dom Belorgey, ii, p. 2). This is a just distinction and it is important to realise that it is in itself a matter of a new kind of contemplation, rather than a new kind of mortification. It involves the latter, and certainly a good deal of pain is necessary to eradicate the pride and selfishness already alluded to. The nature of this contemplation frequently mentioned by Richard Rolle, theologically described by St John of the Cross, and placed in the centre of controversy in modern times, will require a separate article. Here we will concentrate on the secondary aspects as they refer to the imperfections and temptations which beset the soul as it approaches this new life.

God leaves those who are making progress, says St John of the Cross, 'so completely in the dark that they know not whither to go with their sensible imagination and meditation: for they cannot advance a step in meditation . . . their inward sense being submerged in this night, and left with such dryness that not only do they experience no pleasure and consolation in the spiritual things . . . but they find insipidity and bitterness in the said things. . . . He (God) sets them down from his arms and teaches them to walk with their own feet, which they feel to be very strange for everything seems to be going wrong with them' (*Dark Night*, I, 8). And the Mystic Doctor proceeds to describe the signs which show this aridity to be the work of God rather than backsliding darkness.

The hermit of Hampole describes this state of dryness rather briefly, when he is dealing with the length of time taken after the first conversion before a man can reach this true contemplation. He insists that it is in the gift of God above and is only 'gotten in great time and with great labour' (*Fire of Love*—Misyn, p. 134).

Profiting little by little, at the last they are made strong in spirit. Then afterward they have received sadness of manners, and so far as this present changeableness suffers, have attained to stability of mind: for with great travails is some perfection gotten (*Ibid*, p. 19).

But the insipidity of holy things which oppresses the soul at this

time may account for his lack of appreciation of the liturgy. For it is true that one who is really being called into this second way of love will strangely enough find all the things which had been at first such an inspiration become curiously meaningless. The mind can recognise their goodness, their utility, their theological soundness, but the spirit can make nothing of them. The splendour of the Christmas celebrations are assented to by the mind but the soul feels high and dry, wishing almost to run away from the great solemnities of Midnight Mass and the sweet homeliness of the Crib—to run away into a corner alone. No wonder St John of the Cross says that everything seems to be going wrong.

Because in the Kirk of God there are singers ordained in this degree and set to praise God and to stir the people to devotion, some have come to me asking why I would not sing as other men when they have oftimes seen me in solemn Masses (*Fire of Love*, p. 132).

Of course for Rolle this difficulty arose mainly from the presence of the inward gift of song and the somewhat individualistic desire to be alone with this special experience, and yet it describes well the feeling of one who may have found great relish in the full solemnity of the liturgy and then suddenly finds it all withdrawn. He is naturally dismayed, and naturally also misunderstood by all those around who bide by the obvious teaching and encouragement of the Church. This is *the* way to praise God, join in the spirit of the liturgy, offer Mass with the people and sing happily in the services of the Church. Yes, replies the wondering soul, that is the way but it leaves me utterly cold. Rolle suffered much from the attacks of good living people, who noticed that he preferred low Masses and did not join in the singing, even when he appeared at high Mass. And we may say in general that this is a period of misunderstandings and persecutions from good people. It is particularly hard, for the poor individual is sufficiently perplexed by his own inward dryness; he cannot be sure where he is or what is happening to his spirit. Perhaps he is thrown aside after all, discarded by God because of his lack of generosity. And then authority steps in and tells him he is self-opinionated, proud and over confident of his own views. His friends tell him he has ceased to be friendly and has removed himself to a distance, those who looked upon him as a budding saint tell him how disappointed they are in his apparent failure. His work seems not to prosper, his time of prayer is a torture. Indeed this is a night. Perhaps his critics are right; what use to continue in a life which has become almost meaningless?

Usquequo Domine oblivisceris me in finem? 'How long, Lord,

forgettest thou me?' The voice of holy men that covet and yearn the coming of Jesu Christ, that they might live with him in joy. . . . His words may none say soothly but a perfect man or woman that has gathered together all the desires of their soul and with the nail of love fastened them in Jesu Christ, so that they think that one hour of the day were over-long to dwell from him, for them longs aye for him.²

The tempests and trials can only be overcome by the certainty of this longing which remains despite the apparent insipidity of spiritual things. *Accedia* brings a very different tastelessness, one which has no desire and no love for God. This is no acidity but aridity brought by God upon the soul to humble it, to increase its thirst for himself, to make it understand it can turn to no one but to him only, to him who has the power to heal and to perfect. Nothing now remains of much interest or desire save God alone. The things that were on the way to God, the acts of worship, the joy of companionship, the thrill of doing an act of mercy for his sake, these remain good and indeed very good, but they no longer retain much attraction in themselves. It is a Night of the Senses; the senses can find no joy in their natural object, in sights and sounds and feelings. This may be an unnatural state, against the nature of the senses, held back as it were by God from relishing what he made them to relish, but it is needful for the birth in the soul of infused contemplation.

Ghostly gifts truly dress a devout soul to love burningly: to meditate sweetly; to contemplate highly; to pray devoutly; and praise worthily; to desire Jesu only, to wash the mind from filth of sins; to slaken fleshly desires; and to despise all earthly things; and to paint the wounds and Christ's cross in mind; and, with an unwearied desire, with desire to sigh for the sight of the most glorious clearness. (*Fire of Love*—Misyn, p. 113.)

² The whole of this commentary on Psalm 12 should be read in this context. I have modernised the first paragraph from *English Writings of Richard Rolle*, H. E. Allen, p. 10. Cf. also *Fire of Love*—Misyn, p. 40.