

DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL
BOOK TWO .

In the second book of the Dark Night of the soul, St. John of the Cross tackles the more radical purification needed so as to cleanse the human spirit. John wishes us to understand first: of all that this second and deeper purification does not follow immediately on the first. There is he says an interval of 'many years', between these two stages. During this intervening period, prayer has become more simplified and the soul takes a more relaxed and mature approach to spiritual things. There are however isolated times of turmoil which presage trouble to come. At these times the deeper spiritual needs and failings of prayerful people are being uncovered. As John has already stated in the first book, this may continue to be the normal pattern of spiritual life for those not called to the highest contemplation. Those who are advancing to the 'heights' however have to endure a more continuous and prolonged purification. Due to the progress already made there can be deep feelings of delight in God. We will meet with descriptions of these in the early stanzas of the "Spiritual Canticle". St John tells us that these vigorous spiritual communications are too much for the personality which is not yet fully purified, and so they may lead to raptures and ecstasy which sometimes results in corporal suffering such as dislocation of the bones. St. Teresa deals fully with these phenomena in her 'Life' and in the "Interior Castle". But as we stated already these physical manifestations cease altogether in the state of perfection.

The reason why this second night of the spirit is needed is because there are still roots and stains of evil left in the soul, and to remove these a pretty strong detergent must be employed. For a start there may be feelings of complacency and pride at the thought of being favoured by intimacy with God. Indeed the pitfalls to which people at this stage are exposed are dangerous and subtle. Over confidence mixed with pride are the most common snares. People advanced in prayer will be tempted to entertain special revelations and spiritual experiences of the kind John has warned us about in Books 2 and 3 of the Ascent of Mt. Carmel. To give in to this temptation would lessen the power of faith in the soul, and faith as we saw is the means of union with God.

So it is obvious that further refinement is needed if the person is to become pure and completely receptive to God. Not alone that, but John tells us that the sensual side of human nature is not completely purified until the spirit has been purged as well. So in the night of the spirit a dark cloud descends, paralysing every aspect of the

personality. "He leaves the intellect in darkness, the will in aridity the memory in emptiness, the affections supreme affliction, bitterness and anguish, by depriving the soul of the feeling and satisfaction it previously obtained from spiritual blessings". This strong statement we find in Ch. 3.

The fire of dark contemplation is now applied to the soul and John sees the individual, transformed by this work of Gods grace within it. The mind now understands by means of divine wisdom, the will loves with the strength and purity of the Holy Spirit and the memory enjoys intimations of glory.

St John now observes a twofold effect of what he refers to as 'infused contemplation'. It disposes the person for union with God by both purging and enlightening it. At first however all is darkness. The brightness of the divine light shining on the soul causes spiritual darkness, a 'ray of darkness' in the words of Pseudo-Dionysius. The clash of opposites here - the brightness and goodness of God and the darkness and misery of the soul is intense in the extreme. The soul suffers greatly through a feeling of total and final rejection by God. This feeling is compounded by an awareness of ones own misery and helplessness. The soul feels empty and unloveable: this is really a state of spiritual depression because there is no end in sight. There seems to be no escape from this dark dungeon, no light at the end of the tunnel. The soul suffers the pain of rejection from the one it loves most. And so the heart is torn up by the roots. John gives us a very vivid picture of the stress that is endured at this time. "The soul at the sight of its miseries feels that melting away and being undone by a cruel spiritual death".

Emily Bronte gives us a similiar description of Jane Eyre`s desolation.

"I heard a flood loosened in remote mountains and I felt the torrent come: to rise I had no strength. I lay faint longing to be dead. One idea only stilled throbbed lifelike within me - a remembrance of God: it begot an unuttered prayer: these words went wandering up and down in my rayless mind, as something that should be whispered, but no energy was found to express them, 'Be not far from me for trouble is near, there is none to help'. (Jane Eyre Ch. 26)

St. John cites all the great scriptural texts that speak of trouble abandonment, including that text from Jane Eyre quoted by Emily Bronte taken from Psalm 68:

"The waters came into my soul; I sank in deep mire, I felt no standing, I came into deep waters, the floods overflowed me".

The individual undergoing this purification is in fact inconsolable, finding no help either in any advice or spiritual direction. The person actually so. Newman gives us a good description of the suffering involved in

his poem ' "The Dream of Gerontius` in which he pictures the soul in purgatory. John compares the fate of the soul to someone imprisoned in a dark dungeon and he should know because of the intense suffering he endured in his prison cell in Toledo. Any remission of this suffering is like a reprieve from ones prison when one can enjoy the freedom of the open spaces - such as John also enjoyed when he managed to escape in a remarkable way from his tiny cell. So each little degree of illumination coming intermittently with this purgation is still sufficient to give the soul a foretaste of the future. However the return of darkness is enough to obliterate these sunny periods and the soul is again plunged in gloom as before.

One of the heaviest crosses the soul has to bear is that it finds it impossible to pray. There seems to be an impenetrable cloud between itself and God. Vocal prayer is impossible as is concentration on spiritual, things let alone on temporal affairs. The memory is now being purified and as we saw there are lapses in its normal functioning. Again John reminds us that the divine light is too bright for the defiled and darkened soul,

"O light invisible we praise thee thee
too bright for mortal vision". So wrote T.S
Eliot in his "Choruses from the Rock".

John`s thesis is that this dark contemplation must purge and replace all natural ways of knowing and understanding. It is a transference from a human to a divine way of living. John illustrates the painful impact of divine contemplation in the soul by the famous comparison of flame penetrating a log of wood. We will use this example again in the 'Living Flame'. Before the fire can transform the wood into something incandescent and similiar to itself, the wood must pass through various stages when it appears less attractive than in its original condition.

`O must thou char the wood ere thou canst limn
with it`, the Preston poet Francis Thompson wrote in his "Hound of Heaven".

as soon as these imperfections have been burnt away there is an intense enkindling of love produced in the spirit. All the energies of the individual are now employed in a single-minded love of God. So as the work of purification increases there is an incipient growth of new love for God. It is a love that gropes in the darkness feeling itself smitten try the divine lover. A strong passion of love now attaches itself to the purified spirit. This development will be the theme of the 'Spiritual Canticle' and the 'Living Flame of Love'. We see it taking shape here in the 'Dark Night'. Every fibre of ones being is united in one single yearning focussed on and directed to God. The Lord himself has taken the initiative here so it is really the divine love answering to human longing. God continues to pour out his love into the empty receptacle of the human heart. There is consequently an awakening to new life in this new world of Gods love. The whole personality begins to expand and the heart to dilate in the radiance of Gods presence.

Although this is a love that is still painful and hemmed in on all sides because the fire of love has not yet accomplished its work. In the midst of these purgative fires the bond that ties the heart to God is growing stronger. Sometimes the mind and will may be strongly 'caught' or rapt by God bestowing knowledge and love. This St. John calls 'a certain touch of the divinity' which is the vehicle of direct union with God. He has already mentioned this special touch or grace in Book 2 of the ascent. This is in fact as toe stated there .the union towards which he is directing us.. According as the dark contemplation begins to take tighter hold on the soul then it begins to produce marvellous results. The mind is frequently touched with loving knowledge and the heart is tenderly stimulated with love for its spouse. John tells us that these divine movements become a veritable passion of love, making the soul reach out with blind love for God. The soul has now developed a spiritual thirst and longing for God and agonises for Him. The fire of Gods love has reached the deepest centre of the soul, to use a phrase from the 'Living Flame' ..The soul has now such a reverent and loving regard for God that its greatest suffering is the fear of having been abandoned by Him. It has become bold arid daring like Mary Magdalen, and John says that the person would "do strange things in whatever way necessary, in order to encounter Him whom it loves. One of the characteristics of this kind of absorption in God is that you cannot imagine anyone being interested in anything else but Him. John was obviously deeply taken by the example of the Magdalen in the Resurrection narratives. Again he remarks, "Mary`s love was so ardent that she thought she would go and take Him away ,however great the impediments, if the gardener would tell where he was hidden, The opening lines of the Spiritual Canticle would be these;

`Where have you hidden, Beloved and left

me moaning?`

John is somewhat anticipating here in these final chapters of the 'Dark Night', the new song that the soul will sing when it is united with its Beloved.

In Ch. 4 John returns to the theme of his poem where in the first stanza he says ,

I went out unseen,
my house being now at rest",

We note the indelible impression left, on him by his escape from his Toledan captors when he writes, "One who to execute his plan better , and without hindrance, goes out at night, in darkness, when everybody in the house is sleeping". He goes out from the house of sin and imperfection in order to encounter the Beloved in Freedom and joy to engage in . 'in exchange of love.' 'his escape was 'sheer luck' as his jailer had. perhaps forgotten to lock his prison door.

"In darkness and secure,
By the secret stair, disguised."

We do not know how he actually escaped, but most probably he disguised himself and let himself down from his room by a ladder made from his bedding.

John assures us that there is really nothing to fear from the night or from the darkness because in fact it was his ally in making good his escape from his enemies. The ladder he tells us IS the living faith which guides him on his journey. So the soul is secure even though it walks in darkness or precisely because it walks in darkness. It is also a good thing that the soul advances along the path of suffering rather than take the primrose path. Moreover in taking this course the conscience is rendered delicate and pure. John call dark contemplation secret for this reason that it is a hidden wisdom and is truly ineffable. This means that i-s¹ it is impossible to write about it and the recipient of such a favour is unable to describe it to a spiritual director. This secret wisdom of contemplation is also aptly called a 'ladder' because it enables us to ascend to God and to descend into our own nothingness. It is also a 'ladder' because it is the science of love which takes us upwards to the Lord.

This latter idea prompts John to devote the two following chapters (19 and 20) to the ten degrees of love or the ten stops on the mystical ladder of love. Here we are definitely reading the language of the `Canticle`. It constitutes a beautiful meditation on this theme of the divine exchange of love which is the subject of that book. In this sense it is a digression from the main subject of the 'Dark Night` and may be looked at on its own. The main themes of these two chapters are fully elaborated in the Spiritual Canticle.

In Ch. 21 John refers to the threefold disguise adopted by the person

which affords protection against its enemies, the world , the flesh and the devil.The disguise consists of garments of three colours, denoting faith hope and charity.These are both its badge and its means of defence.

(1) Faith is a garment of blinding whiteness which no mind can penetrate.and it is the best means of defence especially against the devil." I will expouse you to me in faith says the prophet Osee.(20 .)

This is the tunic that finds favour with the Beloved.

(2) The second disguise is a green coat of mail.Green is the colour associated with Spring, it signifies the virtue of hope and it it overcomes the world.The reason for this is that hope nurtures the longing for eternal life which rises above the things of the world.

(3) Over these two garments there is placed a third whose colour is red and this garment signifies divine charity:this is what constitutes a defense against the flesh.

St. John goes on to elaborate somewhat on the first symbol, that is faith as a means of protection against the devil.He is very conscious of the possibility of the devils interference in the deep communion between the soul and God.If the communications from God are confined to pure faith then the devil is powerless to intervene.

"My house being now all stilled"

This verse is now repeated because in this context it refers to the purification accomplished in the superior part of the soul - that is in the passive night of the spirit. What John calls the "substantial touches of divine union" increase in frequency and introduce great peace and tranquility into the soul.This is part of the preparation for the espousal between the soul and the Son of God.Everything is moving towards a happy climax."When the state of readiness has come about divine Wisdom unites Himself with the soul in a new bond of the possession of love.

Ch. 25 is the final one in the Dark Night which begins a section that remains unfinished.In that joyful night of contemplation the Lord led the soul along a secret path untouched by anything that could impede its desired union with Him.On this journey the soul refused to be drawn aside or detained by any consideration or by any alternative at traction.Finally the soul seemed to be bereft of external illumination and guidance but nevertheless an ardent love in its heart guided it unerringly to the heart of the Beloved.

So ends the 'Dark Night'¹ of St. John of the Cross, a classic on the spiritual life and one which offers us expert guidance on our spiritual pilgrimage. We can take it that although there are five remaining stanzas in the poem, the consummation of divine love of which

they speak has been beautifully commented on in the parallel writings of the "Spiritual Canticle" and the "Living Flame of Love".