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ST JOHN OF THE CROSS

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ST JOHN OF THE CROSS

His Life and Poetry

GERALD BRENAN

WITH A TRANSLATION OF HIS POETRY BY
LYNDA NICHOLSON

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Preface

St John of the Cross is the first Spanish poet I read when I went to live in Spain. He did not at that time seem to be much known or appreciated except as a writer on mysticism for I could find no separate edition of his verse and had to read it in the big *Autores Españoles* collection of the lyric poets of the century, with its small, almost illegible print and cheap paper. But the impression he made on me was very great. No other poet in any country seemed to me to have reached such heights of lyrical expression and that is an opinion I still hold today.

Later, when I went to live in London, I decided for my first apprenticeship in writing to try my hand at a biography. I chose as my subject Saint Teresa, more because the material for her life was abundant and the psychological interest considerable than from any special interest I took in the mystics, though on starting to explore the ground I was delighted to discover what a large part St John of the Cross had played in her affairs and how vivid and dramatic his story was. In this way I spent more than two years on research in the British Museum till, finding the subject too remote from my other interests, I dropped it and left my book unfinished. However, thinking that some day I might take it up again, I continued to read any new books that came out on the religious life of the period and in 1934 I visited all the places that were especially connected either with St Teresa or with St John of the Cross.

Then in 1947, at the request of Cyril Connolly, I wrote two longish articles on St John of the Cross's life and poetry for a series entitled *Studies in Genius* that was coming out in *Horizon*. They were well received and I thought that some day I would republish them in a small volume together with his poetry. But when in 1969 I felt myself free to do this, I saw on reading through my articles that they were full of inaccuracies, partly because I had written them too rapidly, but also because new material on him had come to light and been published by Father Crisógono de Jesús and others. I therefore decided to write an entirely new and much fuller life,

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making use of the recent research that had been done on St John and his age and also revising and expanding what I had said about his poetry. This is how the present book came to be written.

A few words are needed to explain the principles adopted by Lynda Nicholson in her translation of the poems. St John of the Cross is notoriously difficult to render in English verse. One of the reasons for this lies in the luminous purity and simplicity of his language. It is very precise and economical and completely lacking in rhetorical constructions and in amplifying nouns and adjectives. In his best lyrics every word tells. This offers a strong temptation to his translator to fill out and pad and, if he decides to adhere to his rhyming pattern, to twist and distort the content in his search for a rhyme.

Seeing this, what ought the translator to do? He has three methods open to him. He can either offer a prose crib which accurately conveys the sense, but kills everything else. Or he can employ a fully developed verse form, complete with rhymes. This will have the poetic quality and consistency of an original poem, but it will necessarily be in the poet-translator's own style and manner and so be far removed in both its tone and its content from the original. It will be a parallel version rather than a true translation.

Then there is a third approach which attempts to steer a course between these two methods by following the text as closely as possible, yet at the same time conveying some of the qualities of its poetic form. In order to be free to do this it will abandon the attempt to keep to a fixed rhyming pattern, but will suggest one by means of assonances whenever it is feasible. That is the method offered here. It implies that these translations do not stand as perfected verse forms in their own right, but serve as mediators to the originals. Thus while no rendering can do justice to St John of the Cross's poems, these not only give the reader something very near their prose sense, but catch in many places their rhythm and intonation. Then across the page stands the Spanish text. Anyone who has spent a few weeks in Spain and has a feeling for poetry should find this accessible to him with the help of these translations.

Malaga G.B.
November 1972

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