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978-1-107-65132-6 - St John of the Cross: The Rede Lecture for 1932

E. Allison Peers

Excerpt

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ST JOHN OF THE CROSS

There is always a deep and rare satisfaction in the study of a single man, or of a single work of art, that is of true eminence. Many a young scholar has entered upon research in some remote corner of the field of the humanities, and, after a brief experience, has turned from it in impatience at the deadening effect of the constant study of second-rate and third-rate minds. In many literatures there have been whole eras, which, for historical reasons, have of necessity to be studied, yet in which is found the name of no single author of real distinction, and in which, amid numerous works of immense and forbidding magnitude, there occurs none that can lay claim to greatness. Happy the moment which in any nation sees the birth of some new and outstanding genius, or at which a new light plays upon some surpassingly great genius of the past and

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guides men to a fresh study of his achievements. For there is that in the work of such a man which, at each new contact, both refreshes and enkindles the imagination. It matters not if his eminence seek expression in some resounding material triumph, in the world of ideas or in the domain of pure spirit. "Flame is flame wherever you find it." And the flame of genius "blazes with new glories" whenever and wherever it is rekindled.

Spain, a country indelibly stamped with individualism, has in her long and splendid past been immensely rich in men and women of this calibre. Her greatest achievements have been wrought by the intense effort of individuals rather than by the quiet and persistent co-operation and effective organization of masses. Such individuals are the semi-legendary Pelayo, Fernán González and the Cid; the mediaeval monarchs James the Conqueror and Alfonso the Wise; the discoverer Columbus (whom we may now venture to claim wholly for Spain) and the *conquistadores* who followed him; the prince of dramatic wits, Lope de

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Vega, the divine and humane Cervantes, the brilliant and romantic Calderón; the painters Velázquez, Murillo, Goya; and the great company of religious reformers—St Dominic, St Vincent Ferrer, St Ignatius Loyola, St Francis Xavier, St Teresa, St John of the Cross.

I have chosen to speak in this lecture of St John of the Cross—in three fields pre-eminent, as a poet, as an ascetic and as a mystic—because, after being neglected¹ or misunderstood by all save a few, he is now, somewhat rapidly, coming into his inheritance of fame. Of recent years, indeed, with the widespread revival of interest in the life of contemplation, he has been achieving something more remarkable even than fame—something akin to posthumous popularity. In Spain, the three-

¹ Rousselot (*Les Mystiques Espagnols*, Paris, 1867), for decades the only authority on Spanish mysticism easily available, gives St John of the Cross less than half as much space as St Teresa, less than one-third as much as Luis de León, about the same allowance as Venegas and Malón de Chaide, slightly more than Juan de Ávila and considerably less than Luis de Granada. Yet, as a mystic alone, he is immeasurably superior to any of these save St Teresa.

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volume Toledo edition of his works (1912–14)—itself a great advance on its predecessors—has been completely outclassed by the five-volume edition published in Burgos (1929–31) by the learned Carmelite, P. Silverio de Santa Teresa. The relatively short space of fifteen years which separates those two editions has also seen the publication of two less important editions of the complete works and two of the commentary on the “Spiritual Cantic”. During the same period there has been a flood of *sanjuanista* literature—numerous books and innumerable articles—and, though some of these are ephemeral, called forth by Pius XI’s proclamation of the Saint as a Doctor of the Church Universal (August 24, 1926) and by the second centenary of his canonization (December 26, 1926), many more of them are evidence of independent interest.¹

The abundant testimony to this interest

¹ For a select bibliography, cf. *Studies of the Spanish Mystics* (London, 1927, 1930: abbreviated hereafter *S.S.M.*), Vol. I, Nos. 554–652, Vol. II, Nos. 953–69. A third volume, with supplementary bibliography, is in preparation.

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which comes from Spain is no less strikingly reinforced from abroad. In France, where translations of the complete works have long abounded, no less than four new versions of the “Spiritual Cantic” have appeared in fifteen years,¹ together with two of the most important biographies of the Saint which have ever been written. That of M. Baruzi is only the first part of a long critical study (*Saint Jean de la Croix et le problème de l'expérience mystique*, Paris, 1924) which approaches its subject from a fresh and an entirely independent standpoint. No less commendable, for quite different reasons, is a more orthodox biography, written by a Discalced Carmelite, P. Bruno de Jésus-Marie (*Saint Jean de la Croix*, Paris, 1929). This latter has been translated into English (London, 1932). In our own country, though the recent important textual reconstructions accomplished by Spanish editors now call for a new complete translation of the works, we have on the whole been well served for over

¹ That of Dom Chevallier (*Le Cantique Spirituel de Saint Jean de la Croix*, Paris, 1930) is the most remarkable.

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sixty years by the felicitous, if frequently inaccurate, translations of David Lewis. Lovers of poetry have long been familiar with the versions of two of St John of the Cross's poems made by Mr Arthur Symons, which, like Lewis's translations of the prose works, are usually very true to the spirit of their original though occasionally failing as to the letter.

A general interest in what is loosely called mystical literature has been steadily growing for the last twenty years, and this by no means only in our own country. The contributions of Spain to this literature are enormous, and their importance has come to be fairly generally realized outside the Peninsula. At first, attention was focussed on the two great Carmelite Saints—*la Santa*, as the Spanish Carmelites say, and *el Santo*: I mean St Teresa and St John of the Cross. Soon, however, they came to be looked upon, no longer as the only two mystics of Spain, but rather as her two most significant figures towering above a host of others, which is their true position. But I am not at this time concerned so much with the

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rehabilitation of the lesser Spanish mystics as with the somewhat earlier emergence of St John of the Cross to take his rightful place beside St Teresa.¹ The frank and readable autobiography of St Teresa and her delightfully human letters have caused her to be considered, especially outside Spain, as a sort of phenomenon among the Saints, in that she lived in the closest touch with everyday life; and until recent times there has been a tendency to contrast St John of the Cross with her as a prodigy of asceticism who lived in another world of his own and wrote not so much mystical as misty treatises which the ordinary mortal can be expected neither to understand nor even to read. You would not wish me to enumerate the reasons for this conception nor to trace in detail its growth and decline: that it did exist and that it is now declining there can be no kind of doubt. As the world comes

¹ In Spain, he has always held this place: I am thinking rather of our own country, where Lewis's translations (1864 ff.) first gave it to him, and of continental countries other than Spain, where Rousselot's cavalier treatment of him for some time set the fashion.

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better to understand the Saint who was so dear to Teresa of Jesus and who was no less human than she, it should decline still further. It is to be hoped that when, in ten years' time, we celebrate the quatercentenary of his birth (1542), he may have come into his own, in this country at least, as one of the most attractive, invigorating and inspiring religious writers who have ever lived.

My aim in this lecture is not to present St John of the Cross purely and simply as an historical figure, but to interpret him in terms of the twentieth century—to show him as he may well be regarded by the world of to-day—by that section of the world, that is to say, to which men of his type are naturally sympathetic. And, in order that in the brief compass of an hour-glass we may obtain as complete a view of him as possible, I propose to speak, in turn, of his life and personality, of his poetry, of his asceticism and of his mystical teaching.

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I

Juan de Yepes, afterwards St John of the Cross, belonged by birth, education and predilection to Spain's austere plateau—Castile, “tierra de cantos y santos”: land of boulders and of saints. Land, where the piercing winds of a long and cruel winter, the drought of a short, burning summer, the consequent barrenness of the unwatered soil and the necessary poverty of those who endeavour to drag a living from it combine to produce all the heroic virtues of sanctity—patience, perseverance, meekness, resignation, fortitude. One glorious quality, however, belongs to the Castilian table-land: “the glory of the sun—triumphant in an azure sky”.¹ From its cold, clear rising to its brilliant, luminous setting it bathes the entire country in a light incredibly keen—a light that, with relentless refulgence, reveals the gently undulating, scrub-covered

¹ Y la gloria del sol es un triunfo
en un cielo de azur.

(Enrique de Mesa.)

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or snow-clad steppe, the pinewoods and oak-woods, the tiny, brown, distant villages, and the blue hills of the horizon.

Something of that light, it would seem, has penetrated to the archives which contain this Castilian Saint's life-story. It floods the pages of his biography, illumines all that there is of truth in scores of contemporary documents, and allows us to gaze, not merely upon the paragon of hagiographers, but upon a simple and very human Spanish friar, standing out clearly against the background of the sixteenth century.

It shows us, first, the little son of a poor widow, newly settled in the busy Castilian city of Medina del Campo. A well-to-do gentleman, struck by his ability and devoutness, takes him into one of the hospitals to serve the poor in the intervals of attending the school of the Society of Jesus. But hardly is the boy of age than he sets aside his patron's further ambitions for him, and, in 1563, takes the Carmelite habit at Medina. Thence he is sent, for a three-years' Arts course, to the