

doubted in the face of breathless audiences made up of these extremes who look upon him as a mean between them. Intensity is a mark of a lover; a lover is the shortest way to the loved.

Brother Antoninus is a Friar Preacher, an intense lover, and a strong bridge. His consequent relation to other men is obvious in these offices; it is now left to consider his relation to God.

—BRENDAN CAVANAUGH, O.P.

\* \* \* \*

## ADVENT AND DIVINE PRESENCE IN ANTONINIAN VERSE

*Invitavi te, Domine, ad convivium variis instructum hymnis.  
Vinum nostra desiderat mensa, laudum tuarum, scientiam;  
Qui vocatur ad nuptias hydrias mero optimo implevisti,  
Reple, precor, os meum laude.\**

—Saint Ephraem the Syrian

"I have invited Thee, O Lord, to a banquet of songs," runs the above introduction of Saint Ephraem to his "Fourteenth Sermon Upon the Faith, against the Disputers." This is the Saint Ephraem to whom Brother Antoninus has been compared. Nor was the comparison lacking in rather complimentary tone, for this Ephraem, the Deacon, besides being both Father and Doctor of the Church, was also considered the greatest of the Syrian poets. This prolific fourth century writer was called "the Lyre of the Holy Spirit."

The above quatrain has something more in common with Brother Antoninus than the mere extrinsic denomination of author to author. The four lines speak of a depletion of the poet's wine of praise and a supplication for a duplication of the miracle of Cana within the festivities of his religious hymns. Brother Antoninus mentions a similar diminution of image-flow in the preface of his latest collection of verse, *Hazards of Holiness*. The latter describes the outpouring that followed his conversion and the quasi-aridity that came after. Perhaps it represents the passage from a consideration of the Omnipotence of God in creation that blares forth in the whirling, careening wings and piercing shrieks Antoninus

---

\* Translated from The Syriac by J. S. Assemani.

captures in his "A Canticle to the Waterbirds" to the "immutable silence" and the restrained waiting etched in his subdued, restive prayer for contemplative fullness, "I am long weaned."

If one may be permitted to generalize on the basis of the continual religious theme of Brother Antoninus' last two collections of poems, namely, *The Crooked Lines of God*, and *The Hazards of Holiness*, there would appear to be two aspects of God therein that correspond to the movement of the author's thought. One representation is that of God as the One Who is coming, the Advent of the Omnipotent. The other is concerned with the Divine Presence within the soul, the Divine Indwelling and the sanctifying effect of the Holy Spirit. The one poses nature to Divinity, confusion versus order, but understanding over ignorance. The shock of this contrast could hardly be more evident than in the ode to his conversion, "The Screed of the Flesh":

I cried out to the Lord

That the Lord might open the wall of my heart  
And show me the thing I am. . . .

. . . . .

Lord, Lord, I sang, but I had not understanding.

Lord, Lord, I sang, but the mouth of my soul was shut.

. . . . .

*He showed me my soul.*

The other general aspect deals with God's presence in the soul that is constituted in supernatural life by sanctifying grace and is seeking spiritual perfection. This latter note is obvious from the title of the last collection.

That this coming of God to man, to the soul, to be emphasized in the first collection appears even upon a casual glance at the poems. "Triptych for the Living" opens with the message to the shepherds, continues through the Nativity, and closes with the manifestation to the Magi. "My Lord came to me in the deep of night" and "Come Christ . . . be born, be born" are lines from "The Encounter" and the final item "Out of the Ash," sustaining the advent theme.

*Hazards* might at first seem more in the vein of pre-Christian outlook upon God. The work opens with the figures of Jacob and the Angel; we are later brought into the tent of Holofernes as Judith prepares for his decapitation; and the Semitic flavor of the *Canticle of Canticles* rises to a strong point in "The Songs the Body Dreamed in the Spirit's Mad Be-

hest." The recurrent note of struggle and violence and the author's grouping of one series of poems under the heading, "The Dark Face of God," seem to indicate a distant Deity, hidden and obscured. Does not the author's association of darkness and death with his reflections upon God place this mood in Old Testament currents? The way of conversion is often oppositely thought of, as one of a passing from darkness to light and from light to more light. In addition, the yoke of the Lord is sweet, yet here the path is rough and thorny with inner strife. Is this the way of holiness that is embodied within the verse, or, has the bard's inventive imagination succumbed to the hazards?

Whatever may be conjectured concerning the author's deeper meaning, the words are open to a more felicitous interpretation. When, therefore, in "A Savagery of Love" the figure of the dying Redeemer is followed by "the grappling of the soul in its God" and "there could be no death you had not already died . . . the day . . . the Cross tore a hole in the sky," it is apparent that the author's imagery of struggle is Christian. Although he will indicate later that Christ is the Light and opposed to the dark of sin, nevertheless, by comparison of lights one may be as night to the other. So in the "Conversion of Saint Paul" there occurs "A brilliance so bright the noon blanked black." It is the journey in Christian Faith, radiance beyond the sun in comparison to lower things but interstellar night in comparison to the Divine Light Itself.

God, as source of light, purification, and redemption shines forth in the *Crooked Lines*. It is a veiled Being on the other hand that guides the way of the spiritual traveler in *Hazards*. How explain this difference? In the earlier work the author shares his experiences of conversion, and something of a broadening knowledge of Our Lord, the Saints, and the Church. Still, however, the Jeremiads and laments of Job and penitential vigils recur.

An insight into the underlying basis for the poet's self-repudiation first seems to be traced in "A Penitential Psalm." The following indicate a new awareness:

Crime of my corruption!  
When will it find a cease?

. . . . .

I suffer a day of dread in what I am!  
I beg the cleanly thing I could become!

The agitated soul depicted in these heaven-storming supplications seeks

more than a minimal satisfaction of duties. This searcher yearns for perfection in union with God: "I Will Know God." This transforming desire is sharply spelled in the poem, "Annul Me in My Manhood." Brother Antoninus draws from Saint John of the Cross' descriptions of the Divine Light in comparison to which the soul is darkness and impurity. In this Light it is blinded. The soul's vision, however, is more distinct to see its own defects and "acknowledges its own unworthiness before God and all creatures." The Revealer of hidden thoughts shows him his soul. The spiritual heights beckon almost tauntingly in view of the weak and faltering human apparatus that stumbles with every step and wheezes with every breath of the rarefied atmosphere.

In the new view of the all holiness and infinite purity of God human imperfections disturb the soul's composure. God is looked to as a divine "cautery," a purifier, a deliverer. This deliverance from self by the transforming effect of God's grace is presented in clever biologic format in the poem "In the Breach." "God! The I-killer, the me-death, rip me out! . . . Caul-freed I cry!" The veil of self (the caul or amnion covering) is removed; the birth-cry is heard of the new-born in spiritual life. The answer to Nicodemus is thereby developed in full-length metaphor.

The author makes no claim to have reached great heights of perfection for himself. He beseeches God's healing grace. It is to the Omniscient Reader of souls that he pleads the choral refrain: "I too, O God, as you very well know, am guilty. . . ." These words, from the poet's last selection in *Hazards* do not appear in context to be concerned with the simple relief obtained by freedom from the guilty "sorrows of the wicked" (Ps. 31:10). This clinging sadness that threads through many of Brother Antoninus' poems seems rather to be born out of the acute realization that the Christian soul, yearning for full union with God in heaven, for dissolution in Christ, must patiently bear the burden of the years that separate from this full consummation. Even within man's mortal span, however, a more perfect union is impeded by the treacherous imperfections within the human composite, the heritage of original sin. Hence the woe expressed in these lines:

Let me forgive myself of my terrible sins  
     That I may have peace . . .  
 Let me forgive myself  
     That thought to be a saint  
 And am proved to be a monster. . . .

The groanings of the "Miserere" can be heard in the dim background: "my sin is before me always" (Ps. 50:5). The need for patient attendance upon the work of the Holy Spirit within the soul is admittedly opposed by the aggressive dynamism of the natural forces which are still disordered in their drives:

What uselessness is housled in my loins,  
 To drive, drive, the rampant pride of life,  
 When what is needful is a hushed quiescence?

. . . . .

Draws off the needer from his never-ending need, diverts  
 The seeker from the Sought.

The work of sanctification proceeds in God's chosen time. The driving, active, male human attitude is impatient with delay. It would cut and burn all imperfections now.\* Thus, guilt-laden inaccessible depths of the unconscious id and the unshakeable memory of uncharted nerve plexi disturb our interior ease with roiled up spectres of past defections: "Which is a terrible thing, to know how *wrong* you have been, and remains the strictest part of the torture" ("The Massacre of the Holy Innocents," *Crooked Lines*, p. 53).

The author's last poems in *Hazards* proposes the searcher's return to the "city of man" and to the "ways of man." This return however is not a rejection of the drive for perfection. It is rather a new course that is proposed. Perhaps it is something of a reconsideration of an earlier theme in "Hospice of the Word":

For in the crucible of revulsion  
 Love is made whole. St. Francis  
 Ran on gooseflesh towards the leper's sore:  
 He saw his God.

This would seem to be consistent with a desire for the love of God that concretizes itself in the effective love of neighbor. It is the radiation of the love we should have for God, to use a phrase of Father Garrigou-Lagrange.

Frequently these poems of Brother Antoninus have recourse to erotic

---

\* It is, however, only when the human combatant places his strategy under divine regulation that ascetical practices and great works offer hope of true victory in the demeaning warfare between higher and lower orders operating within man.

allusions when describing the spiritual states of the soul. The final poem of *Hazards* seems to be marked by an almost total absence of fleshy metaphor. It is as though the "return to the ways of man" is the result of a "new insight into divine things." A section from *The Three Ages of the Interior Life* where Father Garrigou-Lagrange treats of the phenomenon of second conversion appears to recount a state that parallels the elevated tone and new direction of these terminal verses. His account of the second conversion that attends a fervent contrition is characterized by the coming of a greater grace to the soul. This greater grace may bring the soul to "a higher region of the spiritual life. The soul then receives a new insight into divine things and an impulse which it did not know before" (vol. II, p. 32).

As the reader finishes the lines of Brother Antoninus it would appear that he is reading a rendering of a new impulse, a new search. It is a search for good works to do in the "city of man"; to convert the sinner, to suffer humiliation, to show pity, to forgive wrongs, and out of self-giving to find true peace. The litany of resolutions favors Saint Teresa's description of the fraternal charity evidenced in the perfect, which flows from their total love of God. The perfect "love others far more, with a truer, more generous, and intense affection. . . . These souls are more ready to give than to receive. . . ." (*Way of Perfection*, c. vi).

Saint Ephraem, as mentioned above, was called "The Lyre of the Holy Spirit." The term would not seem to suit the cadence and mode of many of these poems of Brother Antoninus. A lyre, being composed of strings and intended to be played as a harp, implies something of a flowing, melodic stream of song. The Antoninian themes of violence and post-violence brooding in many lines seem to be located in the more percussive section of the religious orchestra. Sometimes his figures burst upon us with the clash of cymbals; for example, when he has a great mule-deer or elk crash leaping out of a forest into the fatal cataract. At times, confused, smoldering guilt feelings reverberate as though to the muffled echo of kettledrums. Frequently it is a plaintive woodwind that rises in lament or mournful psalm. In the final poem, on the other hand, something of the lyricism of rhapsodic dedication purifies and elevates the verse.

It is interesting to wonder what melodies will issue when Brother Antoninus writes for full orchestra. Will his imagery follow the direction of his thought from earth-based figures stuffed with aggressive, forceful motion to symbols that soar with grace-transformed reality? Some expressions of the author in depicting the relation of the soul to God seem un-

usual and, indeed, too biologic to suit the supreme excellence of divine things. This fact is explained by the author himself in his poem, "Annul Me in My Manhood," wherein he writes:

And in that wrenched inversion caught  
Draws off the needer from his never-ending need, diverts  
The seeker from the Sought.

Mood and figure thus at times reflect the state of soul described. Where disorder prevails some disturbance of harmony may well be expected. The state of soul herein described is not that of the poet but that of the protagonist portrayed in the poetic simile.

Beyond the image there would also be the question of the theme for future works seemingly promised in the final poem. The resolutions touching upon dedicated Christian striving for spiritual perfection, for the service of others in so far as they participate the image of God. One would expect perhaps the employment of more sublime metaphor to convey the historic presence of the God of Revelation in the world of human events. How translate divine charity, supernatural humility, and all the panoply of Christ-like activities to the modern fall-out conscious audience in these quasi-apocalyptic days? Future out-pourings will prove whether the quest for finer wine at the banquet of celestial song will be fulfilled.

—ALFRED CAMILLUS MURPHY, O.P.

## LOVE'S UPLIFTED STROKE

My two colleagues have discerningly discussed the psychology and theology of Brother Antoninus. Man was examined; God was contemplated. Now it seems that a connecting link, however weak, must be forged between Antoninus the psychologist and Antoninus the theologian, for he is not content to make a scientific study of *homo sapiens*, nor does he pretend to speculate about the attributes of God.

All I mean to say is that the poems of Antoninus are the outpourings of his essential understanding and existential expression of the living relationship between God and man. This understanding and expression are not abstract and impersonal; they are concrete and very personal.

Antoninus is a poet. As a poet, he is not fascinated by "a hypostatized