



# BROTHER ANTONINUS:

## A SYMPOSIUM

*Literary criticism has not often been found in DOMINICANA, and certainly not in the form of a symposium. But the particular character of this poet, Brother Antoninus, and his state as a lay Brother of the Dominican Order as well as the spiritual setting and overtones of his poetry give him a special claim to consideration in this quarterly. This symposium is an attempt to evaluate Brother Antoninus and his poetry on three levels: psychology, theology and art.*

### WHO AM I? WHERE DID I COME FROM?

It is as though the ivy-hung East Coast looked across the Atlantic at the war-made skeletons scattered about Europe and shuddered; and a wave of introspection swelled and moved across the nation, gathering height as it went, until it crested in the foam line of the San Francisco Renaissance. Its general causes were multiple. Probably it began with the mass brutality of the Second World War inflicted in the name of a myth about race supremacy or the cataclysmic effects of nuclear warheads dropped on Japan. Then there seems to have been other things to keep it going: trainloads of men and women slaughtered during the Indian national apportionment or Africans shot on sight in Apartheid reprisals. It doesn't really matter which particular one of these mass atrocities was seen and experienced by young Americans; each was nauseating.

Against this horror of mass warfare, philosophers, theologians and poets have violently reacted by reasserting the worth of the individual man. They are asking the same questions Gauguin wrote in the corner of his painting; where do we come from?, what are we?, where are we going? But they are not looking at the picture.

Kierkegaard, Camus, Sartre of the existentialist world; Kerouac, Salinger and now Golding of the introverted heroes are all insistent on the part that the individual must play in life. His responsibility is not to be discounted. He has obligations and rights and the duty to assert them.

These, as others, are speakers for the people, in a broad sense. They both reflect and develop the 'common mind,' feeding it and feeding on it in turn. Step by step presentation, clarity, reasoned procedure is part of their mode of communication.

Besides these and different from them, there are the intuitive voices of the nation's poets such as the late Robert Frost of the East and Brother Antoninus of the West. For these men, communication is as dependent upon rapport as words. Words may be the tools of their careful craft, but the intangible form and spirit is just as essential to the completed work, perhaps even its dominant part. In like manner, generally speaking, sophistication is usually accompanied by a greater dependence upon form or spirit than upon concrete, material things.

A poet is said to be one to whom the gods speak. Certainly there have been those to whom God has spoken. The Old Testament poets stagger at times under the weight of God's message. Our modern poets have a message for us. They must be heard even if we must go to the desert to listen, or, as it is in this case, to the hidden valleys of the West Coast echoing with the sharply struck verses of Brother Antoninus.

For many reasons Antoninus is a pebble in society's sandal, a true scruple. To a society educated to believe that the chief virtue of morality is public chastity, Antoninus speaks in vivid sexual imagery. To a pleasure loving people, he preaches a sermon of pain and sorrow. In a secular modern world he wears the thirteenth century black and white habit of a Dominican friar. Where sophistication is a cultivated art, he affronts with simplicity and honesty.

Some knowledge of Antoninus' background is necessary in order to understand the man and his poetry. Following this discussion, a second part will investigate the theological implications of his poetry and a third will attempt to analyze the complex relationship between the two.

### **The Man**

William Everson is a Californian. Born in Sacramento fifty-one years ago, he spent his youth in Selma. Slighting his formal education, he married and began to support his wife and himself by working as a laborer and a farmer. It was during these early years that he was drawn to poetry. In those years the names he knew were Lawrence and Robinson Jeffers. They sang a humanistic theme that lacked a certain solidarity.

If the historical theory of action and reaction is correct, it might explain this humanism which found its expression in philosophy, education

and poetry. Maybe it was a reaction to the overpowering sense of inhumanity and evil that men practiced upon each other. Before, mass atrocities had been what counted. Now it was the individual experience of natural beauty which was important. As an answer to the paradox of God and the existence of evil in the world, a pantheism was cultivated which sought out the gods of nature in the quiet valleys and solitary splendor of the West Coast mountains.

William Everson became something of a disciple of Robinson Jeffers, taking up his theme of pastoral humanism in his own early attempts at poetry. A series of slight volumes was printed, not so much because they were good, because they weren't; not so much because they had something to say to the world, because they didn't; but mostly because he wanted to be able to hold his past between his fingers and weigh it in his hand. Then he could go on, knowing that the past need not be repeated. In fact he could use it as a tangible foundation for his future.

The war came and young men went. But how was this man nursed on pastoral idylls and humanistic good will to kill and maim and wound. He could not; he would not; so he was interned as a conscientious objector in a camp with those who would not pick the bitter fruit of man's pride.

After his release from camp he hung around the San Francisco Bay area. Something of an anarchist by this time, he became interested in pacifist groups. He came in contact with Kenneth Rexroth who considerably influenced his poetry. Since 1933 he had been doing more writing. By 1948 he had quite a collection of poems and, what is more important, an inkling of direction. In this year New Directions published *The Residual Years*, a collection of the last fifteen year's work. Outside of the fact that it served as a sort of marker in his life, it didn't have a great deal of significance—not, at least, in the light of his latest poems.

During the next year he received a Guggenheim Fellowship and married a second time. The woman he married was a remarkable woman who experienced the finding of her once lost Faith. He saw her kneel and pray; he wondered just what this was all about. Questions and answers. He thought about it. More questions, some answers.

The Christmas of 1948 brought with it an experience which changed his whole life. He had gone to Christmas Mass with his wife. Sitting beside her as she knelt, his eyes rose to the red turban she had wound around her hair, then across the heads and shoulders of the people slowly assembling for Mass until it reached the Christmas crib and rested upon a statue of a shepherd.

A shepherd meant something to him. And here this shepherd had a place in the Catholic Faith. Watching his Catholic wife regain her own peace of soul he gradually formulated the fact that Faith was what he most desperately needed—a man's religion. There was a book, there was a church, there was himself.

Nature for him had been tantamount to God. The dread of renouncing this world tormented him. But in this faith, he realized, Christ would not exact the dreaded renunciation of his natural world . . . after all, it was His.

But here was a statue of a shepherd set on the same straw bed as the figure of the infant God. He had known shepherds in the bleak hills of the West. A shepherd was "most low . . . half-crazed, it is thought with solitude, and hence impenetrably ignorant, unfit for any more noble employment and in consequence depraved, he had become in the obscene humor of the smoking room, a kind of minor rural god of the vice of sodomy." This was the creature whose statue was in this holy place. This extreme outcast of society was one of those admitted to the sanctuary of the stable.

His mind reeled at the thought of that "terrible universal enmity, set against the isolate human heart . . . the loneliness of man trapped in a universe he cannot subdue." And then it focused on "the Sacrifice of Man, where God stoops and proffers, stoops and proffers, descends, rises, is nailed to the sky; 'restoration' driven through the chaos of the world."

He rose and walked up to the crib to kneel in half-dazed wonder at the scene. "A man's touched. His pride-stiff soul crumbles before an ineffable grace and he comprehends . . . Christ pours out the running wave of his grace." And a moment of self knowledge gleams within him; "Adam-like you prefer your wretched fig-leaves to prime spiritual nakedness." This was "the unspeakable Lover who draws the loved as out of the web of afflictions, remakes him as His own. . . ." And at the crib he knelt "to make his assent such as it was—one more poor wretch, who had nothing to bring but his iniquities."

As he knelt there behind him was a "rising of people, a sound coming up out of the hush that held it . . . gathering in waves from here and there, as section after section, in the gathering awareness, rose to the feet . . . a kind of inner spontaneous coming-up as a flock of birds of the fields, out of some instinctual thing, rises. They knelt and it was the spread of the sound as the whole of Christendom bending into the *Confiteor*." Mass began. William Everson was converted to Catholicism.

He then worked for a time in an Oakland hospitality house. In addition to this he had learned to print in order to be able to print his own poetry. Working a hand press, he turned out excellent work, collector's items.

After this there was a short stint with the Catholic Worker Movement. Then in 1951 he and his wife separated and he gave himself as a *Donatus* or gift-of-self to the Dominican Community at St. Albert's College, San Francisco. Clothed with the white tunic, black scapular and capuce, the rosary belted to his side, he was given the new name of Brother Antoninus.

In 1957 he re-emerged with the San Francisco Renaissance and has become one of the most talented and commanding personalities of that entire group. For the last few years he has given public readings at major university campuses throughout the country, especially in the East. In 1959 *The Crooked Lines of God* was published and then in 1962 *The Hazards of Holiness*.

There are two aspects of Brother Antoninus which should be discussed at least in broad phrases: Antoninus the Friar and Antoninus the Poet. Both of these are necessary to an understanding of the man Antoninus and his relation to the rest of men, as he wants it to be and as it is.

### The Friar

As a friar, Antoninus is not confined to one place. In the words of a satirist 'a friar is a monk whose cell is the world and whose cloister is the ocean.' As a *tertiarius donatus* he is bound to the Dominican Order by ties of mutual acceptance and agreement but by no vows. His external life conforms to that of a laybrother. He has simple house duties; he works as a Master Printer on Albertus Magnus Press; and of course, he has the special work of writing and reading his poetry.

Within the fold of the Order he has a place that is at once part and not part of it. Dominicans are professional students, yet Antoninus writes of himself, "I, a laybrother, contingent to that study but not engaged in it." However he does study the 'high flung cross' which, after all, was the major textbook of St. Thomas Aquinas. Yet every textbook in the end is doomed to scant the vision of a transcendental God etched on the heart of man.

He sees Dominicans as having chained themselves to their desks of necessity to maintain their innocence. And he judges that finally, it is true, they will die exhausted, expunged of the ineluctable burden of truth. They have engaged in a contemplative, unceasing commitment, and will die

on that line where the violence of the individual and the violence of God engaged each other, to be transformed by that violence into the last tranquillity of heaven.

And he, as a friar musing in his cloister, who had only to move through the life of secular learning to find it not whole, has turned in here to a deeper integration.

He has brought a vivid past into the cloister and outbursts are not rare. But the monastic life has witnessed many an outburst such as Antoninus', yet has made no judgement, knowing its slow silence will heal all in time. For him the monastery is not so much a place as a condition. It is a type of spiritual perspective, an attitude, a transcendent motive. Men bring to it their individual conformation and are transformed into Christ.

When he sneers at his own "fake medieval attitudinizing in a modern cloister" it is not the friar thumbing his nose at the cloister, it is the man belittling the friar.

Transformation is a long, painful process. It is a rebirth not now rendered painless by the yet dormant senses of the infant, but acutely painful to the fully developed senses of a grown man, who must suffer the contradictions and pressures and the blinding light of self knowledge as he struggles to be born again from darkness into the life of Christ. It is not a process easily undergone. No wonder he admits his poetry is not much more than the agonized cry of his pain. His poetry is the cry of a friar badly burnt by the love he has dared to embrace; he can no more help it than he can direct it. Full control should not yet be expected, for he is not yet delivered, not yet fully weaned. Perhaps above all it is this materialization of his interior pain that gives his friarhood its authenticity.

### **The Poet**

Antoninus the poet is another aspect, related to the first, yet distinct from it. The office of poet is like the office of priest in that it is for others. Not every friar is a poet, yet the fact that this poet is a friar elevates his poetry from the level of nature to the realm of the supernatural. For a friar-poet speaks of a love beyond the wildest hopes of mere natural man. The poet of nature is demanding out of poverty; "They seek splendor: who would touch them must stun them; a nerve that is dying needs thunder to rouse it." The man of supernature is demanding out of love; "Violence touches man, he reacts . . . in his heart's own torment the world's anguish is taken up." Antoninus would have turned under the grass and flowers of the monastery garden and made it into a desert

adorned only by the long spiked cactus "to evoke Passion and Death . . . that we might be called hourly to our own passion." But who would willingly suffer, were it not for love of Him who so suffered for us.

Would Antoninus be the rigorist in the monastery as well as the stark and dramatic figure strutting across a stage in the glareheat of spotlights were it not for his particular and present status? It takes much suffering to make a man.

The explanation lies perhaps in the Spanish concept of mystical marriage. The language of the Spanish mystics in mystical flights was the language of eroticism and quasi-erotic experience. This is admittedly one of the things which has attracted Antoninus to the religious life among Dominicans. His poetry filled with the violent images of erotic pleasure and experience can hardly be held to be reflections of the natural order, and it would not seem that he would want them to be. They are mystical flights and should be taken as such (even though it may be that they are more the product of desire and hope than fact and experience.)

The effect of such a concept of marriage would necessarily end in a desire to act as a means by which others might attain this Infinite Lover. And this in fact is the intention of Antoninus—to act as a bridge. A bridge between what and what? The square and the hip; the humanist and the realist; perhaps the Lover and loved.

Intensity is an outstanding characteristic of Antoninus the man as well as Antoninus the poet and friar. The why and where of intensity is not clear; perhaps it is in the mind's realization that this good thing, whatever it be, is so good for it that all else pales beside it, an intensity of concentration that spills over into the body and its expressions. However, it is a fearful trait, one that sets a man off from his fellows. One doesn't know whether such a man could be all that serious, not realizing that even this is but the surface of it, the spilling over.

He describes the clerical students coming down the stairs to chant the hour of Matins . . . "the hood over the head, and the white scapular dancing before and behind, floating out from the movement of the feet, which gives the light and buoyant tread that somehow catches up the indefinable blitheness, the gaiety of the Order" . . . ; and couples it immediately with the thought of death . . . "and as they descend they intone between them the *De Profundis*." It is only a man who sees beyond the gray mist of life to the stark finalities who dares couple blitheness and death so easily and so closely.

The fact that he is a bridge between extremes of society cannot be



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.

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## 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

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