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The Poetry of Meditation: A Study in English Religious Literature
of the Seventeenth Century
by Louis L. Martz

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Book Reviews

ST. IGNATIUS LOYOLA AND ENGLISH POETRY

THE POETRY OF MEDITATION: A Study in English Religious Literature of the Seventeenth Century. By Louis L. Martz. New Haven: Yale University Press; London: Geoffrey Cumberlege, Oxford University Press. 1954. Pp. xiv-375.

I

Every student of literature is familiar with the term "metaphysical poetry." The *Oxford English Dictionary* traces the term to Dryden who used it to characterize the poetry of Cowley. Samuel Johnson took up the word, as did other critics, and it has thus come to be the accepted name for the poetry of a group of seventeenth century poets, including Donne, Marvell, Herbert, Vaughn, Crashaw.

The term "metaphysical" had in this case a pejorative connotation, very much as the term *filósofo* has a pejorative connotation in our local dialects. These poets were called "metaphysical" because, in the first place, their poetry was "intellectual," that is to say speculative rather than sentimental; and in the second place because they indulged in "conceits": that is to say, they expressed their ideas by means of comparisons which seemed far-fetched, and which appealed to the intellect rather than to the heart.

An outstanding example of the metaphysical technique is Donne's "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning" in which the poet compares himself and his lady-love to twin compasses, the legs of which are always united no matter how far apart distended. But it is by no means merely in their love poems that these poets showed this "metaphysical" tendency. They showed it also in their reli-

gious poetry, of which they wrote much. The Blessed Trinity is compared to a battering ram, to a ravisher, to a king; eternity is compared to a ring; death to a proud conqueror; etc.

This sort of poetry was distasteful enough to critics of the eighteenth century, but it was anathema to the soulful poets and critics of the Romantic and post-Romantic eras: which explains why the "metaphysical" poets were held in so little regard in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Palgrave, for instance, saw fit to include only one poem (and that not the best) of Donne in his celebrated and otherwise excellent *Golden Treasury of Songs and Lyrics*.

But in the past few decades, Donne and the "metaphysicals" have not only received more and more attention, but they have become the objects of a cult surpassed only by the cult of Hopkins and Eliot, both of whom exhibit "metaphysical" tendencies in a marked degree. This revival of interest in metaphysical poetry has been helped, and in large measure caused, by two notable works: Grierson's edition of *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems: Donne to Butler* (Oxford 1921, and reprinted many times since), and T. S. Eliot's essays on the metaphysical poets "inspired by" Grierson's work. The essential spirit and the chief qualities of metaphysical poetry have been defined and defended by Grierson in his introduction to the above-mentioned edition. "Metaphysical poetry, in the full sense of the term," he says, "is a poetry which, like that of the *Divina Commedia*, the *De Natura Rerum*, perhaps Goethe's *Faust*, has been inspired by a philosophical conception of the universe and the role assigned to the human spirit in the great drama of existence." T. S. Eliot carried the defense farther by his interesting thesis (if we might oversimplify it) that it was the metaphysicals and not the romanticists who were the better poets, because the metaphysicals reacted to situations with an integrity of vision (intellect, will, emotions and sense perceptions all acting in harmony), whereas the romanticists and others exhibited a "dissociation of sensibility" in which sentiment was divorced from thought. Thus, Donne could "feel his thought as immediately as the odour of a rose."

Where did the metaphysical poets get their "metaphysical" technique? The question has hitherto received little attention. Scholars have taken it for granted that Donne was "the father and master of a new kind of poetry," and that all the metaphysicals

owed their metaphysical tendencies to the influence of Donne. Professor Martz, in the book under review, challenges this assumption. His thesis (again if we might oversimplify it) is that the first of the English metaphysical poets was not Donne, but Robert Southwell, the Jesuit priest and poet who was killed for the Catholic Faith in 1595 by order of Queen Elizabeth; and furthermore, that the real "father and master" of metaphysical poetry was not Donne but St. Ignatius Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits, who influenced English literature through Southwell and through the numerous books of meditation which were widespread in England in the late sixteenth and the early seventeenth century.

II

The casual visitor, happening to stroll into one of the enormous reading rooms of the Yale University Library some years ago, might have noticed on one of the tables reserved for individuals an odd assortment of books: the *Imitation of Christ*, the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius, the *Introduction to a Devout Life* by St. Francis de Sales, the works of St. Theresa and of St. John of the Cross, of the Jesuit de la Puente and the Dominican Fray Luis de Granada, and many another devotional, ascetical, or mystical treatise. Not, obviously, the usual reading fare of the ordinary undergraduate. "A priest's table, or a nun's," the casual visitor might have thought; but he would have been wrong: the books were on reserve for Mr. Martz, professor of English literature at Yale.

Two things had set Professor Martz on his quest into Catholic devotional literature. The first was the unusual structure of Donne's *Anniversaries*. It seemed to have no precedents in poetical tradition. The other was a historical coincidence (brought home to him by a reading of the third volume of Pourrat's *Christian Spirituality*): one period in which the practice of meditation flourished "coincides exactly with the flourishing of English religious poetry in the seventeenth century." (p. 1)

His researches, both at New Haven and at the Huntington Library, have convinced Professor Martz that this coincidence was not fortuitous. There was a genetic connection between the two, and the precedents for Donne's "unusual structure" must be sought not in poetry but in the methods of meditation made widespread under Jesuit influence: "intense, imaginative meditation that brings together the senses, the emotions, and the intellectual faculties of

man; brings them together in a moment of dramatic, creative experience." (p. 1)

III

This is of course a daring thesis, and it has many obstacles to hurdle. In the first place, meditation is a method of *prayer*: can it really be that the English *Protestant* poets were men of prayer? Secondly, in the time of Donne and the other "metaphysical" poets, Catholicism was proscribed in England: how then could English poets have read Catholic books? Thirdly, Protestant England abhorred all Papists, and particularly Jesuits; John Donne himself wrote slanderous things against Jesuits, and in particular against St. Ignatius Loyola; how then could they imbibe the Jesuit influence strong enough to make them write a new kind of poetry?

It is the triumph of Professor Martz's book that with great clarity, and with meticulous documentation, he succeeds in establishing his thesis solidly and persuasively.

The unfolding of his thesis is perhaps best done by taking excerpts from his introductory chapter.

"It was from Pourrat's third volume that the present study took its origin, for there he has described in rich detail the leading and the lesser figures in the great movement toward methodical religious meditation which matured on the Continent in the middle of the sixteenth century, finding its first great landmark in the Pope's approval of the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius Loyola in 1548. Behind St. Ignatius, as Watrigant has shown, lay various methods of meditation that had long exerted, and continued to exert a powerful influence... In the middle of the sixteenth century, under the stimulus of the Counter Reformation and its spearhead, the Jesuit order, new treatises on meditation began to appear by the dozens, and after the opening of the seventeenth century, by the scores and by the hundreds....

"It may seem surprising, at first glance, that such potent works of the Counter Reformation, all strongly tinged with Jesuit influence, could have penetrated to an England in the throes of religious revolution, fearful of Rome and its works, and especially hostile to the Jesuits. But a number of modern studies, set together, provide us with overwhelming evidence that the channels of communication between England and the Catholic Continent were ample to carry the meditative methods of the Counter Re-

formation into England. The most recent of these studies is A. C. Southern's *Elizabethan Recusant Prose, 1559-1582*, which shows in elaborate detail how Catholic books in English were printed at Antwerp, Louvain, Rouen, Paris, Douay, Rheims—or in some cases at secret presses in England itself—and were distributed among the English people by missionary priests or other religious agents." (pp.5-6)

There were, for instance, four treatises on meditation of more than ordinary influence which were widespread in England. One of these was Fray Luis de Granada's *Book of Prayer and Meditation*, originally in Spanish and translated into English by Richard Hopkins (Paris 1582). The translation went into six London editions. Fray Luis was of course a Dominican, and his method derives from St. Peter of Alcantara: but Professor Martz is right in counting him among the writers "strongly tinged with Jesuit influence" because we have it from Granada's own testimony and from that of St. Alphonsus Liguori (*Opera ascetica*, Marietti 1847, III, 616; see Brou, *Ignatian Methods of Prayer*, trans. W. Young, Bruce 1949, Appendix, p. 202). Nor was the influence one-sided: if St. Ignatius Loyola influenced Fray Luis, Fray Luis influenced St. Robert Bellarmine, whose influence among his fellow Jesuits was immeasurable. (Brou, *op. cit.*, ch. 3-5).

A second influential author was the Jesuit Gaspar Loarte, whose two works appeared in English translation in 1579. One was on *How to Meditate the Misteries of the Rosarie*; the other was on *The Exercises of a Christian Life* and this latter work had seen four more editions by 1634.

A fourth book, more influential than the other three, was the famous one by a famous (and controversial) Jesuit, Robert Persons. Father Persons had gone to England in 1580 with Blessed Edmund Campion. He was the first Jesuit superior in England. After Campion's martyrdom he was recalled to the continent and there organized a college for English students and wrote the *Christian Directory* (Rouen 1582). The book became so influential that the Protestants availed themselves of it, putting out a Protestant adaptation of it under the editorship of Edmund Bunny. Three scholars (Thurston, Southern, and White) have given detailed accounts of the vogue of Father Persons' book in England both in its original Catholic form and in its Protestant adaptation. The Catholic version had gone through seven continental editions by 1633; the Protestant version had gone through some twenty

editions by 1640. Father Persons, incidentally, was much disgusted by the Protestants taking over his book, and a heated controversy with Bunney ensued.

But these works were merely the beginning of a veritable flood of treatises on prayer and the spiritual life that "poured into England, through English translations and adaptations." Such eager reception of these Catholic devotional works, Professor Martz points out, suggests the satisfaction of an inner need. Protestant England was being cut off from the stream of Catholic devotion, owing to the rapid upheavals and bitter controversies resulting from England's defection from the Church: the national soul was thirsty for its old-time devotions and seized the opportunity to satisfy that thirst. "These continental practices of meditation combined with the older traditions of primer and private prayer, and with the inward surge of Puritanism, to produce in the seventeenth century an era of religious fervor unmatched in English history." (p. 9)

IV

There were of course other influences at work besides that of the books. For instance, "the establishment of English Catholic colleges and monastic houses abroad, and their close connections with English Catholics at home." The most influential of these English colleges on continental soil was the College at Douai and the English College of the Jesuits at Rome. The *Diaries* of Douai and the works of such scholars as Pollen, Mathew, Hughes (among others) give proof of the close relationships between Protestant England and the Catholic continent despite the efforts of the English government to prevent such intercourse.

Another influence, more potent than that of the colleges, was the personal work, at grave personal risk, of many Catholic priests who circulated among the educated classes in England and endeavored in that fashion to keep alive a forbidden Faith. The number of Jesuits (many of them raised to the altars as *Beati*) who were martyred for the Faith under Elizabeth and the Stuarts is a testimony to the extent of this activity. The greatest figure among these Jesuit martyrs was of course Blessed Edmund Campion, but the one who exercised the most influence on English literature was not Campion but Blessed Robert Southwell. Southwell, says Professor Marz, "is the most significant [figure] for our purposes here, for he combines within himself all the aspects of

the Counter Reformation which are important to our present study." (p. 10) "Southwell managed to spend no less than nine consecutive years in England, between 1586 and his execution in 1595; during this time he published books from his own secret press, ministered to several noble families, and wrote devotional tracts and poems as a part of his mission. The history of the publication of Southwell's works in England illustrates with particular vividness the way in which the Elizabethan government would prosecute an individual Catholic while leaving his published works free to accomplish their purposes. In 1591, while Southwell was being hotly chased by the pursuivants, Gabriel Cawood issued, 'under the hand of the Lord Archbishop of Canterbury,' Southwell's prose meditation *Marie Magdalens Funeral Teares*; this proceeded to run through seven subsequent editions in London by 1636, to say nothing of two editions on the Continent, and produced a number of English imitations which have been recorded by Janelle and Thurston. In the year of Southwell's execution six editions of his works appeared openly in London, all evidently prompted by the recent notoriety of his career. Three of these were attributed on the title-page to 'R.S.' and one, *The Triumphs over Death*, contained three prefatory poems flaunting the name of the celebrated author, the last of which defied the Puritans to object to the publication of so devout a work.... In all, Southwell's various works went through at least twenty editions in London alone between the years 1591 and 1636, and through at least two Edinburgh and five continental editions as well." (pp. 10-13)

"From all such evidence it seems clear that there were easy ways by which the continental methods of meditation could, and did, reach a large body of educated Englishmen, particularly those of a High Church tendency, who were by no means averse to all things Roman." (p. 13)

V

It is against such a background that Professor Martz can say: "There is, then, reason to consider the thesis that English religious poetry of the seventeenth century represents the impact of the continental art of meditation upon English poetical traditions." (p. 13)

The qualities (he says) of religious meditation "are essentially the qualities that the twentieth century has admired in Donne, or Herbert, or Marvell." (p. 2)

His conclusion is important, though it is somewhat modestly put: "In short, the present study attempts to modify the view of literary history which sees a 'Donne tradition' in English religious poetry. It suggests instead a 'meditative tradition' which found its first notable example not in Donne but in Robert Southwell. Such a tradition could explain a number of embarrassing problems which could not be adequately explained with Donne as our basing-point. Nearly everyone has recognized, for instance, that Crashaw's poetry is very unlike Donne's, while close students of Crashaw have pointed out his marked affinity with Southwell and his occasional echoes of Herbert. At the same time, as Herbert's editors have pointed out, there is evidence of strong poetical kinship between Southwell and Herbert, a kinship which appears very close indeed when examined in detail. Moreover—though this lies outside the scope of the present study—in their habit of meditating on the 'creatures,' it is possible to find a fundamental link between Vaughn, Marvell, Traherne, and even Milton. This is not to deny the great influence of Donne upon the course of English poetry, but only to argue that a broader and greater tradition than that which stems from Donne's poetry lies behind the abundant variety and versatility of English religious poetry in the seventeenth century. The realm of meditation is broad enough to hold Jesuit and Puritan, Donne and Milton, the baroque extravagance of Crashaw and the delicate restraint of Herbert. The 'poetry of meditation' I believe, would be a more accurate, a more flexible, a more helpful term, both historically and critically, than the much debated term 'metaphysical poetry.'" (pp. 3-4)

How this thesis is proved may be seen in outline by a glance at the contents of Professor Martz's book. The work is divided into two parts. Part I deals with the art of meditation, its method, its subject-matter, its spirit and objectives. The religious poetry of Southwell, Donne, Herbert, Vaughn, Crashaw, Butler, are examined from the point of view of "meditative structure," the "composition of place," the fusion of intellect and sense, methods of self-examination, the "Election," the "spiritual combat," devotion to Christ and to Mary, etc. Part II deals in greater detail with the works of three "meditative poets": Southwell, Donne, and Herbert.

There is a concluding chapter on "The Unity of Being and the Meditative Style" in which the poetry of the modern Jesuit, Gerard Manley Hopkins, is examined. Speaking of Yeats, Hop-

kins, and T. S. Eliot, Professor Martz says: "For these three poets, at least, the kinship with the seventeenth century is more than a matter of the local texture of their poetry: more than a style that can fuse the natural and the supernatural, the common and the mysterious. One can find in their poems a total movement, a total structure, that shows a remarkable resemblance to the three-fold method that has been discussed at length... As we might expect, the method is most evident in the Jesuit [Hopkins] . . ." (p. 325)

VI

It has been said of the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius that it is packed with reason and devoid of poetry. It is an interesting irony of history that a work "devoid of poetry" should have become the source of a great poetic tradition.

There is an even more ironic twist of events. John Donne, who wrote with such poor grace of Jesuits in general and of their founder in particular, turns out to be himself an outstanding exponent of a kind of poetry that developed under Jesuit influence.

There is a third irony. In a country where the very word "jesuitical" is a term of opprobrium, it is interesting to note the profound and continued influence of Jesuit spirituality upon its literature. Father Robert Southwell in the sixteenth century and Father Gerard Manley Hopkins in the twentieth have exercised a literary influence that is enormous. It would seem, after all, that England is far more "jesuitical" than has hitherto been suspected, and that the future student of English literature would have to take greater account of that extraordinary man whose "spiritual combat" began with the shattering of his legs in the Battle of Pamplona in 1521, and ended with his death at Rome in 1556, four hundred years ago.

The present reviewer, being himself a Jesuit, would like to take the liberty of offering his personal congratulations for this scholarly (and handsomely printed) work to Professor Martz, to the Yale University Press, and to Mr. Benjamin Christie Nangle, Editor of the Yale Studies in English of which this book is the 125th volume.

MIGUEL A. BERNAD

TRIBUTE TO LOYOLA

COMMENTARIUM IGNATIANI 1556-1956. A commemorative volume for the 400th anniversary of the death of St. Ignatius. Vol. XXV of the *Archivum Historicum Societatis Iesu*. Rome: Institutum Historicum S. I., 1956. Pp. 615

The present issue of PHILIPPINE STUDIES, commemorative of St. Ignatius, is only one of many world-wide periodical tributes to the Founder and Father of the Jesuits. Of all these special publications perhaps the most scholarly and international is this thick volume edited by the Historical Institute of the Society of Jesus in Rome. Twenty-nine distinguished scholars, priestly and lay as well as Jesuits, have authored studies which are divided into six parts: Ignatius' kin, his life, his fame after death, various sources concerning his life, the Spiritual Exercises, the Constitutions.

Some of these investigations are primarily for specialists, as one on the maternal grandfather of St. Ignatius (7-14), and another on recently discovered documents concerning other relatives (15-25).

Most of the studies, however, are of general cultural and religious interest, and make contact with varied modern currents.

For example, education. George Ganss, S.J., "St. Ignatius the Educator, Guide Amid Contemporary Problems" (598-612), enters into the controversy on the purpose of a university. Is it merely the intellectual virtues, as Hutchins originally and then other educators have declared in recent years, or is it all that plus moral virtue? Ignatius, more given to practical than speculative wisdom, had much contact with universities, both as student and planner, and Fr. Ganss demonstrates from documents how Ignatian education, all intent as it is on intellectual excellence, necessarily includes the whole man.

Another valuable article for educators is Pietro Tacchi Venturi, S.J., "L'umanesimo e il fondatore del collegio romano" (63-71). St. Ignatius, as other educators of his age, faced a double humanistic difficulty. Should the pagan classics be read, or were they incompatible with Christian life? If they were to be read, in their entirety or expurgated? Ignatius of course chose the classics, and Jesuit schools of the following two centuries were

famous for their humanistic formation. Concerning the second difficulty, Erasmus and others advocated non-expurgated editions, even of Terence. Not so Ignatius. Obscene passages were skillfully removed by learned classicists, and parents were sure that their sons were in no moral danger from their studies.

Although historical studies in this volume are numerous, here only a few can be mentioned. For example, Pedro Sainz Rodríguez, "Una apología olvidada de San Ignacio y la Compañía de Jesús por Fray Domingo de Valtañas, O.P." (156-178), is an interesting historical sidelight on the early days of the Society of Jesus in Spain; at the very time that many false accusations were hurled against the new religious order, a well known Dominican defended them.

Two articles concern the entry of St. Ignatius himself and of the first Jesuits into England.

Anyone familiar with Ignatius' life knows that, during the 1530 summer of his student days at the University of Paris, he crossed the channel to England to beg for alms to finance his studies. But Ignatius himself in his autobiography gives scarcely any details. William A. M. Peters, S.J., "Richard Whitford and St. Ignatius' Visit to England" (328-350), attempts an ingenious but not completely convincing explanation of where he lived during that sojourn. Joseph Creehan, S.J. writes on "St. Ignatius and Cardinal Pole" (72-98).

Perhaps the most profound studies of the whole volume are those concerned with an understanding of the soul of Ignatius, his spiritual intuitions and principles. Outstanding among such articles is Pierre Blet, S.J., "Les fondements de l'obéissance ignatienne" (514-538), in which the author adds a penetrating treatise to the already extensive literature on religious obedience in general and Jesuit obedience in particular. Skillfully, scholarly, he distinguishes, illumines, synthesizes the manifold facets of the natural and the supernatural, the double tension of personal sanctification and apostolic work, the meaning of "blind obedience" and representation to Superiors.

Then, and this is what is not so commonly developed, he unites and integrates all the above multiplicity by situating it in the concrete order of Divine Providence for the individual, sustained by the indisputable *fidelis Deus*, God is faithful. Thus reli-