

WONDER AND CONTEMPLATION

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WONDER AND contemplation: our subject, as we intend to take it,¹ verges on tautology. And this is just as well, for we deal here with a matter deep and huge beyond telling. We meet man in his primal moment as project, process and achievement, *where he greets the real* – God, self, the world and other men – greets it as mystery, and not as information, and long before and forever after ideas, or things, or God, or self, or others, are problematic, analysed, or used. The latin *mirabilia*, *mirabilia Dei* – wonders, wonders of God – suggests the english *mirror*, where the element of objectivity involved, of distance and detachment, is exact. This argues peremptorily for humility, austerity, for John the Baptist; that is, quite literally, for selflessness, if the real is to have an epiphany consonant with *its* truth, that is, achieve a new existence in our consciousness according to its own otherness and identity precisely as an unmanipulated self. Only the imperfections of a mirror announce its existence when the drama is in play, and they do so, always, by working darkness or distortion upon what is contemplated, mirrored, wondered at.

We are at the roots here of reverence and respect: action centred in the other and the others, according to *their* existence, their goodness, truth and beauty – and their promise. Especially promise. The promise of another in this weak and splendid unconcluded world of ours – those signals of a destiny and future that just could be triumphant – well, they seed our growth and ground our hope. But they are spied at *cost*, since we are prone to sinfulness, which never takes flesh except as selfishness: that lapse of contemplation, however momentary, which is the death of wonder. We are called to that *attention* which lies at the heart of both the gospel² and the monastic ‘watch’, to that virginal expectation and alertness for the bride-

¹ We have treated broadly of contemplation twice before in this journal (‘Prayer and Religion’, July 1969, and ‘Contemplating Christ’, July 1970), and we will not extensively repeat what we said there, but refer the reader to both.

² Cf Gethsemane: ‘watch and pray’.

groom. Contemplation, then, is vigorous *action*, which ponders the other – God, man and world, turning them over in the heart (Mary), and is the condition of science as well as of art, of secularity as well as of religion. It is action centred in the other and the others, as we said, according to *their* reality and promise, their terror and their truth. And if it is expensive – the market price of wonder and joy (as opposed to pleasure) being always a death to selfishness – it may well be thought worth the price and risk. For if reality – God, man and world, is a gift, if it is simply *there* to be met with in its quality as unmanipulated, objective and other – as the example of the mirror suggests, if we are such a gift *to* each other, yet nevertheless, and as equally so, we ourselves are at stake as well. For we are *received* from another. We are a gift that is given. We are grace.

Every man is told this profoundly, just as soon as his story begins: we do not name ourselves. Our name (who shall we be?) is a gift from another. The recent *Man of La Mancha* is vivid here. It seizes upon the christian romance of contemplation as the totally *unsentimental* grappling with the real, as it is: not avoiding but grasping and keeping company with its weakness and horror and disappointment; yet keeping faith too with its wonder as spied only in *contemplative* gaze. It is a look that needs to be long and hardy and faithful, a love-look that penetrates my promise and creates me, making my dream come true. *La Mancha* dramatizes the mystery of the biblical theme of the name and of the changing of the name as no mere sign or pointer, but as laden with and creative of the *ding an sich*, the thing itself. Quixote calls the prostitute his lady Dulcinea and, transcending all rejection with fidelity, invites her, indeed compels her, by his faithfulness to the beauty that he sees, to choose in freedom the beauty that she is, and so become – herself.

The conditions of Don Quixote's creative contemplation, of his capacity for wonder – for making dreams just *be* (that's first), in order to come true – are simple and severe: formalized not especially as introspecting self-perfection, but rather as ecstasy and extroversion: action centred in the other and the others, that God and world and other men may happen in their unique and glorious otherness, may happen for him, Don Quixote – just happen, and be so. The theme is emphatically marian, where the project and adventure, fully done, of contemplation as attentive humility before reality as grace, explodes on God himself: 'let it happen to me'. And that was Christ, who would in turn be wonder-full for history *only* to contemplative, unself-regarding faith (with the romance of

the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount proving steadily, mercifully absurd and useless, sentimental and unrealistic, where appropriated in precision from mystery, sin and grace). And John the Baptist appears here too, as forerunner surely, but also as that perennial companion and ingredient of the real that must also sponsor, if it is to be well met by, the contemplative heart. For granted that we do love, that we do take a very good look (contemplate), and that we do serve, yet we are always just about to, too. The situation of contemplation endures only in continuing obedience to John's rude and accurate advice: before you do anything else, just get yourself out of the way. *That* kind of poverty, emptiness of self, which the child is and which Job finally learned, is the preface and the permanent comrade of wonder.

In leaving Quixote, Mary and the Baptist, we ought to consider how far their reality – even as scarcely touched on here – has nevertheless blatantly outstripped our thoughts of them. For we looked at their truth to see how wonder is and arises (in its own aftermath as awe) out of that reverent, respectful occupation with the real, in *its* otherness, interiority and promise. And we gathered from both Mary and Quixote how this contemplation, where well done, is not only carefully, literally, reflective, but is also essentially creative and actualizing of the other's reality and promise (Christ and Dulcinea).³ Finally, in the Baptist we are met with the constant, negative condition of all human personality as contemplative surrender: that death of the petty, scattered, having self, which manipulates and squanders the real, dominating rather than adoring that which is,⁴ corrupting rather than serving that which ought to be.⁵

Yet at least two further, polar truths stand patent already from our examples, and they are equally interior and fundamental to the being of contemplation and wonder as those truths we have remarked. The first is clear in its simple, splendid statement. If it is the case that a young girl, precisely as contemplative, is so creative of the God she ponders that he becomes history as Christ, yet equally and even more entirely does this woman come to be as Mary through

³ Just a glance here suggests that the quality of any society's secular action stands in direct proportion to the quality of that society as contemplative. The contemplative point, therefore, is significantly prior to and wider than its fuller and deeper application to inter-personal relationships or to religion as such.

⁴ Often defended by the assertion that nothing is except as becoming or process.

⁵ Sometimes defended by the view that man creates his world absolutely rather than, as with Jesus, exercising creative lordship precisely as a servant.

this adventure and event. And if the errant knight's reverent, intransigently loving contemplation of the prostitute is evocation and even *deed* of her as Dulcinea, yet we are also witness here, in that victorious dialectic of all successful contemplation, to a giant stride and penetration into that noble dream and promise that shall come true as Don Quixote. The objects of contemplation, then, are also creative of their lover. And wonder, as man's loss of self in the other, as his ardent *moving out* into the others and other, is also man's arrival upon himself as man. Precisely as contemplative servant of the real – God, fellow men and world – man happens, he occurs, he is man. Where this is done at all, there is personality. Where it is well done and with fidelity, there is sanctity.

A second truth, and also fully explicit from the beginning of our reflection on contemplation and wonder, causes our example of the mirror to founder on a beauty to which it cannot respond. Wonder as mirror, we saw, answers forcefully to the objective character, the otherness and 'thereness' – to the gift-and-grace quality, of reality. The example leads, therefore, to reverence and respect. It asks for careful humility in judgment and invites us to be surprised. This is indispensable to awe and amazement, those precious attributes of wonder which a man may feel before the simplest flower, the hands of a friend, or almighty God – if he will *really* look (it is not easy), with a passion for the evidence, for the *facts* of the real and with a disposition to respond according to what is *given* him to see. It ought not to be assumed that such honesty is easy, and that all difficulty focuses on responding to what we see. The 'doors of perception'⁶ are cleansed with labour and humility, as Darwin learned in searching for the data in order that reality might be for man – simply be itself. Initially and finally, the doors are cleansed by grace. We ask, and we are given – we are even given to ask – not to be deaf and blind.

Yet having stressed that objective element of contemplation which gives to it its first dignity – especially in the case of friendship and of God – and where the example of the mirror may survive, it yet remains paramount, radically intrinsic to the enterprise of wonder, and constitutive of the final excitement of contemplative knowledge as love, that the registration of the object in question is on *human freedom* and not on glass – on human freedom, whose active, contributing, creative character is properly at the very forefront of every

⁶ Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*.

discussion of the human. Contemplation and wonder are *action* centred in the other. That is, contemplative knowledge is born of, as well as fruitful of, love. It is in my freedom's *appropriation* of what yet remains sheer gift that there occurs on the frontiers of contemplative encounter that inter-action with the real which, whether abruptly, or slowly and after the grain dies, fissions to the paradox of wonder: *both* intimacy and distance, *both* tenderness and reverence, *both* fascination and holy fear.

We catch the full tension of this action and passion, this intimacy and mystery – and we recall the theme of the name – in the book of Genesis where Jacob encounters God; wrestles him to earth; prevails; is named anew as Israel; concludes: 'Tell me *your* name', and has his reply: 'Why do you ask my name?'⁷ In the knowledge: mystery. In the intimacy: awe.

Children instruct us fundamentally and movingly, if initially and somewhat superficially, in the matter of contemplation; and they warn us against the death of wonder. The inaugural simplicity of the human heart is celebrated in the child's wide-eyed rush to the light, to the flower, to whatever is new, revealed and there – especially to the thunder heard in the quiet of a smile. The eyes grow big, the hands reach out – and stop, reverently. And the touch is chaste. There is delight, total involvement, not a shred of self – and silence, until the cry of wonder. The eyes turn to the adult. And the questions are: what, and why. The beautiful and the holy are very near. Yet the capacity quickly dims most often, and the question turns into: what for, and, does it work. This is not defeat, but the larger task lies ahead now: not in the refusal of these last concerns (they are the basis of much good science, secularity and incarnationism), but in the *penetration* of the pragmatic, the handled and the familiar, on down deep to the *roots* of particularity where everything is new and wonderful, and strange as God.⁸ *Here* lies the ambitious, christian childhood of the gospel that only the adult can manage.

The task is beset with problems which, like most others, admit of false solutions – untruths difficult to work with often, because partially, even largely, true. In the first line of vision, though, lies a stunning truth, and it is evil: all our historical and contemporary brothers and sisters who have never been allowed to wonder. It is

⁷ Gen 33, 24–29.

⁸ Cf 1 Jn 1, 1–4, and so much of Hopkins' poetry. And cf Flannery O'Connor, who writes in consistent awe of the deeply familiar as incarnational detail.

the primal theft: the theft of childhood – at any age. And its means are both gross and subtle. For we bludgeon one another, individually and as societies and cultures – we bludgeon one another's capacity to dream and will the beautiful, whether with a violence as sophisticated as advertising, or with the cruder forms of violence such as poverty, regimentation, racism and war. So that many of our brothers have no time – no real, psychological, spiritual, *human* time and space and peace – for wonder and contemplation. We do it to our children, our parents, our friends. And as this or that man or community crosses the physical or cultural or spiritual poverty-line, we 'raise the ante' constantly. We enslave one another with the need to *have* as a condition of becoming, while always postponing the moment of *being*, self-surrender, wonder, and praise. Yet 'how much leisure and pay is the miner to have, till he is to be taught to love prayer and the thought of God?' And there is a similar question for those rightly busy in seeking the miner's justice.⁹

A second problem is suggested here by 'those rightly busy in seeking the miner's justice'. And the issue often gets canonized in a famous phrase that is sometimes (and pretty fairly) proposed as a summary of the spirituality of Ignatius of Loyola: finding God in all things. The presupposition here, of course, is biblically and dogmatically immaculate: God *is* in all things (though not equally so, unless pantheistic humanism is the point). But *finding* God in all things, meeting and greeting *him* there – and the conditions of that – is another, surely deeply related, but perhaps slightly more complex affair. And wonder, wonder at God just here, is what is at stake, together with what is organically and not peripherally involved in such wonder: man's coming to be as man through conscious, immediate encounter with God.

The conditions of the numinous, of wonder, are severe, as we already know from John the Baptist: awe and amazement, reverence and respect, humility and gratitude, service and self-effacement, will test the presence of the holy One. The case is especially pressing in the matter of reform. Only contemplative love shall act re-creatively, rather than routinely, cleverly, and on the surface. For only love gives life. The implications are ominous in reformers who do not contemplate – and superb in those who do – contemplate the *mystery* of the papacy, of celibacy, America, or of anything or anyone at all. Reform, at its own peril, must pause for celebra-

⁹ Cf first reference, note 1, above.

tion, and for the giving of great thanks. To tackle mystery in the first place as a problem is a sin.¹⁰

There is a temptation, further, in the adage, finding God in all things, which has a large and contemporary history. And it is two-fold. The temptation suggests, first of all, that we identify contemplation and action, neatly and without remainder. That identity, to be sure, is God's situation, and it is strongly characteristic, not of the contemplation (which always seems to survive as itself), but of the action of the saints in their maturity. Yet it speaks to a harmony that we, poor sinful men and as spirit-in-a-body-in-the-world, are largely always on the way to, both in our love for God and one another, and in our encounter with the ideas and things of our historical existence. Idolatry – which is to have and use instead of serve each other and our world – is the death of wonder and threatens all involvement that is not *reverent* intimacy. We must really look – take a very good look – at the sheer otherness before us: whether a flower, an idea, or a friend and see what is there, and how we are to serve its promise. This is to love what *God* sees and has in mind for our brothers and our world. And that takes time, habits of fresh perception, detachment, freedom from the other *for* the other; that poverty of self that allows us, frees us to notice – especially in the case of the familiar – one another's beauty and hope, and to be surprised.

The temptation of the adage, finding God in all things, secondly concerns the *structure* of our contemplation of God, each other and our world. This touches on the sources of wonder, for the temptation suggests that we come to God *only* in and through creatures, that is, by ardent, dedicated involvement with our fellow men and the material world alone. 'Christ is other people' – taken absolutely – is another, even more limiting expression (since it does not even hope to move on to Christ himself) of the same stance. The first thing to notice about this position is the difficulty of finding any saint who espouses it. That Jesus did not do so is usually granted without much question, though the anthropological framework of the culture within which he had to live and work may get cited as excusing cause for his direct preoccupation with the Father.¹¹ That Ignatius of Loyola did not do so either may be gathered *inter alia* just from that

¹⁰ These remarks are based on an earlier article of mine, 'Credibility and Joy', in *The Month*, February, 1969.

¹¹ Cf the splendid, God-centred portrait of Jesus in the opening pages of Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York, 1951; London, 1952).

consideration – easily considered pedestrian – in the *Spiritual Exercises*, where he discusses that common phenomenon of his own day: oath-taking. The *less* perfect man ought to swear, if swear he must, by God alone, since the respect due to God will be immediately obvious. Only the *more* perfect should swear by creatures, and for the splendid reason that they are more likely to have that *reverence* and care – that attitude of wonder – toward creatures that will discern how they have come from God, are coming from his hand at just this moment, and are destined for him alone.¹² The descending movement of all ignatian theology and contemplation is clear and well documented. Ignatius moves from God to the world, and never the other way about.¹³ The *Spiritual Exercises* are rooted in the divine as initiative, and not as term only. Indeed they have their beginning, middle and end in a Father who wishes to deal *directly* with the one who receives the exercises.¹⁴

The incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, of course, radically reinterprets and creates anew the meaning of the world and of all social, cultural, material existence. The incarnation is a permanent announcement that God not only may, but as a matter of fact, does, choose our fellow men and our world as the place and time in which he wishes to greet us and be served. But the structure of this incarnationism is exposed: it is in the contemplation of *God* that the world is discovered as given by God and coming from God; and *then* arises the cry of wonder: God, found in all things! And the anti-humanist charge falls well short here. For there is no question in incarnationism of loving God alone, or even of also loving others quite directly but only for God's sake. Rather, the adventure is to love *all* God loves (a world and a world of men), *as* God loves it (directly and in detail: the hairs on our heads, and the sparrows), and with *his* love (that is, in his world-affirming Spirit). This last establishes the place of contemplation as intrinsic to christian humanism as action in the world. And to love the world with God's love is never to fail in reverence and wonder. But it takes a man alive with God's fidelity to do this: to love our fellow men, in all their need – espying the beauty of their promise, and persisting – through

¹² Cf *Spiritual Exercises*, nos. 38–39.

¹³ Cf Rahner, Hugo: *Ignatius the Theologian* (London, 1968), chapter I; and Rahner, Karl: *Theological Investigations* (London, 1967), Vol. III, 'Ignatian Mysticism of Joy in the World'; also, *Spiritual Exercises*, e.g. no. 184.

¹⁴ Cf *Spiritual Exercises*, nos. 5, 15. No. 169 speaks of persons who 'do not go straight to God but want God to come straight to their . . . attachments' (trans. by J. Rickaby).

to the end. The source of friendship as wonder, and of secularity too, is the contemplation of God.

It is important too to see here, in connection with incarnationism, that revelation, especially in its fulness as the trinitarian epiphany of God in Christ, further declares, spells out and gives flesh to – and that it never, in any way, attenuates – God's mystery. And fidelity to contemplation of the gospels, to frequentation of the sacraments and to other religious practice – while running the risk (as everything human, including friendship, does) of a familiarity which breeds boredom, routine and the search for that novelty which marks the death of wonder: nevertheless such fidelity has very much the opposite intention as its graced dynamism, wherever *contemplation*, and not its counterfeits (mere dreaming, or the cult of experience), survives and intensifies. Contemplation, wonder, are love. And love is work – a grace and a gift to be fought for, through effort and training and habits and tears, with fidelity, through to the end. For if the eye stays clear (John the Baptist), then the ceaselessly new disclosure (grace) and discovery (freedom) both of *what* the mystery is and of how *mysterious* it is, is as inevitable as the beloved's own inexhaustibility, and will therefore be productive of ever greater amazement and awe. All theology, and scientific scripture studies too, have their final purpose identified and tested here. Do they *serve* the real, laying bare the integral, always unfashionable mystery (ever old and new) and rendering it ever more available for that wonder which issues in the action that is adoration and obedience?

Further, it may be noticed that *all* science, where formally engaged in as human, precisely in its pragmatism has contemplation and wonder, and not pragmatism, as its final intention and criterion. For man is made for joy and self-surrender, for poverty and being, and not for pleasure, or for having, or for self-fulfilment either – these latter being by-products, if the former are well done. The Trinity instructs us here. For it is the Father's total poverty and contemplation, it is his moving *out* into the Son, which gives the Son his entire existence and his name. Yet it is exactly the existence of the Son, as Son, and nothing else, which constitutes the Father in his reality as Father. The reality of God, then, its explanation, and its judgment on itself, are one: faithful love. And the unity of the Godhead, as *one* precisely in the real *distinction* of its Persons, captures the *reverent intimacy* which is contemplation and which signals the presence of wonder.

Perhaps man knows this best, if largely wordlessly, in the mystery that is friendship. We shall bring these unsystematic reflections to a close, then, by considering the role of contemplation and wonder in the rigorous joy of friends.¹⁵ The case is impressive, as we said, beyond the resources of language – or thought, either – to deliver. We take to the road in acquaintanceship,¹⁶ where the element of choice seems large: I may choose my friends. Later, when the relationship emerges as more fully itself – or fails to – the naiveté of this will be clear. For love is a gift. And while I may reject it, I may not compel it. This is fairly easy to see, when it happens, in the element of *being* loved. Yet grace is equally true of the love I give. That must be given me too. I am *given* to love by the beauty I perceive. For the beauty of another actuates my promise as a lover, even as my love calls forth the beautiful to being. Herein we have the basic dialectic of contemplation as both action and passion, as totally grace, and utterly free. Infatuation, compulsion, therefore, are ruled out: they are something else, and diriment impediments to friendship.

Wonder attends the story's start, and constant, easy surprise. Contemplation (which really need only be glancing to succeed at this point) is smooth, undistracted and winning, where the going is good and mutual. Novelty fuels each encounter, freshness is everywhere, and ardent ease. The illusion of forever is palpable. It is acquaintanceship still, and resembles the child's wonder: often brilliant, yet as often phosphorescent – with the resources of fidelity untested.

Then surface novelty ends. Minds have been explored, histories shared, and personalities indulged. At that level where men live who do not contemplate, now there is nothing 'new'. Boredom, however cordial, is in sight. And death – whatever the social rubrics of 'keeping in touch' – may ensue. It may well go unmourned, where nothing quite final and joyful, but only entertainment, 'relevance' and 'interest' were ever alive. We rarely weep except where we have really wondered. Circumstances can mask all this. For at this point, factors such as work or living-situation, or children, financial secu-

¹⁵ I would certainly include, but would in no way limit these remarks to, that friendship which is successful marriage.

¹⁶ I am not especially concerned here to criticize acquaintanceship, which may well have its necessary and proper place in human life. I am talking about something else. Indeed, most of us cannot manage many friendships. And while it is indispensable to admire wonder and contemplation – to find them wonderful – it serves no purpose to over-estimate the realistic and graced *range* of our capacity to do it well.

rity, or just sheer habit, may suggest or even require that the companionship survive the juncture we are at. For a summer, for years, or even for a lifetime.

The relationship gets announced for what it essentially is more clearly where there are no such circumstances which, on their own account, foster or even demand the companionship. The relationship of love must *choose* itself now, and *decide* upon fidelity. Usually we do not do so, whether out of fear of the desert and the darkness that all love involves, or because we simply have no idea – because no experience to go by – that we are, as a matter of fact, just on the threshold of our own and another's mystery. Israel was appalled to discover that the journey out of Egypt – initiated, we remember, with all wonder and delight – could possibly involve the drabness of the desert and that literally awful encounter with her *own* truth and with the other's truth which loving with fidelity always exacts. We forfeit joy, of course, when we refuse this march into another, this invasion by another – joy: that privileged heart of wonder reserved to mystery *engaged* in. But we also spare ourselves the agony of the journey, and the boredom of loitering, indefinitely and almost as a way of life, at the threshold of surprise. Rather we elect that spiritual promiscuity, so often praised as openness to experience and to growth, which draws lines, which settles for brief excursions, and so moves from one 'friendship' to another, and another – and once more. Wonder here has settled for excitement and will never know the awe of single-eyed fidelity, at any cost.

One may well ask why one should cross such deserts and such mountains, and whether permanent commitment of this kind is real at all (the charge of narrowness is famous) and, if so, worth the price. But just to place this question is already to stand outside the context of its answer. For love can appeal to nothing beyond itself. As one stands at this juncture where novelty declines and where love fully enters into itself as formal choice and decision and *will*, one either dreams, or one does not. Dreams are not always idle. They are also a creative judgment about the real. Concerning both man's adventure into God and man's adventure into man: how much is there to know, what is there to love? Man as *contemplative* rather than as discursive freedom is the lapidary issue here.

The decision to press the evidence (yet always in terms of it) and to contemplate the loved one without presupposition or condition, simply forces the matter of fidelity. It is a time for heart. But neither the question nor the reality of fidelity may ever be separated from

contemplation and wonder, as if asceticism were a task for itself. For the fidelity of friendship is dialectically born out of that wonder which contemplation of the loved one is. And the converse is equally so: out of the beauty seen and loved arises the élan for faithful service to the future pursuit of beauty's promise. Perhaps the path could, but it need not here, be further mapped. Rocky hope. Rugged peace. Laughter. And silence.

Any decent manual of prayer – not to mention the memoirs of the great mystical lovers of God in Christ – details a similar story: the birth of love in wonder and delight, together with the grief that one has come so sinful, scattered and so unprepared to this moment one had waited all one's life for; then the journey into the desert, largely undramatic (this is important) – perhaps even unnoticed where the friend, and not the filing away of self, is concentrated on; and finally, on to the adventurous peace of daily-ness where everything is new, quietly superb, thoroughly unnaive, yet simple and strong as a child whose innocence is undefeated. It is the gospel childhood of the adult. A preview and inauguration of the Kingdom which makes all things new. Arrived at not without scars – but they are beautiful now.

By definition, friendship as *contemplative* love is not blind, but wholly intent on the truth that is there and that ought to be – alert to the detail of the other. And while such love is never critical or unaccepting, yet it is, silently, productive of noble shame and peremptorily imperative of the other's best self in freedom. The joke that love is blind in finding the beloved beautiful is faulted here. For contemplation is the art of the real. And the real *is* beautiful: it is what God has in mind, and that is always lovely. A friend is the one – perhaps the only one – who really begins to see what God sees. The *contemplative* judgment of a friend may stand with confidence against the world.

The language of this love and wonder is restrained, as are its gestures. Words may say all, or nearly so, of an acquaintance, but they point, and grope, then shatter in the presence of mystery. Awe grows large here as doubt vanishes. Awe and scepticism are intrinsically opposites, and wordless amazement is the deep contrary of uncertainty (a truth theology always needs to ponder). Take the man who replies about his friend to a mutual acquaintance: 'Yes, that's true. And that, yes, that's accurate enough too. But it's not really it. No, that's not it. Well, I don't know. I really don't know *what* to say'. It is the learned ignorance of love we overhear in this.

It is wonder: that contemplative wisdom that is not thought and cannot speak, the *docta ignorantia* of the Fathers of the Church and of the mystics. John of the Cross records it of his love affair with God: that greatest gift of loving God so much that we know we do not know him at all.

Yet also and conversely, the experience of friendship, of contemplative love, is *merciful* to language, and to gesture too: it renews, gives new mint to, the familiar and the misused, the carelessly given word and embrace. For it scours the lover, re-creates him. Its forgiveness gives innocence and a new beginning to words that were spoken without contemplation and to hands that touched without love.

This love of friendship, where authentically itself, is never introvert – an *égoïsme à deux* – but is always inclusive of the third. And this openness to others tests every friendship as certainly and absolutely as the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount judge the contemplative love of every christian mystic. For the more deeply both these loves seek their own undissipated being, the more fully will community occur. Again, the Trinity instructs us: it is the *totality* of the mutual self-surrender in love of Father and of Son which is the Person of the holy Spirit. And this is a truth that short-circuits any notion of friendship as a luxury. Its products are love and so must appear primary on any list of the necessities of a life that is human and christian.

Contemplation, to conclude, is chaste and reverent passion for the *real* – whether God, our fellow men, or the world. It is a deed that takes a lifetime and is not easily done. Where done well and with fidelity, across deserts and maybe some sandstorms, through to the end, it is productive of the literally wonderful: that love and joy which God is and for which man is made. The lesson is clear, if this is the case: friendship is grace. For – to repeat ourselves – it takes a man alive with *God's* fidelity to see really and to love wholly his fellow man in all his need, through to the end where beauty bides as wonder, asking to be born.