

LOVE AND EXPERIENCE

By MICHAEL NEVIN

THE GENERAL theme of this issue of *The Way* is 'Presence and Absence'. Presence connotes presence *to* something or someone: absence implies absence *from* something or someone. Today there is growing again a need for religious *experience*. No doubt it arises from the increasing secularization of our culture, which leaves us moderns in a world where there is no Other, no Beyond, no Self: only others, beyonds, selves. There is the measurable world of the senses and the manipulable world of the sciences; yet there is no garden, desired but guarded by angels, habitable but limited by neither space-laws nor time-barriers, watered by the river and shaded by the tree of life – unpolluted streams, undying trees. It is the need for religious experience of this kind that sends modern barbarian hordes to the borders of Afghanistan, throws up advertisements for week-end retreats on the sides of 'buses, entices the Huxleys to mescaline, and travellers in tube-trains to transcendental meditation. A peculiar characteristic of this modern religious experience – and it is found there always, though at different intensities – is that it is not an experience of someone or something. It does not connote or imply experience *of*. It is an absolute experience: experience for its own sake, and moreover, being human experience, it is measurable and manipulable, not gratuitous like love or grace.¹

Let me take a recent example of what I mean. Professor Sir Alister Hardy is writing in *The (London) Times*²:

In a previous article . . . I wrote of the power of God . . . but said little about the meaning of God . . . I have no wish to enter into metaphysical speculations . . . For me God is the power with whom

¹ The doctrine of the gratuitousness of grace depends upon the realization that God cannot be bought, neither by mere ritual, nor possessions, nor power, nor sex. This may sound a childish remark, but the doctrine rests on the infinity of God, who is not a God of process, nor experience, nor the achievement of a mechanical asceticism. These are all the kinds of God who are competing for even sophisticated and learned men today. To love God demands the unfashionable basis of a correct metaphysic, however implicit it might be. Most ordinary people have one.

² *The Times*, 18 August, 1973, p 14.

we can make contact in an extra-sensory way . . . At the very least it might be some subconscious Jungian shared reservoir of *spiritual know-how* which we call Divine, but I think it likely . . . that it is something much more wonderful.

However, even if it should be shown that this whole conception is a purely psychological one, or further if this mind factor should eventually be proved to be of physico-chemical origin – and I do not believe it will – it would not to my mind destroy the joy, or help of the *experience* [Hardy's italics] which we may still call divine.

Clearly Hardy believes, with what William James would call over-belief, that God does exist in his own right. But he adds, in a way that would have been impossible to Plato or Augustine or Aquinas or Newman, that even if God is only a mind factor of physico-chemical origin we should still derive help and joy from the experience. Not, notice, the experience of something or someone: just the experience itself, even if there is nothing that is experienced.

What can a human being make of such an attitude? Suppose I had thought that I loved a wife. How dear she had seemed to me. I loved the way she walked, that trace of a west country accent, the strand of brown hair that kept escaping her control, her cooking, her puns, 'and all of London littered with remembered kisses'. And then I met a man who proved incontrovertibly to me that she did not exist, and that I was like one of those sad unfortunate patients in a mental hospital who had dreamed up a lover from damaged brain tissue and forgotten buried infantile traumas. Would I be reassured or assuaged by being told that her existence or non-existence did not matter, for that is only a metaphysical speculation? After all, did I not still retain the experience of her existence?

I am reminded of a frightening science-fiction story where civilisation is reduced to people lying in electronic boxes, kept at perfect temperature, fed by the correct amounts of vitamins, proteins and carbohydrates, and touched in their every sense by probes which allowed them to experience the adventurous and wonderful lives of other people, *just as if* they were experiencing the adventures themselves. It was a sort of super-television, whereby one not only entered imaginatively into the lives of others through sight and hearing, but also entered them through all the senses and through what William James called the 'voluminousness' of the body – kin-aesthetic sensation.

We are of course beginning to live this second-hand sort of life already, through the cinema and the television, through novels and

pictures. We are beginning to substitute the experience in itself for the experience *of*.

One of the essential components of love is that the lover does not seek to get something out of the relationship. Rather he tries to put something into it, desiring to give rather than to receive. And oddly enough, this is a necessary condition for *experiencing* love. What is important is the other who is loved, rather than the self that is loving. As Saint Paul says in his one-sentence gospel: It is more blessed to give than to receive.³ Giving, however, presupposes not only a donor but also a legatee.

A second essential or principle of love is involved here. It is what we might term the principle of indirection. One of the most interesting reflections that C. S. Lewis has brought to our attention from his reading of Alexander⁴ is that of the indirection of all human qualities, precisely as human. Man shares many qualities with the animals; but he also has specifically human activities, such as play, culture, prayer, love and so on. It is these human activities or qualities that we find to be indirect. All these activities are chosen for their own sake, for their own intrinsic value, and not as a means towards something else. (Thus the importance of Hardy's divine-factor is not that it is a joy or a help to man, but that it *just is*.) But human activities are not aimed at directly; at least what is valuable about them is not achieved when that value is sought directly. Take the example of play.⁵ The value of play might be generally described as recreation. The recreation we enjoy by playing is an unconscious by-product of playing for the sake of playing: that is, it happens when the mind is not concentrated on the self, but is directed outwards and absorbed in the game. Thus, if we play tennis with our minds always intent on the pleasure value *we get out of* each stroke, thus striving to relax, we do not relax; we play bad strokes, we stop playing. The relaxation which arises out of the achievement of the strokes occurs precisely because we are focussing on the game alone and not upon self. No doubt, before the game, we might say to ourselves that we need the exercise or the diversion; and this motive might continue up to the game quite consciously, and still retain its virtual and unconscious power while the game is on. But during the game, the mind must be conscious

³ In Acts 20, 35.

⁴ See Lewis's *Surprised by Joy* (London, 1955), and S. Alexander, *Space, Time and Deity* (London, 1920).

⁵ See Roger Caillois, *Les Jeux et les Hommes* (Paris, 1958).

of the game as a game; otherwise the first motive will be frustrated.

This characteristic of play lies behind the technique of gamesmanship described by Stephen Potter. The idea is to make one's opponent lose his concentration on the game, and become aware of other motives outside the sphere of play, which is necessarily and strictly separated from the rest of reality,⁶ thus distracting the player's attention. If we casually tell an opponent that his backhand is reminiscent of Rod Laver, especially in the way the wrist turns over and down at the beginning of the drive, and that it deserves a wider audience and a more general appreciation, it is possible that he will concentrate his attention upon himself rather than upon his tennis, and through such *self-attention* he will fail to achieve even his usual limited form. And where an opponent has placed a bet on the result, an occasional reference to what he is going to win or lose might be enough to — we can note the phrase — put him off his game. Indeed, gambling might be the test case here. In gambling a man wants to win because the idea of winning is that which initiates the game and gives it direction, but the play-quality does not consist in winning. If this were so, the losers might be said never to have played at all. What matters is that there should be a possibility of winning *and* a possibility of losing. If winning were the only reason for playing, the gambler would place his bet on the table, close his eyes, and think of something else until the result came. Thus book-makers, whom years of experience have taught that they will not in the long run lose, conduct a *business*; and most of them, I suspect, do not consider themselves at play at all. What a true gambler does in fact do, and here I am thinking of roulette, is to watch the rolling ball eagerly until it stops rolling, hesitates, and falls back into the slot. It is the delicious uncertainty which is the game. The fact of having won or lost after the game is over is beside the point. Indeed, if the concentration upon winning has been too great, the gambler derives no joy from the game: he has lost his freedom in becoming enslaved to the result. As in love, so in play and all other specifically human activities, freedom is a necessary characteristic.

Prayer is another example of the same phenomenon of indirection. Prayer is valuable for its own sake, or it is not valuable at all. It is true that we sometimes intercede for ourselves or for others; and this may be a motive for beginning to pray, just as recreation is a motive for beginning to play. But a man does not set himself

⁶ Caillois, *op. cit.*, *passim*.

praying by concentrating on desired sunshine by the sea or a friend's ill-health. This motive may initiate the prayer, and keep obtruding upon the prayer; but a man will not be praying until he forgets everything else and concentrates upon God. Anyone or anything other than God is called a distraction from prayer. Too concentrated an attention or desire upon what is being asked for would run counter to the quality of indifference,⁷ and would destroy prayer as the christian understands it: 'Not my will but thine be done'. Thus all prayer is mystical since all prayer is an experience of God. But because it is thus an interpersonal experience it is therefore an absorption of self, a form of ecstasy.

I do not want to claim too much here. Ecstasy does not mean a mystical phenomenon in the extraordinary sense. Ecstasy colours quite ordinary achievements. Thus culture is also ecstatic, because it too is human and shares the quality of indirection. Culture is not gained when it is aimed at. The tourist who dashes from Stratford to Canterbury, who carries books of sonnets with ostentation, who takes care to know when Beethoven wrote his fifth symphony lest he should be asked or allowed to air his knowledge, has not begun to be cultured. The man who drops names for others to pick up has achieved nothing, until he drops the fact that he knew Mr Goldstein as joyfully as he drops the fact that he knew Mr Einstein. It is the young man who comes across the comparison of his own beloved to a day in summer, and thus becomes only too aware of the rough winds of time that shake the darling buds, not particularly or at all aware that this is the great poet and that *he* himself, who may be said to be cultured, is reading a sonnet. It is not, as E. M. Forster points out, the man who recognizes the transitional drum passage who really appreciates the symphony; it is the woman who fearfully hears the goblins crawling over the face of the earth.⁸ Of course, a knowledge of the mechanics of a poem or a piece of music may find a place in cultural activity: but never when information evacuates sensitivity and is thus understood as if it were in itself culture. A man might be led to read Shakespeare or listen to Beethoven because he wants to become cultured; but unless he becomes absorbed at some stage in the poetry or music for itself, culture will

⁷ Ignatius's *indiferencia*. The biblical scene which sets the christian standard is of course Gethsemani.

⁸ See my article in *The Way*, Vol 12 (October, 1972), pp. 274-82, for this doctrine applied to the Sacrament of Penance.

never indirectly come about. As in play, as in prayer, he must achieve a quality of contemplation.

Thus the key to all this valuable human activity is that a person must become a self, a subject, relational, absorbed, ecstatic, centred elsewhere. And love is like this.

If love is a gift of self it must tend towards a totality of giving; and thus it is also a gift of attention. A young man who arranges to meet the woman he loves at her house to take her to a party, might drive up in his new car dressed like a god for evening and glowing with well-being. He might, while he is waiting – for of course he has to wait, start to reflect upon love and come to the decided conclusion that it is a wonderful thing. But while he is concentrating upon love, he cannot be said to be loving *her*. Then she steps out splendid in the light about her head. Heads along Edwardes Square begin to turn. One man thinks what a harmony of colour her honey hair makes with the magenta dress and the globes of pearls. He does not love *her*. Another's attention is caught by a tilt of the head in careless joy. He does not love *her*. Her own escort might also be absorbed in these attractive varieties, not as a *corps objet* but rather as a *corps sujet*. In other words, his perception is of something which expresses *her*, not a mere experience of *objects* perceptible to the senses. Hair, dress, movement become for him her self-expression and his self is absorbed in her self. A moment of ecstasy. It is this that responds to Yeat's question when he warns the girl:

Never shall a young man, thrown into despair
By the great honey-coloured ramparts at your ear,
Love you for yourself alone and not your yellow hair.

Love is not love until it is not sought directly, but because it is valuable for its own sake it is to be revered,⁹ not sought as a prize which will enrich the possessor. Self-gift means inversely to *be* possessed; and it is only in being possessed as gift that the riches of love are won. To treat another as an object can mean that to love a girl for her hair might be as inhuman as to love her for her money, because both enrich the possessor. That lust is evil is not a false claim from Mrs Grundy. It is evil because it is not human, not because it is not respectable. Pornography is not to be condemned

⁹ The great figure of reverence is the Baptist. He is described as that purification (the desert) which prepares for the coming of the Word of God *wherever he may be found*, so that when he does come in the guise of a sinner humbly at the Jordan, John recognizes him.

because it is too joyful, but because it is not romantic enough. Christianity is the stronghold of romantic love. But the accoutrements of romantic love are part of love if they lead to a stage where they are no longer valuable. A series of old songs about still loving the gold hair when it is sprinkled with grey is only a popular attempt to state the position I am trying to describe. In an age when the sacred intimacy of love is destroyed on the public stage, it is understandable that these songs are found to be old. I am not trying to say that there is a self that is loved which is separable from the expression of that self, any more than I would claim that the soul can be separated from the body. What I am saying is that where a self is loved, a body, a dress, a voice can always be an expression of the self. It is something of this that can be discerned in the warm paint of Rembrandt, when he lovingly and realistically traces out the wrinkles on his beloved's face, and rejoices in the vulgar inflation of her flesh.¹⁰ There is nothing particularly sentimental about love.

In summary, then, love is relational and ecstatic: a state of mind where the whole attention is turned away from the awareness of oneself as an object of attention, where the whole desire is turned away from oneself as the legatee of satisfaction, and where through the sacrifice of such intellection and desiring, the radical self-possession of consciousness is dedicated in a forgetfulness that is the complete recollection of human reality.¹¹

We are now in a position to respond to one of the difficulties of ordinary christian living. We are told as christians that we must love our neighbour and yet we find that we only love our friends. Once we love a neighbour, the neighbour stops being a neighbour and starts to be a friend. Christianity seems always to be telling us to do the logically and psychologically impossible. Love everyone, especially those you do not love. And as the world grows smaller, everyone does indeed become a neighbour, entering our very living rooms through 'the box' and sharing our meals, our rows, our endearments, the most intimate stuff and tissue of our lives. The TV dinner tastes flat as we watch the floods of Pakistan or the deserts of North West Africa. We love our wives and children less, as the bitterness of twisted hearts is analysed in hate-filled dramas,

¹⁰ The painting I have particularly in mind is that of Saskia van Ulenborch in the National Gallery, London. But see also the portraits of an 83 year old woman, the self-portrait at 63, and the painting of Hendrickje Stoffels.

¹¹ I am here presupposing the ascetical doctrine of St John of the Cross.

or the most homely and heroic of our affections is explained away in cynical interpretations of human behaviour. We share the culture of the whole world; and the ephemeral unimportance of our superficial, narrow, limited beliefs is borne hard in upon us.

It is here that one can go very wrong if one is deeply influenced by the trend towards experience in itself and away from the experience *of*. It is here that one must take account of the sheer tough rigidity of the real objects and subjects in the world which stand over against ourselves. If love is mutual, and takes place between realities, then account must be taken of those realities and the fulness and particularity of those realities. We cannot have an intelligible spirituality which is merely a rule relating only to ourselves: Love your neighbour. The neighbour may not be willing to be loved, at least in the way and to the extent that we wish to love them. Over against our Lord's command to love all, we must place the temple whips and the hissing venom of his 'brood of vipers' and 'whited sepulchres'. Medicine, however healing, can poison one man while it cures another. It all depends on the real, factual, concrete particularity of the one to whom it is applied. It is a matter of condition and need, extent and intensity. Love is one of the most difficult achievements of mankind. It demands that account be taken of the complexity, the enormous complexity, of other people. It demands a sensitivity of the most acute kind. And the same can be seen in loving things as well as in loving people. Some people learn to make a garden grow. Others destroy it. Pollution contains many indications of inhumanity; but above all it indicates our tragic loss of *reverence* for things. To all these considerations we must add that love is never simply between two people, but that it takes place in a total environment. Thus if I am to love Durbar Singh who is being starved by Lord Tunbelly, then how am I to love him without hating Tunbelly. It is too facile and unreal to say that I must hate the sin and love the sinner. Christ's real and massive anger is not accounted for by such cool distinctions.

I suspect more and more that the rule of total love is eschatological: that it describes the perfection of the achieved kingdom of God. What we can do as christians who are trying to realize that kingdom is to grow less and less self-centred, that others may grow more and more focussed in our sight, and thus, like the Baptist, learn the reverence for things and people that led him and will lead us to recognize Christ when he comes under whatever guise; dusty and ordinary, and, above all, *there*.