

TRADITIONS OF SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE

Dom John Chapman O.S.B. (1865–1933)

IN AN EARLIER ARTICLE in this series, ‘Spiritual Direction in the Benedictine Tradition’,¹ Dom Jean Leclercq singled out only three outstanding Benedictine directors from this century, one of them the Englishman Dom John Chapman, Abbot of Downside 1929–33, and author of the influential *Spiritual letters* (London, 1935; hereafter *SL*).² Chapman was primarily a scholar of the New Testament and Church history, and his letters of direction were only posthumously collected and published. Moreover, he was a reluctant director; as Leclercq underlines, formal spiritual guidance is not a traditionally Benedictine trait, and Chapman’s stated aim was to intervene only to the extent of helping another to ‘walk unaided’. In practice, however, he was a man with certain distinctive, if controversial, messages about ‘contemplative’ prayer, and his letters promulgate them with almost missionary force. In what follows I shall enumerate these distinctive theories, and comment on them both appreciatively and critically.

Running through Chapman’s correspondence are two eminently simple but practical maxims, which one could say form the basis of everything else that he teaches. One is: ‘*Pray as you can, and do not try to pray as you can’t*’ (*SL*, 109). An adjunct of this first maxim is not even to ‘wish for any other prayer than what God gives’; nor should one struggle to read any books about prayer that do not immediately appeal or speak to one’s current state (*SL*, 57). The second maxim is: ‘*The more you pray, the better it goes*’, the converse of which (‘the less you pray, the worse it goes’) underlines that if prayer stops for any reason, it will be the surest sign that something is amiss. In the case of the ‘contemplative’ prayer that Chapman describes with such uncanny perceptiveness, ‘a very little distraction by worldly things, and quite tiny unfaithfulnesses make it stop suddenly, and it may mean some humiliation and some time before getting it back again’ (*SL*, 135; cf 181).

If these basic maxims of Chapman’s are unexceptional (albeit always worthy of repetition), his further views on ‘contemplation’ involve a decidedly controversial—some would say idiosyncratic—reading of John of the Cross, whose views Chapman takes to be normative. The controversy here revolves around the extent to which ‘contemplation’ (in John of the Cross’s sense of a divine infusion of prayer into a passive recipient) may be the preserve of relative ‘beginners’; and if so, what are the signs that the pray-er may appropriately abandon discursive scriptural

meditation and adopt a simpler and more passive prayer, devoid of mental effort.

Chapman's line on these issues was the following. First, looking afresh at the three crucial passages in John of the Cross where the signs of the onset of 'contemplation' are charted,³ Chapman points out, quite rightly, that John acknowledges that this shift can occur to some 'recollected' beginners (see *Dark night* I, viii, 4). However, Chapman then significantly reinterprets and eases the apparently forbidding requirements for the entry into contemplation. For whereas John of the Cross insists, for instance, on a failure of any sense of pleasure (whether over divine or created things), and a continual 'painful care and solicitude about God' (*Dark night* I, ix), Chapman is inclined to require only two of John's other signs: an inability to meditate, and a persistent sense of dryness (*SL*, 287-8). Already, then, Chapman has 'democratized' contemplation, by subtly redefining the 'essential marks'. He does so, as emerges from the *Letters*, on the basis of years of intensely curious observation of enclosed religious and other lay correspondents (an investigation he approached dispassionately, 'like chemistry'). On this basis Chapman is convinced that 'most Benedictines', 'virtually all contemplative orders', and a goodly number of 'pious' lay people are, whether wittingly or not, already in what John of the Cross calls the 'night of sense'.

What this means is that such people have embarked on the first stages of 'contemplative' prayer, characterized by an arid, emotionally unsatisfying, desire for God. They can no longer 'meditate' (as, for instance, in Ignatius's methods of imaginative or reflective use of scripture); this is no longer possible for them *qua* prayer. This is not to say that they cannot still work out a sermon or essay, say, on the basis of scripture, which Chapman insists that they should continue to do; scriptural reading is never to be abandoned. But discursive and imaginative meditation as a *method of prayer* will not suit at all. Anyway, writes Chapman, 'There was little of all this before the 16th century, and none before the 13th' (*SL*, 104). He is right, of course, but no wonder he aroused some feelings of suspicion in Jesuit circles.

The main point at issue here, and the point where Chapman's theory was totally at odds with the Jesuit Poulain's widely-acclaimed *Graces of interior prayer* (Eng. tr. London, 1910), is over the indications of this caesura of John of the Cross's between 'meditation' and 'contemplation'—the 'ligature', in Poulain's parlance. Chapman derides Poulain's suggestion that there needs to be some linking stage, and that increasingly simplified *affective* states lead on—eventually, but rarely—into the 'night of sense' and miraculously high 'mystical' states.⁴ On the contrary, says Chapman, it is a simple matter: 'affective' (meditative) prayer stops, because something else—the 'night of sense' is already starting:

Either the imagination works or it doesn't. If it does, you can meditate; if it won't, you can't. The stoppage IS the Night of the Senses, and the Night of the Senses is *nothing more* than this stoppage, and *nothing else* (SL, 281).

Moreover, insists Chapman, this is a relatively commonplace occurrence. Indeed all of the *Letters* are addressed to people who similarly 'cannot meditate', and yet are equally clearly not in particularly 'high' or 'miraculous' states.

Chapman's controversial views on the onset of 'contemplation' are aligned with a concomitant attitude to that 'hateful, modern and ambiguous' word 'mysticism' (see SL, 297-321, Appendix II: 'What is Mysticism'). Acknowledging that it is a modern word (in contradistinction from 'mystical theology'), Chapman nonetheless chooses to use it in a particular, and again 'democratizing', sense, based on his interpretation of Thomas Aquinas's epistemology. Thus Chapman holds that we all have some dim memory of the 'angelic' cognition Adam possessed before the fall, which was direct intellectual knowledge of God, without reference to material beings through the use of sense and imagination. In 'mysticism' these direct powers of perception are—albeit dimly—reactivated. When this happens (and Chapman claims it can in principle happen to anyone) it is not *necessarily* a 'supernatural' act, that is, a special grace or initiative from God. Rather, it can just be what Chapman calls 'praeternatural mysticism', the (admittedly unusual) re-arousal of that original Adamic cognition. Chapman places the 'nature mysticism' of such as Tennyson and Wordsworth in this category.

However, in the 'contemplation' of the 'night of sense' just discussed, God can and does use the reactivation of this faculty for God's own purposes:

Consequently, though neither the mystical act nor the mystical faculty are 'supernatural', God can make them the vehicle of supernatural communication . . . a wire along which God can speak to the soul (SL, 309).

It may be clear by now that what I have called Chapman's 'democratizing' theories on 'contemplation' and 'mysticism' involved no mere semantic quibbles. They were to find some echoes, certainly, in Abbot Butler's rather differently nuanced *Western mysticism*, which came out in 1922;⁵ but they still flew in the face of the prevalent understanding of John of the Cross at the time, which preserved even the first of his 'dark nights' for a minority élite.⁶ To the recipients of Chapman's letters, however, his analysis must have brought immense relief and encouragement; for many of them had, according to him, already spent long and

painful years in the 'night of sense', inappropriately berating themselves for their lack of fervour and inattentiveness to meditation. For them, meditation was a 'physical impossibility'; but Chapman could reassure them that their prayer had probably already turned into something else, so 'delicate' and 'obscure', however (to use John of the Cross's language), as even to elude their notice.

It is at this point that Chapman bequeaths his greatest legacy; for unlike John of the Cross, whose practical advice here is consummately vague (if full of pregnant hints), Chapman actually tells his correspondents *precisely what to do*, what to expect, and how not to become disillusioned, in the prayer of the 'night of sense'. In the West, perhaps only the author of the fourteenth-century *Cloud of unknowing* (whose practical hints Chapman also commends) approaches Chapman's specificity and acute psychological insights in this area. Again, however, we have to admit, as Chapman appears not to,⁷ that his advice is both far more precise than that of John of the Cross, and at points close to contradicting him. Thus, while Chapman *spells out*—well beyond what John does—how one can be praying in the most intense way whilst simultaneously appearing to be 'doing nothing and wasting [one's] time' (*Dark night*, I, x, 4), he also instructs the pray-er in a technique for dealing with *distractions*, of which John tells nothing, at least nothing explicit. Indeed, John gives the impression that the soul should fall naturally into a state of complete passivity, peace and inactivity, *devoid* of all anxiety and distraction (*ibid.*; and *Ascent of Mt Carmel*, II, xv; *Living flame of love* III, 34, 35, 38). No wonder then that Chapman's correspondents (who could not meditate) doubted that they could 'contemplate' either. Such ease of transition would indeed be rare.

Chapman's advice, in contrast, runs thus. First establish that your inability to meditate is not just 'laziness' or 'lukewarmness' (*SL*, 289, following *Dark night* I, ix, 1). A good test here, says Chapman, is to try and say the 'Our Father' slowly, as a prayer, and really think out what each phrase means. If this is impossible (at any rate without feeling that one has stopped *praying* in order to think), then one should stop trying to meditate: the 'night of sense' has begun.

However it is quite impossible, Chapman acknowledges (as John of the Cross does not), to wish oneself without further ado into a state of complete passivity to God's 'delicate' act of contemplation. The active, analytical part of the mind and the ever-bullient imagination bring their different sorts of distractions, and these Chapman is careful to distinguish (*SL*, 290). In the first case there are the distractions which 'take one right away', that is, stop the prayer by causing one actively to start thinking about them, and so detach the faculty which was communing with God from its undertaking. In the second case, however, there is another, and different, sort of distraction: the 'harmless meanderings of the *imagination*

alone, while the intellect [remains] . . . idle and empty, and the will is fixed on God'.

How, then, to ignore the meaningless meanderings of the imagination, yet also avert the more serious and substantive distractions? Here Chapman gives his invaluable advice for 'beginners' (and he adds, 'Let us be thankful if we are like this for no more than twenty years' (*SL*, 289)! The idea is to use repetitive but mechanical 'acts' (a phrase from a psalm, or just a general expression of wanting God), not *as* the prayer, but as a sort of accompanying 'drone' to keep the imagination occupied. Elsewhere, Chapman describes this as like throwing a bone to a dog—'a sop to Cerberus' (*SL*, 60). Not only is the imagination thus mechanically stilled, but the 'drone' also helps prevent the mind from operating discursively; thus the (empty) intellect is left facing a 'blank', with the will gently holding it there. This 'blank', or 'nothing in particular' is, as Chapman likes to put it to startle, 'God, of course; for we *know* really that "nothing" [in this case] means "the ALL"' (*SL*, 94). The imagination naturally still tends to run around chaotically; but with a bit of practice with the (unfeeling) 'acts', can be largely ignored. Anyway, 'Provided these imaginations are not *wilful* they don't matter in the least' (*SL*, 58).

The prayer then consists in cleaving to God in what does indeed seem a mindless and 'idiotic' state; as when one is trying to fall asleep, and attempting to avoid thinking of anything in particular, so too then the imagination throws up a similar jumble of random images.

Now this sort of advice about distractions in 'contemplation' is of course not unfamiliar to readers of *The Cloud of unknowing* (chs. 32, 36–40), or to those cognizant of the traditions and techniques of the Eastern Jesus prayer (to which Chapman does not allude). What Chapman does do, however, is to align his advice very precisely to John of the Cross's epistemology, which, unlike the *Cloud's*⁸ locates the faculty of prayer and communion with God in the non-discursive 'higher' intellect, supported by the will. The body, the senses, the imagination and all 'feelings' associated with them, are seen as radically disjunct, and wholly insignificant to the workings of this prayer (a point to which we shall return later). 'Aridity', that is, *dry* emotionally unsatisfying conditions, are likely to be the norm (Chapman jokes about 'God's "Infra-red" rays', *SL*, 72); and the more distracted and unsatisfied, even 'anxious', one feels about one's prayer, the better, for thence comes humility. The 'night of sense' is, after all, according to John of the Cross, the *purgation* of sense, of the reliance on positive feeling states in prayer.

What Chapman has done, then, is to gloss and amplify John of the Cross's themes of 'darkness', 'dryness' and 'strangeness' (*Dark night* I, ix–x) with the explicit admission that the 'lower' part of the self will still be disconcertingly chaotic and active in this prayer, producing distinct feelings of 'worry', 'anxiety' and 'bewilderment' (see *SL*, 42); on none

of this does John himself expatiate. At the same time, however, and at some indefinable 'higher' level, there will be what Chapman calls the 'blank' (or, as John himself phrases it, not 'being able to think of any particular thing': *Dark night* I, ix, 6). This, according to Chapman, will in time, or just sporadically, give way to a state more close to that described by John of the Cross: a 'peaceful and loving attentiveness toward God . . . *without anxiety*' (*Dark night* I, x, 4, my emphasis). Thus will emerge, says Chapman, at least for some people, a consciousness 'of being in the presence of Something undefinable, yet above all things desirable, without any the more arriving at being able to think about it or speak about it . . . ' (*SL*, 291). There will be other observable effects, too, though ones probably perceived more outside the time of prayer or indeed by others: a unifying sense of all things being directed to the will of God, a cessation of 'multiple resolutions' (so that resolutions now 'make themselves'), and, above all, the fruits of the Christian virtues. This last point is Chapman's acid test: 'I have *always* said that I cannot admit *any other* criterion of prayer than its effects'.

But is this prayer demonstrably 'Christian'? The question is not lost on Chapman, who admits that in earlier years he himself thought John of the Cross more 'Buddhist' than 'Christian'. Moreover, to our own eclectic generation, the resemblances of Chapman's practical advice to (say) the techniques of Transcendental Meditation will be obvious. Chapman's background theory of 'praeternatural' mysticism made him, of course, relaxed about such inter-religious comparisons (see, e.g. *SL* 65-6, 253). Yet he was also convinced, rightly or wrongly, that the prayer he described made people into 'good Catholics', even doctrinally (see *SL*, 66, 123-4), and that far from leading one away from 'Christ's humanity', as it might seem to do, this prayer was actually an imitation of Jesus's own evident need for solitude and extended time in prayer (see *SL*, 78, 314-5). As for the duty of Christian petitionary prayer, Chapman says little, and most surprisingly for him, offers no precise theory of its relation to the 'contemplation' he is describing. But he admits that 'more and more' he has come to the conclusion that 'contemplation' makes one bolder in one's petitions, and that one should ask God for 'everything' necessary for oneself and others; and 'make up your mind that you will get it (not because you deserve it, but because God is good)' (*SL*, 99).

I have dealt at length with Chapman's theory and description of 'beginners' contemplation in the prayer of the purgation of sense, for the greater part of his correspondence is concerned with it. There are a number of letters, however (specifically nos. XXVI-XXVII and LVII) which deal with the symptoms and effects of the much more rare 'night of spirit', in which, according to John of the Cross, the higher realm of spirit is purged with disorienting and sometimes terrible effects (see *Dark night*, Bk II). The 'darkness' now designates not merely noetic blankness

(as in the Eastern Dionysian tradition inherited here), but a new, personal sense of 'affliction and torment' (*Dark night* II, v, 2).⁹

Most of Chapman's remarks here are simple reassurance. 'What you describe seems to be not *abnormal* but *unusual*' (SL, 85), or, 'It is all right. . . . Don't worry' (SL, 140). But also he underlines: 'No one goes in for contemplative prayer without violent trials'—whether externally or internally presented (SL, 84). Working from John of the Cross's own analysis in Book II of the *Dark night* (esp. chs. v-viii), Chapman again both gives practical amplification of it, and also further emphasizes the message of a fundamental division in the self. Thus, two characteristic signs of the 'night of spirit'—the feelings of 'being off the main road, or isolated' (SL, 86) and of 'personal impurity' and 'nothingness' (*ibid.*) are 'fully to be expected here (see *Dark night*, II, vii, for example). But, according to Chapman's reading of John, the 'real ME' is 'above all feelings of discomfort, or despondency or doubt'. Consequently, if you have such feelings, causing depression or anxiety, disown them . . .' (SL, 87). Other symptoms will be a sense of stupidity or failure of concentration (see *Dark night*, II, viii, 1), a sense of affliction by God (see *ibid.* II, vii, 7), and even despair and the fear of collapse (see *ibid.* II, vi, 5). Chapman treats of all these in letter LVII, and also of what he sees as a more modern symptom—'temptations against the Faith' (SL, 142). Such humiliations are, however, all the intentional acts of the divine sculptor (one of Chapman's favoured images) 'carving us into the likeness of His son' (SL, 143).

We see here that Chapman's reflections on the 'night of spirit' can at times take a moving christological turn, and it is significant that it is only and precisely at these points that he softens his otherwise staunch demand to 'disown' feelings of any kind. For here he concedes that, though we ought to 'aim at' a contempt for suffering, such suffering is only real suffering if we hate it and wish it would go away (SL, 157). In this, Christ's example in the Garden of Gethsemane shows that such a hatred of suffering is not incompatible even with divine perfection: 'He prayed that the chalice might be taken away,—to show that the feeling of hating suffering, and feeling it unbearable, is a *part of perfection* for us, as it is a part of our weakness of nature' (*ibid.*). The appropriate and 'perfect' response to all such suffering, however, Chapman underlines, is a sort of 'abandonment to God'. For 'Everything that happens to us, inside and outside, is God's touch' (SL, 163). With this subject of 'abandonment' we turn to the last of Chapman's central themes.

In 1920 (see letter XVII) Chapman first wrote of having started to read the eighteenth-century Jesuit de Caussade's *L'Abandon à la Providence divine*. He describes it then as 'extraordinarily good' (SL, 62), and thereafter de Caussade's doctrine of *abandon* becomes the *Leitmotif* of Chapman's letters, a sort of summation of everything else he is trying to

say. To agree thus with a Jesuit gave Chapman special satisfaction: he himself had not survived the Jesuit novitiate (perhaps unsurprisingly in the light of his lack of attraction to Ignatian methods of meditation, and his profound distrust of 'affectivity'). He had also at times, to his chagrin, been taken by Jesuit acquaintances to be 'run[ning] down the Exercises of St. Ignatius';¹⁰ but in fact he underscores that de Caussade's doctrine of 'abandonment to divine providence' can be seen to be derived wholly from Ignatius's 'simple and sublime teaching . . . : *Sume et suscipe, Domine, universam meam libertatem* . . .', the prayer in the *Exercises* which delivers the whole self into God's possession.¹¹

But what did de Caussade mean by 'abandon' or 'the sacrament of the present moment' (his other celebrated phrase)? According to Chapman, the doctrine is not as simple as it seems. It is not, for instance, merely passive, apathetic (or 'quietistic') acceptance of everything that happens to one. Instead, it requires a positive and participative intention to will God's will for one at this moment, and to accept (just for *this* moment) that whatever is befalling one is indeed God's will. Thus:

We can be perfect here and now by being exactly as God wishes us to be here and now: perfection is not an aim to be realized in a dim and doubtful future, but it is for this minute . . . Here, I venture to think, is Père de Caussade's novel contribution to ascetical literature.¹²

This subtle but profound doctrine seems to inspire Chapman's own more colourful images for the inexhaustible and pervasive presence of God's love in all that we do. Thus we are as 'fish in water'; we are carried 'in God's arms', but 'so close to His Heart that [we] cannot see His Face'; in all things 'His hand [is] upon us'; so that finally 'It is one long act of love—not of my love to God, but of His to me. It is always going on—but in prayer you put yourself into it by an act of faith' (*SL*, 46).

I have dealt earlier with the contentious nature of Chapman's 'democratization' of contemplation and his reading of John of the Cross's signs of the 'ligature'. My own view is that Chapman gives what is certainly one *plausible* account of John of the Cross's views on the transition into contemplation (especially as read from *The dark night*), and that, by amplifying on the matter of how continuous distractions are to be expected in 'beginners' contemplation, Chapman affords to many relieved correspondents the opportunity to give up fruitless and frustrating meditation. The more important issue here, then, is the good pastoral consequence of Chapman's advice, rather than the hermeneutical quibble over John of the Cross's precise meaning. However, it must be admitted that if we turn to such passages as *Ascent of Mt Carmel* II, xv, 1–2, we find advice that more readily supports Poulain's thesis of a sort of transition stage

between meditation and contemplation, such that when contemplation proper begins it is 'without [the soul] in any way exercising its faculties . . . with respect to particular acts' (*ibid.*, 2, my emphasis; and see *Living flame of love* III, 32-4).¹³ Perhaps we must simply concede a level of ambiguity in John of the Cross on this point. But does it matter? Surely not as much as Chapman's more fundamental maxim: 'Pray as you can and [not] . . . as you can't'. Moreover, it may be worth noting, from a feminist perspective, that the somewhat obsessive interest in qualifications for 'contemplation' (shown by John of the Cross and Chapman alike) is something almost exclusively found in male writers, and then only from roughly the thirteenth century on.¹⁴ A more continuous and integrative sense of progress is natural to women saints such as Teresa of Ávila, for whom, arguably, the acceptance of a more *passive* mode, in life generally, as in prayer, was already an expectation of the prevailing culture.

A more interesting point of debate and criticism, then, is to be found in Chapman's understanding of a radical bi-furcation in the self, and his concomitant disavowal of any significance to 'feelings' or bodily effects in prayer. We have already touched on this briefly, but Chapman's views, again based on a *selective* use of texts from John of the Cross, need some further explication.

Appealing to John of the Cross's sharp distinction between 'sense' and 'spirit', and then, also with John, identifying the ('higher') intellect and supporting will as the receptors of contemplation, Chapman dismisses all 'images' and 'emotions' as 'peripheral' and 'not me' (*SL*, 76). As for bodily effects—visions, levitations, or the like—these are equally irrelevant; indeed, in a most revealing article on 'Mysticism' that Chapman was persuaded to write for Hastings' *Encyclopedia of religion and ethics*,¹⁵ Teresa of Ávila is lengthily berated for confusing progress in prayer with changes in physical or psychological accompaniments, and so fares dismally in comparison with John of the Cross. In the same article, the twelfth-century visionary Hildegard of Bingen is damned with faint praise as 'attribut[ing] to a divine source much curious information'; and the fourteenth-century Julian of Norwich merits only a passing mention amongst other (quickly dismissed) women mystics: for 'Delusions are . . . exceedingly common in such cases'. A connected package of assumptions thus begins to emerge: the dismissal of bodily effects of any sort, along with 'sentiment', 'emotions' and 'feelings' (all of which we note are undifferentiatedly identified), and the connection of all these with a denigrated 'female mysticism'. The 'real "me"', in contrast, is 'not feeling and sentiment and worry and suffering' (*SL*, 85), but exists at the 'highest point of the soul' (*ibid.*), called variously the 'higher intellect', the 'ground' of the soul (as in Blossius) or its 'apex' (Francis de Sales) (*SL*, 260). It is on this understanding, of course, that Chapman can urge someone undergoing the 'night of spirit' to accept and '*despise*' even

feelings of incipient madness as if they were happening to 'someone else' (SL, 84).

There are a number of points which need addressing here. At the practical level, first, there is the danger that Chapman's superbly effective method for dealing with 'harmless' distractions (and the method is based precisely on this dualistic notion of the self, as we saw), may become so mechanically established that material from the 'lower' part of the self, which on occasions may *need* to be attended to, is either ignored or repressed. Part of the trouble here is that Chapman has no cognizance of the psychoanalytic categories that we now tend to wield freely, and in which this objection has to be couched. In these terms, however, one could call the contemplation of the 'night of sense' a state of willed 'disassociation', in which the 'unconscious' is released almost as in a dream. Such unconscious material will—at least in a Jungian understanding—be deeply significant for the purposes of the 'integration' of the self, whether or not it is reflected upon during the time of prayer. But if, in that prayer, one is simultaneously courting the release of such unconscious material, and yet also refusing or even repressing it, there may be dangerous psychological consequences. Indeed one cannot help wondering whether the 'anxiety' of which Chapman constantly speaks is not a symptom of this. Yet to correspondents suffering anxiety-states, the message is simply repeated: 'Put up with them—they are not really "you"' (see SL, 89).

This is indeed a spirituality of lonely 'iron heroism'. But is it fully true to John of the Cross's intentions? This is our next question, and again, not a simple one to answer. There is certainly no doubt that John of the Cross makes dramatically disjunctive remarks about 'bodily sense' on the one hand and 'spiritual things' on the other: this forms the very basis of his theory of the two 'nights'. Thus, in a section of *The ascent of Mt Carmel* to which Chapman regularly alludes, John can utter such remarks as '... the bodily sense is as ignorant of spiritual things as is a beast of rational things, and even more so' (*Ascent of Mt Carmel* II, xi, 2). All 'corporeal visions' and 'feeling in respect to ... the senses' are thus to be 'rejected' (*ibid.* II, xi, 5-6), for they could equally well be of the devil as of God. Likewise, the workings of the 'interior bodily senses' (imagination and 'fancy') must be 'cast out from the soul' (*ibid.* II, xii, 3). John can even on occasion use the violent language of 'annihilation' of the lower faculties when discussing the entry into pure contemplation (*Dark night* II, iv, 2).

But there is another side to John of the Cross's position which Chapman wholly fails to enunciate, perhaps because his reading of him focuses so exclusively on these transitional 'ligature' passages, with their admittedly stern disjunctions and warnings of self-delusion. Yet the whole point of the disjunction of sense and spirit is their successive and eventual

purgation, so that in due time the soul may be transformed, 'clothed with the new man . . . in the *newness of sense*' (*Dark night* II, iii, 3, my emphasis). Likewise, when John talks of the faculties of the soul being 'perfectly annihilated', we know he is using hyperbole, for the synonym for 'annihilated' is 'calmed'; the same passage ends with a vision of how all the 'energies and affections of the soul' are ultimately to be '*renewed* into a Divine temper and Divine delight' (*Dark night* II, iv, 2, my emphasis).¹⁶ Indeed, the whole of the *Spiritual canticle* and *Living flame of love* (to which, significantly, Chapman makes very little allusion) are about how, once both the bodily senses and the spiritual faculties of the soul are emptied and purged, the 'spiritual senses' come into their own in union, and the language of feeling returns at this higher level with all the daring force of erotic metaphor.

It has to be admitted, I think, that John remains fundamentally ambiguous about the ultimate significance of the body *per se* (though a fascinating recent treatment by Alain Cugno of 'bodily' themes in John of the Cross vividly illustrates how differently from Chapman one may read him given alternative philosophical presuppositions).¹⁷ On the subject of 'senses' and 'feelings', however, John is infinitely more subtle, nuanced—and positive—than Chapman's analysis admits. For Chapman omits to set the whole matter in the light of the ultimate and integrative goal of the self's transformation into God.

For Chapman, however, as we have shown, 'feelings' are not only no necessary sign of progress in prayer, and thus on the whole better ignored (both of which points are indeed made by John of the Cross), but, more radically, they are not even part of 'me' (see *SL*, 175)—they have no ultimate significance in the constituency of the self. The *opprobrium* that Chapman accords to 'feelings', we note, allows him to make no convincing distinction between 'sentimentality' (for which Thérèse of Lisieux is chided), 'emotions' (passing states of tonality which may have various causes), and what might be called the core affective constituent of the soul—residing in the will, in the Western Augustinian tradition which John of the Cross inherits. Yet John himself devotes much of the last part of the *Ascent of Mt Carmel* (III, xvi ff.) to the subject of the *purgation* of this affective organ for the purposes of its divine transformation and proper 'rejoicing' in God. Chapman talks much of the transitional 'empty will', but not of the (affective) joy for which this emptiness is destined.

We know, of course, that something projective (indeed emotive!) is afflicting Chapman here in the negativity he accords to 'feeling'; for the subject becomes muddled up with two other objects of scorn—Protestants and women mystics. '*Feelings*,' he expostulates, 'Protestants depend upon them . . .' (*SL*, 99); as for 'ecstasies', they are 'commoner in women than in men, and are more frequent in persons of feeble intellect . . .'.¹⁸ Nor is it a coincidence, surely, that the subject of sexuality at no point

emerges into explicit discussion in Chapman's correspondence. We may put this down to the coyness of his age; but it is a startling omission, as anyone seriously engaged in non-discursive prayer will testify. It involves, of course, the most curious of all Chapman's *excerptions* from John of the Cross's writing; for at no point does Chapman even mention the poetry around which John's entire corpus is constructed, a poetry rejoicing in the erotic metaphors of the *Song of songs*. Chapman has nothing whatever to tell us about the connection between sexual desire and the desire for God; John of the Cross has much.

To conclude: Chapman's *Spiritual letters* have been justly influential. His practical and perceptive advice on 'beginners' contemplation is almost unmatched in its charting of the unchartable. 'The intellect is facing a blank and the will follows it' (*SL*, 76); this 'near nonsense' of Chapman's, as Sebastian Moore has described it, this love affair with a 'blank', probes to the heart of what the contemplative has to express if she/he is to speak in any way adequately of God.¹⁹ More than one English generation, then, both Roman Catholic and Anglican, has taken Chapman's reading of John of the Cross as normative, has seen John through Chapman's lens. In this paper I have attempted to show at what points Chapman in fact adjusts, amplifies, excerpts from—even distorts—John's original meaning. True to his Benedictinism, Chapman is eclectic, forging his own synthesis.²⁰ It is a brilliant and insightful reading of John of the Cross; but it is not the whole picture. Let us call it 'sanjuanism with a stiff upper lip'.

Sarah Coakley

NOTES

¹ *The Way* 27, 1987, 54–64; see p 61.

² The pagination given in this article is that of the 1976 Sheed and Ward edition, On the details of Chapman's life I cannot here expatiate, although they are obviously of significance for his theory of prayer. Dom Roger Huddleston provided a somewhat hagiographical portrait in the introduction to *SL*; a biography was promised (p xi) but did not eventuate. It is worth comparing Dom Roger's account with the more critical portrait of Chapman that emerges from Dom Adrian Morey, *David Knowles: A memoir* (London, 1979), esp. ch 5.

³ *Ascent of Mt Carmel* II, xiii; *Dark night* I, ix; *Living flame of love* III, 32–6. The English translation used in this article is that of E. Allison Peers, *The complete works of Saint John of the Cross* (London, 1953).

⁴ See Poulain, *op. cit.*, ch XIV on the 'ligature', and ch XV on the 'night of sense'. For Chapman's critique see (in more detail) *SL*, 280ff.

⁵ Butler's work shared with Chapman's the stress on the relative ordinarieness of contemplation, but there their agreement largely stops. (See *SL*, 67, 278–9, 328 n.1, for hints of Chapman's departure from Butler). For a detailed account of Butler's book and its reception, see Rowan Williams, 'Butler's *Western mysticism*: towards an assessment', *The Downside review* 102, 1984, 197–215.

⁶ See Chapman's remarks *SL*, 71; and more fully in his art. 'Mysticism (Christian, Roman Catholic)' in ed. J. Hastings, *Encyclopaedia of religion and ethics* (Edinburgh 1908-26), esp. cols 100a-101b.

⁷ See esp. 'Mysticism', cols. 98a-100a, where Chapman simply weaves his own views and observations into his comparative account of Teresa and John of the Cross.

⁸ *The cloud* (see esp. ch 4) makes a different sort of disjunction in the self from that of John of the Cross, dividing the *will* (which is the faculty of loving and contemplating) from the *intellect* (to which 'God is forever unknowable'). Chapman sometimes passes over this crucial difference (see *SL*, 149-50), but at *SL*, 257 points it out.

⁹ See Andrew Louth's illuminating discussion on the differences between the sanjuanist and earlier Eastern views of divine 'darkness' in *The Origins of the Christian mystical tradition* (Oxford, 1981), ch 9.

¹⁰ The remark appears in Chapman's article 'J. P. de Caussade', *The Dublin review* 188, 1931, 1-15; see the note on p 12. The postscript about hating to make enemies among 'the S.J.s' (at *SL*, 81) is relevant here; Chapman however could also underscore that 'nothing could be more opposed than the Benedictine and Jesuit methods' (*SL*, 23).

¹¹ The whole prayer, from the 'Contemplation for Achieving Love' runs: 'Take, Lord, into Your possession, my complete freedom of action, my memory, my understanding and my entire will, all that I have, all that I own: it is Your gift to me, I now return it to You. It is all Yours, to be used simply as you wish. Give me Your Love and Your grace; it is all I need' (*The spiritual exercises of Saint Ignatius*, tr T. Corbishley, S. J. (Wheathampstead, Herts., 1973), 80.

¹² Art. cit., *The Dublin review* 188, 1931, 6.

¹³ Chapman does admit there may sometimes be a 'wobbly' stage between meditation and contemplation (*SL*, 327) but insists it 'is not recognized by St John of the Cross' and 'I don't believe in it . . . '.

¹⁴ This Western development is illuminatingly charted by Simon Tugwell, *Ways of imperfection* (London, 1984), chs. 9-11.

¹⁵ Art. cit. (n. 6 above), see cols. 98a-99a.

¹⁶ The point is of course most famously expressed in the lines at *Ascent of Mt Carmel* I, xiii, 11: 'In order to arrive at having pleasure in everything, desire to have pleasure in nothing', etc.

¹⁷ See Alain Cugno, *St John of the Cross* (Eng. tr. London, 1982), ch 6. The author at points acknowledges his debt to the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas.

¹⁸ Art. cit. 'Mysticism', col. 99a. See also the crushing end to a letter to a (woman) correspondent: 'As to visions, they are rarely to be trusted. Women have them . . . ' (*SL*, 108). It is worth noting that the distrust of visions is *not* linked to a stereotyping of 'female mysticism' in John of the Cross himself.

¹⁹ See Sebastian Moore, 'Some principles for an adequate theism', *The Downside Review* 95, 1977, 201-13.

²⁰ See Jean Leclercq, art. cit. (n. 1 above), p 63, and also the citation from Benedict's *Rule* on p 54. Chapman's *SL* draw on a wide range of authorities at points, including Evagrius, the Macarian homilies, Thomas Aquinas, *The cloud*, Teresa of Ávila, Ignatius of Loyola, as well as John of the Cross and Père de Caussade.

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