

TRADITIONS OF SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE

The Rhineland Mystics: Soul Friends on the Journey back to God

We read in the Gospel that when our Lord was twelve years old he went with Joseph and Mary to the Temple in Jerusalem, and when they left, Jesus stayed behind in the Temple without their knowing; when they reached home and missed him, they sought him among acquaintances, among their kindred and amidst the throng, and they could not find him. They had lost him in the crowd. And so they had to go back to where they had come from. And when they got back to the starting-point, the Temple, they found him.¹

I COME TO THIS SUBJECT with no more than a fragmentary knowledge of the Rhineland mystics, largely born of the search for an understanding of the inner journey. Yet from childhood I seem to remember how fragments of broken mirror, arranged around a central image, would surprisingly reflect that image in multiplicity and in layers of depth. With this picture in mind, I allow myself to assemble some of the fragments, which over the years have most vividly mirrored to me the nobility of the inner self, grappled with by the medieval German mystics in powerful idiom and metaphor. As a German I have been fascinated by their language, as an artist touched by their imagery and as a Dominican pinned down by their invitation to preach God from ‘inside out’.

I am aware that I mention very little of the actual lives of the three mystics to whose texts I refer. This gap, I feel, may well be left to the reader to fill. I am conscious, also, of having risked approaching their teaching from a largely personal perspective, as perhaps we tend to do in response to those fleeting moments when our ordinary lives are suddenly flooded with a glimmering of what lies at the root of our existence. With our hearts burning, we desperately seek for soul friends, who will help us understand our experience and point out to us the direction in which to continue to travel. Likewise, I am aware of having heavily relied on the use of images in order to unravel what, I feel, are important aspects of the teaching of the Rhineland mystics. I have done so, because they themselves seem to resort to images, which powerfully mediate something of the process of being stripped of images, in order to have God ‘as the kernel from which goodness flows’.² Also, having been engaged in the process of image-making in art over many years, both for myself and with others, I have been intrigued by the way in which images, made from inside, reveal and give insight into what it is in the ground that needs to be cleared,

freed and transformed so that the ground may be opened to 'the soul's true image, where nothing is imaged forth or within save what is God Himself'.³

I was led to the writings of the Rhineland mystics many years ago, in the heart of Zimbabwe. In the dusty volumes, assigned to the uncatalogued section of my convent library, I discovered words in my own tongue, tempting the reader with a glimmering of 'things forgotten':

It seemed to a man as in a dream – it was a waking dream – that he became pregnant with Nothing, like a woman with child. And in the Nothing God was born: He was the fruit of Nothing.⁴

I have sometimes spoken of a light that is in the soul, which is uncreated and uncreatable: it is the light which lays straight hold of God, unveiled and bare, as He is in Himself, that is, it catches Him in the act of begetting.⁵

If only the soul would stay within . . . Where understanding and desire end, there is darkness, and there God shines.⁶

Such words, in turn, seemed to fashion images, which 'blitzed' the mind with a shimmering of what the natural world mirrored and revealed: dark nights drenched with light, motionless rock stirred by heat suspended, devastated stubbled land drawing flame, white light weaving in still places, birth of new life within the depth of barrenness. There were moments when it was as though these images functioned as a bridge almost, mediating between an outer familiar world, suddenly seen from a different viewpoint, and a deeper inner world, roused into consciousness by the words of the mystics. Most importantly, they seemed to mediate between an experience of inner being and the insight into that experience, conveying something of a kind of marriage between 'feeling what I see and thinking what I see, when "I want nothing"'.⁷

The soul's spark wants nothing but God, naked as He is. It is not content with the simple changeless divine being, which neither gives nor takes: rather it seeks to know whence this being comes.⁸

Love without knowledge
Is darkness to the wise soul.
Knowledge without revelation
Is as the pain of Hell.
Revelation without death
Cannot be endured.⁹

Wouldst thou know my meaning?
Lie down in the Fire
See and taste the Flowing
Godhead through thy being;
Feel the Holy Spirit
Moving and compelling

Thee within the Flowing
Fire and Light of God.¹⁰

I happened to be reminded of this last quotation on a journey by plane from London to Cologne, the summer following German unification. I was travelling on one of those rare afternoons, when few clouds marred vision. The land below us lay infinitely still, as if shadowed by sun. On approaching Cologne, the aircraft seemed to hover over the river Rhine, as if suspended. The river, cutting deeply into the plateau like a silvery vein, brimmed with light and motion. Looking down from my window seat onto this dazzling, shimmering sight, I suddenly realized that what had once been the devastated country of my childhood had been remade and transformed into a pattern, finely stitched with flowing light. The picture below seemed profoundly significant of the kind of transformation God works in the depth of the soul, in the Ground of Being, depending on my willingness to let go – ‘affirming and yielding to all that is in my depths – to the liberating, kindling spark of His Great Light’.¹¹ My attention was gripped by the realization that the ground, way below, was the very ground which had been traversed and lived in, many centuries ago, by women and men who had so passionately spoken of this way of transformation:

The shell must be broken and what is inside must come out, for if you want to get at the kernel, you must break the shell. Accordingly, if you want to find nature unveiled, all likenesses must be shattered, and the further you penetrate, the nearer you will get to the essence.¹²

Thou shalt love the naughting,
And flee the self.
Thou shalt stand alone
Seeking help from none.
That thy being may be quiet,
Free from the bondage of all things.
Thus shalt thou dwell in the desert.¹³

In her novel, *Die Abberufung der Jungfrau von Barby* (1948), the author, Gertrud von Le Fort, records a conversation between the young Beguine von Barby, the main character of the book, and the Abbess Jutta von Sangershausen, in whose community the Beguine had found hospitality. The abbess, visibly unnerved by von Barby’s spiritual conduct, frequently marked by unexpected spells of seizure in public, had summoned her to disclose, under obedience, her state of soul. Distressed at not knowing how to express herself and obviously struggling for the appropriate words, the shy, vulnerable Beguine resorts to imagery, deeply significant, I feel, of the transformative process involved in the journey back to the ‘starting point, the Temple’,¹⁴ to ‘the citadel in the soul’,¹⁵ and ‘the darkness’ named ‘potential receptivity’.¹⁶

Von Barby explains that the great Beguine, Mechthild von Magdeburg, had spoken to her, advising her to fall in love, *sich einminnen*, with her book, *The*

flowing light of the Godhead, so that the light might flow again. She admits, however, that whenever she follows Mechthild's invitation, the light begins to fade. She confesses to darkness impinging on her soul and to perceiving a voice which utters: 'Lady Soul, thou shalt be nothing', '*Frau Seele, Ihr sollt aus sein*'. She likens her soul to an altar on a Good Friday, stripped of all its images and finery.

Deeply alarmed by this metaphor, descriptive of the absence of God, *Gottesfremde*, and yet strangely drawn into the experience of it, almost beyond her will and control, the abbess accuses the vulnerable Beguine of disobedience, suspecting her of having read Meister Eckhart and of thus colluding with the heretics. Symbolically, almost, she isolates von Barby, banning her to her cell, while she orders the community to adorn the altar of the abbey church with gilded images, in defiance of the iconoclasts already clamouring at the doors. These, however, storm the sanctuary, smashing all the images. Eventually, Jutta von Sangershausen, the once mighty abbess, finds von Barby dead in her cell. She has inscribed on von Barby's tombstone these words: 'She who dies of love must be buried in God'.¹⁷

I feel that this story contains symbolism of a kind, profoundly mediating something of the core experience of inner transformation to which the Rhineland mystics passionately refer, and through which 'the temple is freed from obstructions', so that it may 'glisten with beauty shining out bright and fair above the whole of God's creation, and through all God's creation'.¹⁶ This story also mentions both Mechthild von Magdeburg and Meister Eckhart, whose writings have most attracted me over the years. I have already referred to their texts and wish to continue to do so, including, at this stage, a third source, namely the writings of John Tauler, whose allusion to a psychological dimension in the process of *self-knowing* I find significant.

I suppose it is not difficult to create in one's mind the image of an altar, such as might have adorned a medieval abbey church, made of solid quarried stone. It might be slightly less easy to perceive it, placed within the dim light of a sanctuary, still, bare, weathered, the focal point of sacred functions, if and when they occur. It might be even more difficult to allow oneself a sense of being as the bare desolate stone is – pivotal both to detachment and receptivity.

Now you might say, 'Is it really always necessary to be barren and estranged from everything, outward and inward: the powers and their work, must they all go?'¹⁹

Stand, O Soul!

Thy SELF must go!

Thou art by nature already mine!

Therefore must thou put from thee

Fear and shame and all outward things.²⁰

Lord! now I am a naked soul

And Thou a God most Glorious.²¹

Ah dear Lord! how still is now Thy silence.²²

Supposing this altar stone would exist within the open spaces of the Southern African landscape as solitary rocks do, exposed for centuries to the elements, particularly to the unceasing flow of light and heat, weaving through their substance. Would this image not help the viewer to know something of the most central teaching of the Rhineland mystics: *NIM DIN SELBES WAR!* Know your self! Know your dignity!

This has God given to all creatures
To foster and seek their own nature.
How then can I withstand mind?
I must to God – ²³

See, God loves us so, God cannot wait till the soul has turned away and stripped off all creatures. It is certain and necessary that God must needs seek us, as though His Godhead were at stake – which it is! And God can no more do without us than we can do without Him, for even if we were able to turn from God, God still could not turn from us. I will praise Him because He is of such nature and essence that He must give.²⁴

The powerful abess of my story seemed to struggle against the invitation to leave the familiar terrain of a guarded, controlled, defended self, which had tried for perfection too long, whereas the timid, fearful, young Beguine allowed herself to let go into the darkness, risking the loss of the *flowing light* and the pain of the un-making. There ensues, as if of necessity almost, the harrowing episode of the destruction of all the images that once adorned the sanctuary, indicative of the suffering to be endured, when such dismantling involves detachment from all that is not God alone.

We should examine with the light of reason all our works, words, and thoughts to see whether there is not something in the ground of our soul which is other than God and which does not hunger for God in all things, in activity as in passivity. And should we find something which is directed at something other than God, then we should cut it off and cast it out.²⁵

Lastly, there remains the image of the cell, the confined, empty space, the nothingness into which the aching Beguine had been banned, while the rigidly guarded abess and her community hid from the rage of the iconoclasts. Does not this image mediate something of the reality of the transforming ground to which the Rhineland mystics continually beckon us to return? They invite us to traverse this ground, filled with the alternating rhythm of death and becoming, with the painful experience of self-knowing, of detaching ourselves and being freed from all our erroneous self-images and even more so from all our false images of God.

If you want to be taken up into God's inmost nature, to be transformed into him, then you must free yourself, of your nature, your inclinations, your actions, your self-opinion, in short of all the ways in which you have had possession of yourself. Two beings, two entities cannot occupy the same space.²⁶

However, they also promise us that within the very depths of our grieving and sorrowing for the loss of Self and God, when we feel most abandoned, when we are 'dead in imperfection, the highest intellect arises in the understanding and *cries to God for grace*'.²⁷

And then when we are so abandoned that we have no further knowledge of God, and we come into such distress that we do not know if we have ever been in the right path, we do not know whether God exists or not, or if we ourselves are alive or dead. And thus there comes upon us such a *strange pain* that the whole world seems to oppress us. We have no more experience or knowledge of God, but all is abhorrent to us, and so it seems to us that we are caught between two walls, that a sword threatens us from behind and a spear from in front.²⁸

Yet the Rhineland mystics also point to a dimension of suffering, which belongs to the painful longing for deliverance, almost lovingly drawing us home. They assure us that if we suffer for God, and God alone, then 'our suffering does not hurt us and bear us down, for God bears the burden'.²⁹ They likewise seem to be saying something of immense importance about the moment, when the *strange pain* of mourning is at its height and the way seems opened to the most sudden, unprecedented experience of all, *the birth of God in the soul*.

'Lady Pain, this I order you:
That you should set me free now
For at present you have power over me.'
Then Pain left the body and the soul
Like a tenebrous ray
And went towards God with wisdom
Calling out in a loud voice:
'Lord, You know well what I want!'
Then the Lord came towards Pain before
the Gates of the kingdom,
And said: 'Welcome, Lady Pain!'³⁰

I declare in all truth, by the eternal and everlasting truth, that into any person who has abandoned self right down to their ground, God must pour out His whole self in all His might, so utterly that neither of His life, nor His being, nor His nature, nor of His entire Godhead does

He keep anything back, but must pour out the whole of it as fruitfulness into that person who in abandonment to God has assumed the lowest place.³¹

Within the shadow of Cologne Cathedral and close to the Dominican church, there nestles a small Gothic church, only partly restored. This church was bombed by fire during the Second World War and virtually laid bare to its foundation. The only thing that survived the destruction and appeared from within the mist of the smouldering timber was a Gothic Madonna in stone, raised on a pillar. She had lost her crown in the blitz, yet she still smiled, holding on her right arm a child, which by its very gesture almost held the mother. Today, a small sanctuary has been built around the Madonna within the ruined walls, attracting travellers in search of some respite and stillness within the hub of Cologne's busiest shopping precinct.

I would like to let this image speak for itself, mediating something of the mystery of returning from the crowd into the inner temple to find the virgin who is now a mother, 'filled with God, filled with overflowing, welling over into divine fulness, crying out with a loud voice, wanting to bring God to everyone, making them full of God as she is full'.³²

It is as if we were to allow the Rhine its way, removing from its paths all hindrances. As if it were to break its banks with its mass of flooding waters, roaring and threatening to submerge all things, filling all the valleys and inclines. So the Holy Spirit does unceasingly; he fills and floods the ground of our souls, our hearts and minds, whatever he finds.³³

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NOTES

¹ M. O'C. Walshe, *Meister Eckhart: sermons & treatises* volume I (Longmead, 1989), p 39.

² *Ibid.*, p 100.

³ Walshe, vol II, p 141.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p xxxi.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p 104.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p 236.

⁷ M. Milner, *Eternity's sunrise* (London, 1989), p 159.

⁸ Walshe, *Meister Eckhart* vol II, p 105.

⁹ L. Menzies, *The revelations of Mechthild of Magdeburg* (London, 1953), p 12.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p 194.

¹¹ K. Graf Dürckheim, *The way of transformation* (London, 1990), p 81.

¹² Walshe, vol II, p 252.

¹³ Menzies, p 17.

¹⁴ Walshe, vol I, p 39.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p 76.

- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p 41.
- ¹⁷ From *The revelations of Mechthild*.
- ¹⁸ Walshe, vol I, p 58.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p 42.
- ²⁰ Menzies, p 25.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p 25.
- ²² *Ibid.*, p 243.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, p 24.
- ²⁴ Walshe, vol I, p 101.
- ²⁵ O. Davies, *God within* (London, 1988), p 85.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, p 85.
- ²⁷ Walshe, vol I, p 267.
- ²⁸ Davies, pp 88–89.
- ²⁹ Walshe, vol I, p 75.
- ³⁰ E. Zum Brunn & G. Epiney-Burgard, *Women mystics in medieval Europe* (New York, 1989), p 165.
- ³¹ Walshe, vol II, p 103.
- ³² *Ibid.*, p 192.
- ³³ Davies, p 84.