

*Philosophy to Poetry:  
Faith as a Way of Knowing  
in John of the Cross and Edith Stein*

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We are gifted with teachers and guides, companions and friends, present to us whether currently living or not, who shape our lives by giving us the courage to live and to love. As a matrix of such relationships, Mount Saviour Monastery offers a microcosm of living into and out of the perennial source of nourishment that we call "tradition." In this often cacophonous reach for symphony many voices contend, each bringing something needed, though not always appreciated. The letters of Edith Stein, as daughter, student, companion, teacher, and then as Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, testify to a person replete with friends, nourished by relationships which she herself cultivated. Responding to the initial invitation of another Teresa to collaborate in the reform of Carmel, John of the Cross devoted the bulk of his life as a religious to that work, carrying out assigned duties in the order despite acute and recriminatory opposition, yet never allowed any of it to displace his vocation as a spiritual guide. Indeed, his two most lyrical works, *The Spiritual Canticle* and *The Living Flame of Love*, were composed at the behest of friends who had come to accompany him in the spirit: Ana de Jesús and Doña Ana de Peñalosa.

The plot thickens as Edith Stein, also called forth on the journey which led her to become Sister Teresa Benedicta by her encounter with Teresa de Avila, devotes what were to be the final months of her life attempting "to understand John of the Cross in his life and works, considering him from a point of view that

enables us to envisage this unity." Occasioned by the upcoming fourth centenary of the saint, this philosopher would seize that opportunity to "penetrate to this unity" of John's life and works, incorporating "an interpretation, offering what she believes a lifetime of effort to have taught her about the lows of intellectual and spiritual being and life." So she will not hesitate to expound "her theories on spirit, faith, and contemplation," specifying that "what [she says] on ego, freedom, and person is not derived from the writings of our holy Father John . . . for only modern philosophy has set itself the task of working out a philosophy of the person such as is suggested in the passages just mentioned."<sup>1</sup> So this relationship of master-disciple, sustained by the family of Carmel extended over space and time, allows the apprentice to exercise her own experience coupled to philosophical developments achieved in the intervening four centuries. So the relationship between these two—a poet with an exquisite grasp of matters in philosophical theology, and a vigorous philosopher brought through her interior life to a refined sensibility for the poetics of love—can epitomize our thesis about the fruitfulness of lives lived in so rich a community of prayer and inquiry.

In attempting an appreciation of the homage of this philosophical spirit to her poetic guide and predecessor in Carmel, I shall utilize a work completed a few years before, *Finite and Eternal Being: Attempting an Ascent to the Meaning of Being*, which followed her self-imposed task of appropriating the thought of Thomas Aquinas by translating his *Disputed Questions on Truth*. The later synthetic work on the metaphysics of Aquinas owes an express gratitude to Erich Przywara's *Analogia Entis*, a work which presaged the fruitful efforts of Louis Geiger and Cornelius Fabro to call attention to the centrality of *participation* in the metaphysics of Thomas Aquinas. What is remarkable about Edith Stein's inquiry is her ability to penetrate to the heart of Aquinas's subtle and elusive discourse on *being*, and do so without the benefit of the studies cited above, indeed without much reliance on secondary literature at all. Yet her own confessed formation in the "school of Edmund Husserl . . . and phenomenological method" may have offered her a prescient optic for the potencies of Aquinas's language in trying to bring to expression this axial

notion of metaphysics which in fact resists any proper conceptual formation.<sup>2</sup>

But let us first try to evoke the rich person of this scholar who found herself so drawn by truth as it was unveiled to her, as well as drawn to those with whom she shared this adventure: friends and students (who quickly became friends) alike. Gifted with a thoroughly intellectual temperament, her advice to a colleague, Fritz Kaufmann, reveals as well just how centered she already was at 28 (in 1919):

I am worried at seeing how, for months, you have avoided doing purely philosophical work, and am gradually beginning to wonder whether your “profession” should not lie in a different direction. Please do not take this as a vote of “no confidence” or as doubting your ability. I only mean that one should not use force to make the center of one’s life anything that fails to give one the right kind of satisfaction.<sup>3</sup>

Equally drawn as she was to scholarship and to guiding others to cognate goals, she could be utterly forthright in criticizing another’s work, as evidenced in her response to Maria Bruck’s dissertation comparing two German philosophers:

I am convinced that if you have an opportunity to work for a few years longer at systematic philosophy, you will yourself experience the need to go beyond [this work]; not merely take an independent position on the problems you have touched but, above all, to tackle the interpretation from the basis of clearly established final principles. Without that, no actual comparison of what is meant as systematic philosophy is possible. From the start I missed a sharp delineation of what Brentano and Husserl understood as the *real* and as *essence*, and several other matters. (SPL #149)

To be sure, this communication begins gently: “Undoubtedly this work demanded a great deal of effort from you. It is very neat and

conscientious and will surely be of lasting use for anyone who will study the relationship of Husserl to Brentano"; but its author cannot have failed to discern, in her friend Edith's words, that she had rather missed the point—philosophically.

In a more personal vein, Edith wrote to a former student who was discerning a vocation to religious life:

God leads each of us on an individual way; one reaches the goal more easily and more quickly than another. We can do very little ourselves, compared to what is done to us. But that little bit we must do. Primarily, this consists before all else of persevering in prayer to find the right way, and of following without resistance the attraction of grace when we feel it. Whoever acts in this way and perseveres patiently will not be able to say that his efforts were in vain. But one may not set a deadline for the Lord. . . . Among the books you got as a child, do you have Andersen's Fairy Tales? If so, read the story of the ugly duckling. I believe in your swan-destiny. (*SPL* #102)

And to another former student, now teaching in school, also discerning religious life, she writes:

To contend for souls and love them in the Lord is the Christian's duty and, actually, a special goal of the Dominican Order. But if that is your goal and if the thought of marriage is farthest from your mind, then it will be good if you soon begin to wear appropriate dress. That will make it clear to people who it is they are dealing with. Otherwise there will be the danger of your misleading others, of your behavior being misinterpreted (I would be surprised if, without your being aware of it, that has not already happened at times), and your achieving exactly the opposite of what you desire. (*SPL* #103).

It should be clear how those who associated with this woman could be assured of hearing the truth as she saw it, yet at the same

time many seemed ineluctably drawn to her, as she reminds her colleague Fritz (in 1931):

- The circle of persons whom I consider as connected with me has increased so much in the course of the years that it is entirely impossible to keep in touch by the usual means. But I have other ways and means of keeping the bonds alive. (SPL #93a)

Edith had been early on thwarted from pursuing her second doctorate (*Habilitationschrift*) for the simple reason that she was a woman, and her remarks (again to Fritz Kaufmann) on the academic politics surrounding the matter were unyielding (SPL #31). Yet within two weeks, she finds herself consoling him:

- It was terribly dear of you to be so zealous on my behalf, but I must tell you that things have gone very well for me in the past weeks and that I am no longer the least bit furious or sad. Instead I find the whole matter very funny. After all, I do not consider life on the whole to carry so much weight that it would matter a great deal what position I occupy. And I would like you to make that attitude your own (SPL #32).

She realized perfectly well that she would never be admitted to university teaching without the second doctorate, yet service was already more important than a career, so she soon immersed herself in secondary teaching at a Dominican Sisters' school in Speyer (Bavaria) soon after her baptism on 1 January 1922 (at age 31), a position she held for nine years until she resigned to complete her translation of Aquinas. All during this time she immersed herself in lectures on the place of women, especially in Catholic circles, remarking in 1931: "During my years in the *Gymnasium* and as a young student [at the university] I was a radical feminist. Then I lost interest in the whole question. Now, because I am obliged to do so, I seek purely objective solutions" (SPL #100).

Fully engaged in teaching young women, she made their concerns her own, yet in a quite disinterested way. This vocational

commitment was, if anything, intensified in her next post at the *Deutsches Institut für Wissenschaftliche Pädagogik* (German Institute for Scientific Pedagogy), from where she continued to lecture on women's issues until 1933, when the National Socialists insisted that Jews be deprived of teaching posts. Writing again to Fritz Kaufmann, she is able to say that

the *umsturz* was for me a sign from heaven that I might now go the way that I had long considered as mine. After a final visit with my relatives in Breslau and a difficult farewell from my dear mother, I entered the monastery of the Carmelite nuns here last Saturday and thus became a daughter of St. Teresa, who earlier inspired me to conversion. (SPL #158a)

In that life she would be able to pursue her interior vocation intellectually as well, and be prepared for the ultimate test, to come in less than a decade.

From what we have seen of Edith Stein, we would be hard-pressed to read her move to Carmel as "leaving the world," but rather as intensifying her presence to a world gone mad. Indeed, her letters from Breslau to her friends, on the cusp of entering Carmel, invite them all to visit her there, while reflections in an earlier (1928) letter to a Dominican sister friend help us to read the move more accurately:

Immediately before, and for a good while after my conversion, I was of the opinion that to lead a religious life meant one had to give up all that was secular and to live totally immersed in thoughts of the Divine. But gradually I realized that something else is asked of us in this world and that, even in the contemplative life, one may not sever the connection with the world. I even believe that the deeper one is drawn into God, the more one must "go out of oneself": that is, one must go to the world in order to carry the divine life into it. The only essential is that one finds, first of all, a quiet corner in which one can communicate with God as though there

were nothing else, and that must be done daily. . . . Furthermore, [it is essential] that one accept one's particular mission there, preferably for each day, and not make one's own choice. Finally, one is to consider oneself totally as an instrument, especially with regard to the abilities one uses to perform one's special tasks, in our case, e.g., intellectual ones. We are to see them as something used, not by us, but by God in us. . . . My life begins anew each morning, and ends every evening; I have neither plans nor prospects beyond it. (*SPL* #45)

As we shall see, it would be difficult to find a better formula for describing a life patterned on the transformation outlined by John of the Cross; Edith seemed to have been prepared to move quite naturally into Sister Teresa Benedicta of the Cross.

While she did not complete her constructive monograph on the unity of John's life and work until her final days, we can easily discern her pull to Carmel, first in her attraction to Teresa of Avila, and then in her inner affinity for the purity of John of the Cross's presentation of the inner dynamics of a life of faith. John is disarmingly forthright in identifying the goal of that journey—"the union and transformation of the [person] in God"—as well as the means—"faith alone, which is the only proximate and proportionate means to union with God." He is at pains to distinguish this intentional union from the "union between God and creatures [which] always exists [by which] God sustains every soul and dwells in it substantially. . . . By it He conserves their being so that if the union would end they would immediately be annihilated and cease to exist" (*Ascent* 2.5.3).

So John will presume the unique metaphysical relation of all creatures to their source, which Meister Eckhart elaborated from Aquinas's distinction, and does not hesitate to call it a union—indeed, an "essential or substantial union." This grounding fact attends all creatures, hence it is *natural* and found in everything (though displayed differently in animate from inanimate, and in animate, differs from animals to humans, though among humans it can still be found in "the greatest sinner in the world"), while the intentional union is *supernatural* and can only

be found “where there is a likeness of love [such that] God’s will and the [person’s] are in conformity” (*Ascent* 2.5.3).

We shall see that what eliminates any prospect of “heteronomy” between those two wills is precisely this “non-reciprocal relation of dependence” that attends all creatures, but let us attend first to the internal connection between *faith* and *union* which John confidently asserts. What makes this sound so startling is our propensity to confine such talk to “mystics,” while reducing faith to belief: holding certain propositions to be true. This is a long and complex debate in Christian theology, which often cuts oddly across confessional lines, so the best we can do here is to remind ourselves that John of the Cross could well have been responding from the Iberian peninsula to sixteenth-century winds from northern Europe. He does so by elaborating some key assertions of Aquinas to cut through the debates that polarized intellect and will in the act of faith.

First, Aquinas: “Faith is a sort of knowledge [*cognitio quaedam*] in that it makes the mind assent to something. The assent is not due to what is seen by the believer but to what is seen by him who is believed” (*Summa Theologica* 1.12.13.3). The one who is believed is, of course, the Word of God incarnate, Jesus, as mediated through the Scriptures, so this peculiar “sort of knowledge” is rooted in an interpersonal relation of the believer with Jesus. It is that relation, at the root of faith, which John of the Cross sets out to explore, quite aware that what results from it will “fall short of the mode of knowing [*cognitio*] which is properly called ‘knowledge’ [*scientia*], for such knowledge causes the mind to assent through what is seen and through an understanding of first principles.”

More positively, Aquinas will characterize faith as “an act of mental assent commanded by the will, [so] to believe perfectly our mind must tend unflinching towards the perfection of truth, in unflinching service of that ultimate goal for the sake of which our will is commanding our mind’s assent” (*ST* 2-2.4.5). Unlike ordinary belief, then, faith must be an act of the whole person, involving a personal and critical quest for a truth that outreaches our proper expression. John will focus critically on our concepts: “nothing which could possibly be imagined or comprehended in

this life can be a proximate means of union with God" (*ST* 2.8.4), since "nothing created or imagined can serve the intellect as a proper means for union with God; [indeed], all that can be grasped by the intellect would serve as an obstacle rather than a means, if a person were to become attached to it" (*ST* 2.8.1). So following Aquinas, we must be able to let our conceptualities "lead us on by the hand" [*manu ductio*], as John does, to a goal that transcends them. That goal, we recall, is "union and transformation of the [person] in God," and it is already intimated in the sort of *faith* of which Thomas and John are speaking.

As Augustine had already worked it out, Christian faith differs from ordinary belief in being a response to an utterly gratuitous invitation, which could never be initiated by persons themselves. So this treatment of faith and union anticipates the critiques of both Freud and Marx, while leaving room for both. For if Freud would reduce religious faith to projections, Aquinas will also insist that "faith that does not rely on divine truth can fail and believe falsehood" (*ST* 2-2.4.5), yet if we regard John of the Cross as developing Aquinas's lapidary exposition of faith, authentic faith will ever involve a journey of responding rather than initiating, with intervening projections being submitted to a searing critique.

And with regard to Marx, it is John's forthright insistence on union that responds to Marx's characterization of Christian faith as alienating human beings from their authentic life and work by offering a distracting "heavenly reward," for the union of which John speaks begins now. Yet Marx's account may well address a Christian ethos quite innocent of the tradition, which John articulates, of an internal connection between faith and union, so Marx's critique can well fuel the kind of internal critique that John's account of faith demands. Indeed, the demands of that journey of faith which John outlines are utterly rigorous: "We shall explain how in order to journey to God the intellect must be perfected in the darkness of faith, the memory in the emptiness of hope, and the will in the nakedness and absence of every affection [unrelated to the goal of union]" (*ST* 2.6.1).

A poetic characterization of that intentional union is offered in his "Living Flame of Love," where we can compare the initial stanza of the poem together with statements from his own commentary:

O living flame of love  
 That tenderly wounds my soul  
 In its deepest center! Since  
 Now You are not oppressive,  
 Now Consummate! If it be your will:  
 Tear through the veil of this sweet encounter!

The commentary begins:

The soul now feels that it all inflamed in the divine union, . . . and that in the most intimate part of its substance it is flooded with no less than rivers of glory, abounding in delights, and that from its bosom flow rivers of living waters [Jn 7:38], which the Son of God declared will rise up in such souls. Accordingly it seems, because it is so vigorously transformed in God, so sublimely possessed by Him, and arrayed with such rich gifts and virtues, that it is singularly close to beatitude—so close that only a thin veil separates it. (1.1)

He continues:

This flame of love is the Spirit of the Bridegroom, which is the Holy Spirit. . . . Such is the activity of the Holy Spirit in the soul transformed in love: the interior acts He produces shoot up flames for they are acts of inflamed love, in which the will of the soul united with that flame, made one with it, loves most sublimely. . . . Thus in this state the soul cannot make acts because the Holy Spirit makes them all and moves it towards them. As a result all the acts of the soul are divine, since the movement toward these acts and their execution stems from God. Hence it seems to a person that every time this flame shoots up, making him love with delight and divine quality, it is giving him eternal life, since it raises him up to the activity of God in God. (1.3-4)

There is no hint of “heteronomy” here, I would suggest, because John presumes that unique metaphysical relation of person

("soul") to its source, which Meister Eckhart had developed from Aquinas.

Sister Teresa Benedicta had become attuned to that unique relation of creatures to their creator in her study of Aquinas on eternal and temporal being, which led her into the presence of the great mystery of creation:

that God has called forth each being into its differentiated being; a manifold of beings in which what is one in God is there separate. . . . [Yet] the subsistence of creatures is no longer that of a portrait over against the one portrayed, or of a work over against the artist doing it. Earlier [thinkers] had likened the relation to that of a mirror to the object in the mirror, or of refracted light to its pure source, yet these remain but imperfect images for what is quite incomparable. (*EES* 320-21)

She then goes on to compare the creator/creature relation to the relations among the divine "persons":

The entire divine essence is common to all three persons. So what remains is simply the differences of the persons as such: a perfect unity of *we*, which no community of finite persons could ever realize, yet' in this unity the difference of *I* from *you* remains, without which no *we* is possible. . . . Indeed, the *we* as the unity of *I* and *you*—"I and the Father are one" (Jo 10:30)—is a higher unity than the *I*. For in its most perfect sense, it is the unity of love. Now love as assent to a good is possible as the self-love of an *I*, but love is more than such an assent, more than a "valuing." It is gift of oneself to the *thou*, and in its perfection—on the strength of manifold gifts of self—an existential unity [*Einssein*]. Since God is love, divine being must be an existential unity of a multiplicity of persons, while the divine name "I am" is identical in meaning with "I give myself totally to you," "I am one with a *you*," and so also identical with "we are." The love of the life interior to God can never be replaced, however, by the

love between God and creatures, which can never attain love in its highest perfection—even when it be realized in the richest perfection of glory. For the highest love is differentiated eternal love: God loves creatures from eternity, whereas God can never be loved by them from eternity. (*EES* 323-24)

So while the *we* of human lovers may offer an image for divine triunity, it will always fall short of that eternal unity; yet the very relation of creatures to creator defies representation, so the unity with God to which humans can be elevated by grace must be likened to that within the triune God, even though the one can never replace the other. What is incomparable can nonetheless be compared. That is the paradox into which the analogical metaphysics of Aquinas invites us, and to which the poetic genius of John of the Cross will give its most proper expression. For his poetry gives voice to the utterly unique “distinction” of creatures from creator, which we have seen John already calling a “union” in the nature of created things with their creator, and one which becomes intentionally so in those who permit the interior transformation by the Holy Spirit into “images of god” become “images of Christ.” In this way the circumincession of human and divine that characterizes Jesus can be bestowed upon human agents who have been turned into lovers.

So Edith Stein, become Sister Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, traced the divine becoming so aptly described by John of the Cross in her life and works, as he had limned it in his, so that her apprenticeship to him reflects ours to them both, in the circumincession of emulation which characterizes a community of revelation, as friendships sustain each of us in our search for Truth as we attempt to incorporate that Truth into the truth of our lives.

#### Notes

1. St. John of the Cross, *The Spiritual Canticle*, in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, ed. Kiernan Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington: ICS Publishers, 1991), xxi.

2. Edith Stein, *Endliches und Ewiges Sein* (Leuven: Nauwelaerts/Freiburg: Herder, 1950), viii. Cited hereafter in the text of my essay as *EES* followed by page number.

3. Edith Stein, *Self-Portrait in Letters*, ed. L. Gelber and Romaeus Leuven, translated by Josephine Koepfel (Washington: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1993), #29a. Cited hereafter in the text of my essay as *SPL*.

4. St. John of the Cross, *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, 2.5.3; 2.9.1. Cited hereafter in the text of my essay as *Ascent*, followed by section and chapter number.