

LOVE AND SOLITUDE

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March - April 1966.

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NOTE. The following pages were originally written as a preface for the Japanese translation of the author's book Thoughts in Solitude. They are here revised to form an essay on the solitary life, on contemplation, and on basic monastic values which are today called into question even by monks themselves. The purpose of these notes is not to elaborate a defence" of solitude, -which is often condemned or defended without having been understood,- but simply to let solitude speak a little and say something for itself. In the original preface, I felt that many Japanese readers, still open to their more contemplative heritage, would recognize something familiar to them in these intuitive, provisional, and deliberately incomplete suggestions. It is possible that western readers will simply dismiss them with impatience.

LOVE AND SOLITUDE.

No writing on the solitary, meditative dimensions of life can say anything that has not already been said better by the wind in the pine trees. These pages seek nothing more than to echo the silence and the peace that is "heard" when the rain wanders freely among the hills and forests. But what can the wind say where there is no hearer? There is then a deeper silence: the silence in which the Hearer is No-Hearer. That deeper silence, must be heard before one can speak truly of solitude.

These pages do not attempt to convey any special information, or to answer deep philosophical questions about life. True, they do concern themselves with questions about life. But they certainly do not pretend to do the reader's thinking for him. On the contrary, they invite him to listen for himself. They do not merely speak to him, they remind him that he is a Hearer.

But who is this Hearer?

Beyond the Hearer, is there perhaps No-Hearer?

Who is this No-Hearer?

For such outrageous questions there are no intelligible answers. The only answer is the Hearing itself. The proper climate for such Hearing is solitude.

Or perhaps better, this Hearing which is No-Hearing is itself solitude. Why do I speak of a Hearing which is No-Hearing? Because if you imagine the solitary as "one" who has numerically isolated himself from "many others," who has simply gone out of the crowd to hang up his individual number on a rock in the desert, and there to receive messages denied to the many, you have a false and demonic solitude. This is solipsism, not solitude. It is the false unity of separateness, in which the individual marks himself off as his own number, affirms himself by saying "count me out."

The true unity of the solitary life is the one in which there is no possible division. The true solitary does not seek himself, but loses himself. He forgets that there is number in order to become all. Therefore he is No (individual) Hearer.

He is attuned to all the Hearing in the world, since he lives in silence. He does not listen to the ground of being, but he identifies himself with that ground in which all being hears and knows itself. Therefore he no longer has a thought for himself. What is this ground, this unity? It is Love. The paradox of solitude is that its true ground is universal love - and true solitude is the undivided unity of love for which there is no number.

The world is shrinking. There is less and less space in which men can be alone. It is said that if we go on increasing at our present rate, then in six hundred and fifty years there will be only one square foot left for every person. Even then, (someone may say) there will be one square foot of solitude. But is that right? Is each person a separate solitude of his own? No. There is One Solitude in which all persons are at once together and alone. But the price of a mathematical, quantitative concept of man (for instance in a positivistic and sociological

approach) is that in reducing each individual to his own number it reduces him to nothing: and in making the mass of men simply a total of individual units, it makes of it an enormous statistical void--in which numbers simply proliferate without aim, without value, without meaning, without love.

The peril of this massive, numerical, technical concept of man is then that it destroys love by substituting the individual for the person. And what is the person? Precisely he is one in the unity which is love. He is undivided in himself because he is open to all. He is open to all because the one love that is the source of all, the form of all and the end of all is one in him and in all. He is truly alone who is wide open to heaven and earth and closed to no one.

Love is not a problem, not an answer to a question. Love knows no question. It is the ground of all, and questions arise only insofar as we are divided, absent, estranged, alienated from that ground.

But the precise nature of our society is to bring about this division, this alienation, this estrangement, this absence. Hence we live in a world in which, though we clutter it with our possessions, our projects, our exploitations and our machinery, we ourselves are absent. Hence we live in a world in which we say "God is dead," and do so in a sense rightly, since we are no longer capable of experiencing the truth that we are completely rooted and grounded in His Love.

How can we rediscover this Truth?

Only when we no longer need to seek it -for as long as we seek it we imply that we have lost it. But in fact, to recognize ourselves as grounded in our true ground, love, is to recognize that we cannot be without it.

This recognition is impossible without a basic personal solitude.

Collective agitation, no matter how much it expostulates about

"I and Thou" will never attain it. For in the ground of solitude, "I and Thou" are one. And only from this ground does true dilection grow. Let us not then make 'love' and 'solitude' a matter of question and answer. The answer is not found in words, but by living on a certain level of consciousness. These pages are, then, concerned with a spiritual climate, an atmosphere, a landscape of the mind, a level of consciousness: the peace, the silence of aloneness in which the Hearer listens, and the Hearing is No-Hearing.

Christianity is a religion of the Word. The Word is Love. But we sometimes forget that the Word emerges first of all from silence. When there is no silence, then the One Word which God speaks is not truly heard as Love. Then only "words" are heard. "Words" are not love, for they are many and Love is One. Where there are many words, we lose consciousness of the fact that there is really only One Word. The One Word which God speaks is Himself. Speaking, He manifests Himself as infinite Love. His speaking and His hearing are One. So silent is His speech that, to our way of thinking, His speech is no speech, His hearing is no-hearing. Yet in his silence, in the abyss of His one Love all words are spoken and all words are heard. Only in this silence of infinite Love do they have coherence and meaning. Yet we draw them out of silence in order to separate them from one another, to make them distinct, to give them a unique sound by which we can discern them. This is necessary. Yet in all these many sounds and concepts there remains the hidden, secret power of one silence, one love, which is the power of God. "When all things were enveloped in quiet silence," says the Book of Wisdom 18:14, "and when the night had reached the mid-point in its course, from the height of the heavens Thy

"all powerful Word leaped down from the royal throne." By the action that takes place in life and history the secret non-action of Word and power manifest their reality. In this deep silence, Love remains the ground of history.

Even though one may be a learned man and may have profound knowledge of many subjects, and many "words", this is of no value, it has no central meaning, if the One Word, Love, has not been heard. That One Word is heard only in the silence and solitude of the empty heart, the selfless, undivided heart, the heart that is at peace, detached, free, without care. In the language of Christianity, this freedom is the realm of faith, and hope, but above all of Love. "If I have perfect faith...but no Love, I am nothing." -I Cor. 13:2. "Anyone who does not Love is still in death." -I John 3:14.

When the Christian faith is made to appear very complicated, it seems to consist of numerous doctrines, a complex system of concepts which impart information about the supernatural and seems to answer all possible questions about the after life, and about the means to attain to happiness in heaven. While these doctrines may be very true, they cannot be understood if we think that the only purpose of faith is multiple information communicated in many complex doctrines. In fact, the object of faith is One - God, Love. And though the revealed doctrines about Him are true, yet what they tell us of Him is not fully adequate as long as we grasp them only separately, incoherently, without living unity in Love. They must converge upon Love as the spokes of a wheel converge upon a central hub. They are window frames through which the One Light enters our houses. The window frame is precise and distinct: yet what we really see is the light itself, which is diffuse and all-pervading, so that it is everywhere and nowhere. No mind can comprehend God's reality, as it is in itself, and

if we approach Him we must advance not only by knowing but by not-knowing. We must seek to communicate with Him not only by words, but above all by silence, in which there is only the One Word, and the One Word is infinite Love and endless silence.

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Where is silence? Where is solitude? Where is Love?

Ultimately, these cannot be found anywhere except in the ground of our own being. There, in the silent depths, there is no more distinction between the I and the Not-I. There is perfect peace because we are grounded in infinite creative and redemptive Love. There we encounter God, whom no eye can see, and in Whom, as St Paul says, "we live and move and have our being." Acts 17:28. In Him, too, we find solitude, as St John of the Cross said, we find that the All and the Nothing encounter one another and are the Same.

If there is no silence beyond and within the many words of doctrine, there is no religion, only a religious ideology. For religion goes beyond words and actions, and attains to the ultimate truth only in silence and Love. Where this silence is lacking, where there are only the "many words" and not the One Word, then there is much bustle and activity, but no peace, no deep thought, no understanding, no inner quiet. Where there is no peace, there is no light and no Love. The mind that is hyper-active seems to itself to be awake and productive, but it is dreaming, driven by fantasy and doubt. Only in silence and solitude, in the quiet of worship, the reverent peace of prayer, the adoration in which the entire ego-self silences and abases itself in the presence of the Invisible God to receive His one Word of Love, only in these "activities" which are "non-actions" does the spirit truly wake from the dream of a multifarious, confused and agitated existence.

Precisely because of this, modern western man is afraid of solitude. He is unable to be alone, to be silent. He is communicating his spiritual and mental sickness to men of the East. Asia is gravely tempted by the violence and activism of the West, and is gradually losing hold of its traditional respect for silent wisdom. Therefore it is all the more necessary, at this time, to rediscover the climate of solitude and of silence: not that everyone can go apart and live alone. But in moments of silence, of meditation, of enlightenment and peace, one learns to be silent and alone everywhere. One learns to live in the atmosphere of solitude even in the midst of crowds. -Not 'divided' but one with all in God's Love. For one learns to be a Hearer who is No-Hearer, and one learns to forget all words and listen only to the One Word which seems to be No-Word. One opens the inner door of his heart to the infinite silences of the Spirit, out of whose abysses love wells up without fail and gives itself to all. In His silence, the meaning of every sound is finally clear. Only in His silence can the truth of words be distinguished, not in their separateness, but in their pointing to the central unity of Love. All words then say one thing only: that all is Love.

Heidegger has said that our relation to what is closest to us is always confused and without vigor. What is closer to us than the solitude which is the ground of our being? It is always there. For what precise reason it is always ignored, for when we begin to think of it we are uncomfortable, we make an "object" of it, and our relation to it is falsified. And truly, we are so close to ourselves that there is really no "relation" to the ground of our own being. Can we not simply be ourselves without thinking about it? This is true solitude.

Is it true to say that one goes into solitude to 'get at the root

of existence?' It would be better simply to say that in solitude one is at the root. He who is alone, and is conscious of what his solitude means, finds himself simply in the ground of life. He is 'in Love'. He is in love with all, with everyone, with everything. He is not surprised at this, and he is able to live with this disconcerting and unexciting reality, which has no explanation. He lives, then, as a seed planted in the ground. As Christ said, the seed in the ground must die. To be as a seed in the ground of one's very life is to dissolve in that ground in order to become fruitful. One disappears into Love, in order to 'be Love'. But this fruitfulness is beyond any planning and any understanding of man. To be "fruitful" in this sense, one must forget every idea of fruitfulness or productivity, and merely be. One's fruitfulness is at once an act of faith and an act of doubt: doubt of all that one has hitherto seen in oneself, and faith in what one cannot possibly imagine for oneself. The "doubt" dissolves our ego-identity. Faith gives us life in Christ, according to St Paul's word: "I live, now not I, but Christ lives in me." [Galatians 2:20]. To accept this is impossible unless one has profound hope in the incomprehensible fruitfulness that emerges from this dissolution of our ego in the ground of being and of Love. Such a hope is not the product of human reason, it is a secret gift of grace. It sustains us with divine and hidden aid. To accept our own dissolution would be inhuman if we did not at the same time accept the wholeness and completeness of everything in God's Love. We accept our emptying because we realize that our very emptiness is fulfilment and plenitude. In our emptiness the One Word is clearly spoken. It says, 'I will never let go of you or desert you' [Hebrews 13:5] for I am your God, I am Love.

To leave this ground in order to plunge into the human and social process with multiple activities, may well be only illusion, a purely

imaginary fruitfulness.

Modern man believes he is fruitful and productive when his ego is aggressively affirmed, when he is visibly active, and when his action produces obvious results. But this activity is more and more filled with self-contradiction. The richest and most scientific culture in the world, potentially organized for unlimited production, is expending its huge force and wealth not on fruitfulness but on instruments of destruction. In such condition, even though men sincerely desire peace, their desire is only an illusion which cannot find fulfilment. Such men live in perpetual self-defeat.

To rebel against this self-defeat by a morbid self-imprisonment in the disillusioned ego, would be a merely false solitude. Solitude is not withdrawal from ordinary life. It is not apart from, above "better than" ordinary life, on the contrary, solitude is the very ground of ordinary life. It is the very ground of that simple, unpretentious, fully human activity by which we quietly earn our daily living and share our experiences with a few intimate friends. But we must learn to know and accept this ground of our being. To most people, though it is always there, it is unthinkable and unknown. Consequently their life has no center and no foundation. It is dispersed in a pretense of "togetherness" in which there is no real meaning. Only when our activity proceeds out of the ground in which we have consented to be dissolved, does it have the divine fruitfulness of love and grace. Only then does it really reach others in true communion. Often our need for others is not love at all, but only the need to be sustained in our illusions, even as we sustain others in theirs. But when we have renounced these illusions, then we can certainly go out to others in true compassion. It is in

solitude that illusions finally dissolve. But one must work hard to see that they do not re-shape themselves in some worse form peopling our solitude with devils disguised as angels of light. Love, simplicity and compassion protect us against this. He who is truly alone truly finds in himself the heart of compassion with which to love not only this man or that, but all men. He sees them all in the One who is the Word of God, the perfect manifestation of God's Love, Jesus Christ.