

Another Parenthesis

Philippe Jaccottet,
translated by John Taylor

I am thinking of Paul Claudel rereading *The Song of Songs* in Saint Jerome's Latin, and glossing the phrase "descendi in hortum nucum" ("I went down into the walnut orchard") of 6:11 as "the walnut orchard is the dogma orchard," etc. And of Saint John of the Cross explaining the following lines from his own *Spiritual Canticle*, which, as we know, comes straight from *The Song of Songs*:

*A las aves ligeras,
Leones, ciervos, gamos saltadores,
Montes, valles, riberas,
Aguas, aires, ardores
Y miedos de las noches veladores,*

*Por las amenas liras,
Y canto de sirenas os conjuro,
Que cesen vuestras iras,
Y no toqueis al muro,*

Porque la esposa duerma mas seguro.

He remarks: “In these two strophes, the divine Bride speaks to the birds, the lions, the stags, the deer, the mountains, the valleys, as well as to the other things representing various obstacles from which her soul suffers in its holy dealings with God, to beseech them not to interrupt her joy. . .”

In both cases, is it not as if the explanation reduced the poem to its imagery, thus altering, if not ruining it?

One day when some hiking companions and I did not, strictly speaking, “go down into” but rather walked alongside a walnut orchard, it was no allegory whatsoever that—as we were passing by—held my innermost attention. Even if I had maintained the same respect as Claudel for Church dogmas, not for anything in the world would I have wished to see those beautiful trees replaced by thoughts, even by the most venerable ones! Be this as it may: without ceasing to be trees, the walnut trees also somehow beamed beyond themselves; along with what was in their midst—a stream, stones, grass—they formed a configuration that caught me in its trap; except that this trap, instead of holding me prisoner, seemed to make me freer; far from being fatal, it seemed to give me more life. And I had been affected in the same way by poetry, whenever it had been worthy of the name.

This likewise occurred when I read *The Spiritual Canticle*. I did not read it literally, as a wholly human love story set in a wholly earthly place; yet nor could I read it as a “spiritual method,” be it conceived by the author himself, one of the purest poetic voices that I have ever heard.

While reading *The Spiritual Canticle* in the original, that is without losing anything of its musicality, which is as harsh, stark, and limpid as the Castilian landscape that I had admired so much one day while we were driving across it under a bright sun, I spontaneously entered, without even having to think about it, a space “between two worlds” where my whole being, itself double,

swelled with joy. I was receiving gifts of images that, far from being weary or weighted down because of their long voyage from remote regions of time, seemed to have taken on wings (like a musical composition incorporating earlier musical elements yet remaining no less transparent); yet images that were also things often or occasionally seen by me during my lifetime: these mountains, these doves, these streams, these pieces of fruit, this wall of a house, these shepherds, these nymphs and even this lock of hair brushing against the nape of a neck. Now it so happened (and this was the in-between space) that there was not a single example of these earthly things and creatures that the momentum of the poem, and its pauses, did not transform: as if the things and creatures were indeed there, perfectly visible and audible, never blurry, never wavering (we were in no misty country!), yet with a part of the invisible also as present, and as indubitable, as their very shape, an extraordinarily radiant part of the invisible—the equivalent, for the eyes, of what for the ears is the “silent music” evoked in the same *Spiritual Canticle* just after the lines “the tranquil night / at the time of the rising dawn.”

This in-between space, this open enclosure—perhaps my only homeland; a world that is not confined to its appearances and that you would not love as much if it did not contain this invisible core that shines in a poem like the one written by Saint John of the Cross, indeed more brightly than in any other; no more than you could love light that implied neglecting or rejecting this core.

In his *Journal*, Gerard Manley Hopkins notes on 14 May 1870: “One day when bluebells were in bloom I wrote the following. I do not think I have ever seen anything more beautiful than the bluebell I have been looking at. I know the beauty of the Lord by it.”

Wrongly or regretfully, this “explanation,” if it can be called that, cannot be mine. I need to attempt something else, on the same theme, beginning with an identical emotion. With all due respect.

“By means of this bluebell, or any flower, which barely lasts, I can imagine that the world is not finite, that anything is more than it appears to be and somehow exceeds its apparent limits. Sensing

that a thing is beautiful, although nothing prepares or, even less, obliges us to do so, means experiencing it as shining beyond itself; it means feeling that, in the final reckoning, it opens up, and never stops doing so.

“By means of this bluebell, I am led to the light that for centuries has been given so many divine names, yet none of which has ever managed not to veil it partly.

“By means of this bluebell, I am led away, as if by undeceiving sirens, into a space that could open up ever more; even as it happens that a hand grasps you, leads you away, in silence, out of the darkest labyrinths.

“By means of this bluebell the highest circle of heaven could begin to be mended. At the level of the ground, which would no longer open only when shovels were digging graves.”

Words at the limit of hearing, attributable to no one, received in the conch of the ear like dew by a leaf.

— Phillippe Jaccottet, from *Et, néanmoins*,
© Éditions Gallimard, 2001.
— Translated from the French by John Taylor.