

## CHAPTER 1

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### *Solitude*

1. One dark night,  
*En una Noche oscura*  
Fired with love's urgent longings  
*Con ansias en amores inflamada*  
Ah, the sheer grace!  
*¡Oh dichosa ventura!*  
I went out unseen,  
*Salí sin ser notada,*  
My house being now all stilled;  
*Estando ya mi casa sosegada.*
2. In darkness, and secure,  
*2. A oscuras, y segura*  
By the secret ladder, disguised,  
*Por la secreta escala disfrazada*  
Ah, the sheer grace!  
*¡Oh dichosa ventura!*  
In darkness and concealment,  
*A oscuras y en celada,*  
My house being now all stilled;  
*Estando ya mi casa sosegada.*
3. On that glad night,  
*3. En la noche dichosa*  
In secret, for no one saw me,  
*En secreto, que nadie me veía,*  
Nor did I look at anything,  
*Ni yo miraba cosa,*  
With no other light or guide  
*Sin otra luz y guía*

Than the one that burned in my heart;  
*Sino la que en el corazón ardía.*

4. This guided me

4. *Aquesta me guiaba*

More surely than the light of noon

*Más cierto que la luz del mediodía,*

To where He waited for me

*A donde me esperaba*

Him I knew so well

*Quien yo bien me sabía*

In a place where no one else appeared.

*En parte donde nadie parecía.*

5. O guiding night!

5. *¡Oh noche que guiaste!*

O night more lovely than the dawn!

*¡Oh noche amable más que el alborada!*

O night that has united

*Oh noche que juntaste*

The Lover with His beloved,

*Amado con amada,*

Transforming the beloved in her Lover.

*Amada en el Amado transformada.*

6. Upon my flowering breast

*En mi pecho florido,*

Which I kept wholly for Him alone,

*Que entero para él solo se guardaba,*

There He lay sleeping,

*Allí quedó dormido,*

And I caressing Him

*Y yo le regalaba,*

There in a breeze from the fanning cedars.

*Y el ventalle de cedros aire daba.*

7. When the breeze blew from the turret

7. *El aire de la almena,*

Parting His hair,

*Cuando ya sus cabellos esparcía,*

He wounded my neck

*Con su mano serena*

With his gentle hand,

*En mi cuello hería,*

Suspending all my senses.

*Y todos mis sentidos suspendía.*

8. I abandoned and forgot myself,

8. *Quedéme y olvidéme,*

Laying my face on my Beloved;

*El rostro recliné sobre el Amado,*

All things ceased; I went out from myself,  
*Cesó todo, y dejéme,*  
 Leaving my cares  
*Dejando me cuidado*  
 Forgotten among the lilies.  
*Entre las azucenas olvidado.*

St. John of the Cross, "The Dark Night"/"Noche Oscura"

## Introduction to Solitude

As Thomas Merton has noticed,<sup>1</sup> there is a certain tyranny exerted on human beings by diversion or distraction, by what Pascal called "divertissement." Yet John of the Cross writes a great deal about solitude (*soledad*), not so much to convince people to become solitary, but to become more aware of the condition of solitude in which they already exist. He thinks that all human beings are solitary, even if many of them work as hard as they can to forget this fact. Nor do they have to work hard to forget their solitude in that culture (especially contemporary culture, with its electronic media and fetish for commodities) that makes diversion systematic by graciously providing a person with opportunities all through the day and night to avoid his own company.

My procedure in this chapter will be to describe in a general way this solitude and its enemies in contemporary culture, and then carefully to consider the texts of John of the Cross in order to introduce his approach to the sort of contemplative life which he thinks best takes advantage of human solitude. In the process, we will have occasion to consider several features in John of the Cross's thought: asceticism, meditation, the dark night of the soul, and contemplation.

It should be noted at the outset, and this point will be developed in chapter two on *praxis* (action), that solitude does not mean a reversal of John Donne's claim that no man is an island. Even the worst society provides some goods essential for human life. That is, John of the Cross is well aware of the fact that there are individualistic illusions pursued under the pretense of solitude. (When Frank Sinatra sings that he did it *his* way we cannot help but notice that he is a *cultural* artifact. Those who protest too much about their individuality are precisely those who are abjectly dependent on society.)

The good that society provides an individual is, most importantly, the opportunity to transcend individualism in the service of

others. But one cannot provide such service by diversion, for its function is to "anesthetize the individual as individual, and to plunge him in the warm, apathetic stupor of a collectivity which, like himself, wishes to remain amused."<sup>2</sup> Such amusement may be blatant, as in watching football games on television while doing twelve-ounce curls with a can of beer, or hypocritical, as in the seriousness of political conventions or in the precise plans to invest money.

There are those for whom solitude is a problem, and reading John of the Cross will be of little use to them. His appeal is found in those who have less need of diversion than they are told, to those who can detach (*ajenci3n*) themselves from the engineers of human personality and from the cult of publicity. Further, John of the Cross can only appeal to those who are not afraid of the abyss. In avoiding diversion one gives up the possibility of a neat, tidy, self-referential illusion about oneself.

But to be alone is not necessarily to be lonely; this is the whole point to John of the Cross's religious view of what he calls "holy solitude" (*soledad santa*). When one is called to be a solitary (the passive voice to be explained in chapter six), one need not be a monk (etymologically, one who is isolated). John of the Cross is concerned with an interior solitude that can exist even in an active life like Henry Thoreau's, or better, even in an extremely active life like his own. One achieves true solitude not by literally leaving society but by transcending it; not by eschewing fellowship but by realizing that human solidarity is not achieved through Rotarian optimism. For John of the Cross each person is a metaphysical one, a spiritual center, and if there is a higher unity it is found at a divine level (as we will see in chapter four in what John of the Cross believes to be a mystical body—of Christ). In between these two unities some chase the mirage of "union" found in the fictions and conventions of social groups. These fictions can take possession of an individual and divert him, that is, divide him against himself.

Political and economic systems have a tendency to treat persons as instruments. As we will see, John of the Cross's severe *nada* has led some to suppose that he, too, sees human beings as instruments in the service of God. Yet John of the Cross almost always uses *nada* in conjunction with *todo*. Without emptiness the solitary remains an individualist whose nonconformity terminates in a James Dean-like rebellion without a cause. Negation properly understood, however, awakens one to *all* that matters. John of the Cross's vocation is not a call to a narcissistic or solipsistic religion, but a call to be awake.

The hope of John of the Cross is to live hidden in the sense that his solitude is not easily seen. He was a trenchant opponent to anything flashy in religion, as he was to any ec-centric desire for recognition. It is true that there is something severe in John of the Cross's Weltanschauung, a severity which surfaces in many ways, for example, in the opposition to what many contemporary religious seekers assume to be the goal of their search: the heightening of *self-consciousness*. But the point to his severity is *decisively* to break with social and psychological fictions.

Despite the severity of John of the Cross's view of solitude, or perhaps because of it, the tendency of his thought is toward unity. The false or superficial solitary wants society to advert to his separateness, hence he needs society as a ventriloquist needs a dummy. The solitude John of the Cross has in mind does not call attention to itself, but it takes with a grain of salt the claims made in the modern world for collective achievement and happiness. The unity that is the *telos* of his thought has nothing to do with patriotism; in fact, he may very well despise the arrogance of his own nation as that of any other. The unity that he is concerned with is, as we will see in chapter four, stripped of the fiction which many people require in religion and politics and culture.

Homer was correct in implying that the solitary is likely to be either bestial or godlike. Polyphemus the Cyclops, who lived apart from human culture, is an example of the former. His anthropophagy is the fruit of his solitude. John of the Cross, however, defends in text after text a solitude that is really shared by everyone. What the true solitary renounces is not fellowship with others, but rather the fictive community of fans, say, at a frenzied rock concert. The solitary is united with others on a deeper, emotional, even metaphysical level. He is united with others in their common solitude, a commonality which, as we will see, is the ground of sympathy.

Many will no doubt find the solitary person a bit unsocial, despite his deep sympathy. In any event, the true solitary does not waste time searching for solitude—a sure sign of a lost soul—in that he is already found by it. The simplicity of the solitary's life would be lost if the search for solitude itself became a principal means of diversion. Further, there are many who try with idle chatter to “save” the solitary from his solitude, perhaps because the veneer of religion they are familiar with makes them ill-prepared to appreciate the bond they already have with the solitary.

If every Christian, and perhaps every artist, is supposed to be in the world but not of it, then there has never been a truer Chris-

tian or artist than John of the Cross. To be "in" the world means that there is no need to retreat to the desert in order to reach union with God, especially when it is realized that the contemporary desert is not necessarily a retreat, as in its oil rigs, its dirt bikes, and its nuclear test sites. It is an internal withdrawal that John of the Cross has in mind. To despair of the elaborate facades that human beings build is not to despair of humanity. The solitary has the humility to realize that to better the human condition *in* the world it is not necessarily the case that the only contribution is made in an overt, social way. I will try to deliver on this promissory note as the book advances.

I do not wish to deny that love for others must eventually take some visible, or at least symbolic, form. I am only claiming, along with John of the Cross: (1) that interior withdrawal from others (or a mute witness to a profound truth) can in fact be a type of love for them; and (2) that an unreflective attachment to action for its own sake plays into the hands of a corruptive, even demagogic, fiction. Merton calls this fiction "the virus of mendacity."<sup>3</sup> The solitary escapes mendacity in a Socratic fashion by being critical first and foremost of himself. And although the desert is not necessary for such criticism, it must be admitted that there is a healing silence in natural wilderness that facilitates self-knowledge. Further, and this point will be amplified in chapter five, silence is needed for language to have meaning because without intervals between utterances all of our words would run together into a Babel, as they often do.

In my discussion of action, it will be clear that John of the Cross is not necessarily concerned with those who are condemned to isolation by circumstance or, perhaps, by temperament. Familiar with activity himself, John of the Cross directs his attention at those who "leave" activity for the sake of an internal wilderness. Because these solitaries have not so much chosen their solitude as they have been chosen by it, they often experience torment *at first*, but, as we will see, eventually they become acclimated to the positive features of poverty, emptiness, and anonymity.

There are Wordsworthian spots of time in every person's life, when, like Puck, we notice what fools mortals can be. But to be *completely* honest with oneself requires a "wretched austerity,"<sup>4</sup> which is mitigated a bit if one lives in a religious community or if one is ensconced within a counter-culture. (From the perspective of mysticism, Christianity itself is a counter-culture, even in, perhaps especially in, nominally Christian cultures.) The smaller group is still a group, however, and the solitary must to some extent be a

stranger (*extrañez*) or a wanderer even among friends. There is something ironic about solitude in community, perhaps even something oxymoronic about it, but there is nothing positively inconsistent in a solitude which no longer possesses an instinctive, knee jerk response to the otherwise automatic mechanisms of a group, but a solitude which nonetheless belongs to the group.

The solitary certainly has eccentricities and faults, but he is not a failure just because he lies outside the computations and plans of those in the dominant culture, including those within mainstream academia, who can commodify people or treat them as instruments as well as any technocrat. Only when one works from the assumption that these computations and plans are preeminent can one see the solitary as irrelevant. From the perspective of the technocrat the solitary is, at best, indistinguishable from the pragmatic individualist, but the latter is a construction of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century commercial culture rather than of mystical religion.

Although it is easier to have religion filtered to us through the slogans and assumptions of a particular organization or a particular culture, the solitary is nonetheless happy on his difficult road, even if he does not always "have a good time." It is easier for culture to recreate a god in its own image through catchwords and advertisements than it is to approach God on the divine's own terms. There is something "other" not only to God, but also to the individual human being. Even when viewing one's own past self one senses an alterity, say when one is startled by a photo of "oneself" when in high school. One of the jobs of the solitary is to come to terms with this otherness and with divine otherness.

It will eventually become apparent that the solitary self is not only not selfish, it is not even permanent. It vanishes unmysteriously in mystical contemplation, especially that false, superficial, social self which postures in everyday life. The shallow "I" of individualism can be commodified, prostituted, and pandered to. The inner "I" is elusive, yet when uncovered it is the fertile ground of divinity itself.

### Unity-in-Variety

Thus far I have spoken in very general terms of John of the Cross's notion of solitude. Now I would like to consider several specific texts of his that amplify this theme of solitude. I would like to begin by noticing the pragmatic tendency in John of the Cross's thought. That is, all of his efforts aim at the solution of a problem or at the amelioration of some condition. He notices those who feel

interiorly alien from all things (*extrañez de todas las cosas*), an estrangement which causes a distasteful weariness (*tedio*) with the world (D, II, 9; L, 3, 39).<sup>5</sup> Once the spirit has a taste of the solution to these difficulties, its previous food seems bitter. In a holy idleness, the soul comes to realize that it is advantageous for the soul to be sick (*enfermar*), for then it searches for God as a cure. It is this hope for a cure which, in a way, makes the soul's suffering quite unwearisome (*sufrir sin fatigarse*). According to John of the Cross, the really sick person only desires health, and the really sick soul only desires God (D, 2, 19; S, 10, 1).

But the soul must not only suffer, it must realize that it suffers in order for progress to be made. Hence John of the Cross is quick to point out that self-knowledge (*conocimiento de sí*) is the first requirement for advancing to God (S, 4, 1). To know that one's life is in need of a cure is one thing, to know where to find a cure is another. John of the Cross's advice is straightforward and prompts the title to this chapter: God must be sought within the soul, which is the divine hiding place. John of the Cross relies on Luke 17:21 and on several simple metaphors to describe the knowledge of self he has in mind: the self is like a sick person desiring health, a hungry person craving food, or an empty vessel waiting to be filled (S, 1, 6-8; S, 9, 6).

No reflective person in our age would be convinced by Job's friends to the effect that a suffering soul is caused by hidden wickedness. What is more likely is that the contemporary suffering soul would first psychologize his condition and then procrastinate due to the assumption that the suffering would go away or could be bought out by a trip to a few stores (see A, prologue; M, prayer). But procrastination, by definition, only postpones the problem. For John of the Cross, the old person must die and the new person live *now* in order to achieve union with God (L, 2, 33). This effort is facilitated by the dynamism of life itself, a dynamism which presupposes what Alfred North Whitehead calls the "perpetual perishing" of the drops of experience that make up our lives.

It is not my aim to disparage psychology of religion as a discipline, but rather to suggest that the whole notion of a "spiritual crisis" is trivialized if it is reduced *simpliciter* to psychological components. Further, psychological reductionism is a knife that can cut both ways, as William James noticed; it can reduce a spiritual crisis to certain psychological excitations *and* it can reduce the atheist's beliefs to a malfunctioning liver.<sup>6</sup> The assumption many contemporaries make, an assumption which initially seems harmless, that spiritual suffering is due exclusively to psychological con-



ditions, is one of the cataracts noticed by John of the Cross, a small speck clearly seen which clouds our vision of a big object. God, for John of the Cross, lies on the other side of the cataract (L, 3, 72-73). Never one to be bothered by the mixing of metaphors, John of the Cross sees the removal of the cataract as the cause of an awakening (*recuerdo*) of God in the soul, and those who are recently awake breathe the most deeply, they are most in-spired (L, 4, 2). Like Merton, John of the Cross himself was inspired by Isa. 8:6, where the life-giving waters of Siloe flow, unnoticed, in silence (L, 3, 64).

It might be asked, how could a soul suffer and not know it? John of the Cross's response would consist, like Thoreau's,<sup>7</sup> in pointing out that many, if not most, human beings live lives of *quiet* desperation, a desperation hidden by the cataract of their own sleepy assumptions regarding what life can be. John of the Cross does not write an ode to dejection, but brags as lustily as chanticleer if only to wake us up. Wakeful individuals wedge their feet downward through the mud and slush of prejudice and mere opinion, the alluvion which covers the globe, until they hit rock bottom, until they hit God.

In order to stay awake in life human beings need training. Hitting something solid is not as easy, as the cliché has it, as falling off a horse. That is, spiritual progress for John of the Cross requires asceticism. It was a commonplace in Greek culture that virtue consisted in a mean between two extremes. Moderation (*sophrosyne*) was a key virtue, perhaps *the* key virtue, consisting in a mean between self-indulgence (*pleonexia*), or thinking too much of oneself, on the one hand, and thinking too little of oneself (*mikropsychia*), on the other. In that Western culture has exhibited pleonexic tendencies at least from the time of Adam Smith, it is not too surprising that many recent interpreters of Christian thinkers like John of the Cross either see asceticism as an example of *mikropsychia* or as an embarrassing feature for which one must give an *apologia*. My thesis in this section of the chapter is that defenders of John of the Cross need not be embarrassed by his asceticism and that asceticism need not be a type of *mikropsychia*. Integral to this thesis will be an emphasis on the athletic nature of *askesis*.

Another sixteenth-century Spanish writer like Saint Ignatius of Loyola makes it clear in *The Spiritual Exercises* that there is a difference between moderation and penance. The former consists in denying ourselves what is excessive, luxurious, flashy; that is, eliminating what we might want as opposed to what we really need. But penance consists in temporarily denying ourselves what is essential for us to have; it does not eliminate that which is

excessive but that which is integral to our well being. Two preliminary examples would be avoiding frequent desserts after meals (moderation) as opposed to fasting (penance).

In which category is asceticism to be placed? In order to respond to this question one must realize that the etymology of the word *askesis* shows an athletic origin. The word does not so much refer to self-denial as to the practice or training required to compete in an athletic event. It must be emphasized that ascetic training is also needed to avoid *pleonexia*, that is, to obtain moderation so as to reach God. Or as Porphyry implies, asceticism enables us to escape from barbarism so that we may "enter the stadium naked and unclothed, striving for the most glorious of all prizes, the Olympia of the soul."<sup>8</sup>

E. R. Dodds is an example of a scholar who seems to think that Christianity introduces a hatred for the body and contempt for the human condition.<sup>9</sup> His negative attitude is understandable when we realize that he relies on an anonymous early Christian thinker who compares the human body to a filthy bag of excrement and urine. The moderation of John of the Cross can be seen if we offer a better model for ascetic discipline. If I am not mistaken, John of the Cross's notion of solitude is connected with the concepts of interior beauty or of being "centered." If I am correct about this connection, then solitude can be seen as a mean between two sets of extremes, as the following diagram indicates:

### Diagram 1

B = too much order or asceticism  
lack of *discreción*

D = hopeless  
profundity



E = superficiality  
*golosina de  
espiritu  
ornato de  
muñecas*

C = too much disorder  
*distracción  
vana codicia  
excess "needs"*

I will now work my way around this circle, starting with *distracción* (C). If one wanted to hear beautiful music, one would be disappointed if forced to hear a two-year-old bang piano notes at random. Too much disorder is as distasteful in one's spiritual life as it is in music or politics. John of the Cross is intent to show that an excessive reliance on sensation creates a sort of ugliness called "distraction" (*distracción*). This ugliness is intensified when inordinate attachment to appetites becomes habitual, for then it becomes less likely that one will create a beautiful life for oneself (A, I, 9, 11; A, III, 26). A vain covetousness (*vana codicia*) leads to a slavish clinging to things, like a wood boring insect who continually gnaws. The oddity is that this tawdry attachment to things is often rationalized as the search for beauty through ornamentation (a search which presupposes that the object ornamented cannot stand on its own aesthetic worth), style (*modo*), or craftsmanship (A, III, 35).

For John of the Cross, trying to journey to God without shaking off the appetites and the cares of the world is like dragging a cart uphill (M, sayings, 53). The heaviness of the burden is caused by the fact that the habit of meddling with exterior attachments multiplies one's needs. In addition to invariant biological needs (like food) and those variable needs connected with some particular historical epoch (for example, in our culture, a telephone), John of the Cross realizes that there are those "needs" created by our anxiety (*nuestra solicitud es la que nos necesita*). These latter "needs" are such impediments to beauty that John of the Cross hyperbolizes by saying that we should not attach ourselves to anything (M, sayings, 26; M, letters, 10, 20). It is this sort of talk on John of the Cross's part that plays into the hands of critics like Dodds who assume that Christian asceticism is life-negating.

A more favorable treatment of John of the Cross would have us notice that he is only advocating the view that the soul should divest (*desasida*) itself of distractions to solitude (S, 40, 2). He has no hope of eliminating biological desire altogether; there will always be some herd of appetites which escape even the ascetic's control; there will always remain inclinations under the sway of bad habits; and there will always be certain angry predispositions, which, like foxes, pretend to be asleep, but which have a certain degree of hegemony over us nonetheless (S, 14, 30; S, 16, 5; S, 26, 18; D, I, 5).

There is nothing wrong with eating, as long as we do so mindfully, that is, as long as we carefully notice what we are eating (no easy task today), why we are eating, where the food came from, which work was exerted or which pain inflicted to get the food, and so forth. In order to preserve this mindfulness, Ignatius of Loyola

suggests that we plan our next meal just after we have eaten. This way we avoid eating gluttonously or without considering who produced the food or whose blood was spilled in such production. The junk food of the senses is not unconnected with the junk food of the spirit.

In order to habituate oneself to live a Christian life, John of the Cross thinks that we have to take aesthetic categories seriously. Too much variety causes ugliness, as in the above piano example. Total ugliness (*total fealdad*) occurs when the soul completely succumbs to desire with no ascetical restraint whatsoever (A, I, 9, 13). I suspect that this idea of "total" ugliness is a limit concept or a regulative ideal for John of the Cross and is not to be taken literally or as a constitutive idea. The incompatibility of alternatives in life makes all of us somewhat ascetical. Life is full of choices between good things, as in choosing to be a dedicated teacher or an honest business-person. Or again, there are numerous good ways to compose music, each of which in a given case excludes other ways. When choosing between positive values there is no uniquely right choice, and, more importantly, some good choices must be renounced. It is silly to aim at *all* the good things in life, so in a peculiar way we are all ascetics who do without some very good things. But some ascetics like John of the Cross self-consciously choose their renunciations and choose them to a greater extent than others.<sup>10</sup>

The renunciations, which John of the Cross chooses to make, blanket all five senses (A, I, 3), an inclusiveness that should not surprise reflective twentieth-century individuals who have noticed how easy it is to succumb to the seductive lures of: (1) the pleasant feel of a calf leather seat in a Mercedes; (2) the smell of expensive perfume or cologne aggressively marketed at Christmas; (3) the taste of Chateau Neuf du Pape; (4) the look of *this* year's fashions—a seduction which should remind us how foolish we were last year; or (5) the siren sound of commercial music—note that it is at times almost impossible not to turn on a car radio. The gate to divine union is narrower than we think (A, II, 7). John of the Cross reminds us that once the ancient Hebrews ate flesh in Egypt they had a hard time appreciating any other food, even manna sent from heaven (D, II, 9).

Distraction is especially a problem because we not only have to come to terms with present perceptions but also with memories of previous ones. Many sights, sounds, smells, feels, and tastes of years gone by have hardly faded. Relying on Matt. 6:24, John of the Cross claims that memory (especially resentment) is a master to

which we can easily become enslaved, and no one can serve two masters. Hence, suspensions (*suspensiones*) of memory must occur at the beginning of one's effort to achieve union with God. Although certain powerful images from the past have not faded (that is, they have not lost their intensity), they do change in the sense that they can lead to falsehood (*falsedades*) when intervening events distort what really happened in the past. Because of the destructive nature of resentment, falsehood, and waste of time (*perdimiento de tiempo*), John of the Cross thinks that there is something liberating in the attempt to annihilate (*desnudar*) memory. Perhaps the only positive thing he has to say about memory is that, if accurate, it leads us to humility in that we all have made egregious mistakes in our pasts (A, III, 2-3; S, 33, 1).

Area (B) in the above diagram is meant to indicate that John of the Cross also thought that too much order in one's life, too much asceticism, was destructive of the beauty in solitude (A, I, 8). That is, the well-ordered soul is different from one that exercises totalitarian control over her desires because the soul has a multitude and diversity (*multitud y diferencia*) of affections for God. Animal passion itself is good as long as it does not deter a life of prayer of quiet (*oración de quietud*). Discretion (*discretamente*) is the hallmark of an orderly life (A, I, 9-11, 13).

Chaos in music may lead one to desire order, but repeatedly going up and down the scales is ugly because it is *too* orderly and too predictable. Utter confusion in politics is ugly, but no more ugly than the other extreme. For example, the Italians paid an exorbitant price when Mussolini made the trains run on time. Likewise, an asceticism true to its etymological heritage in athletics is only to be commended if it prepares one to perform well in the big event. Some zealous religious aspirants in John of the Cross's day, and some of his contemporary Carmelites, weakened themselves too much through fasts (D, I, 6), a practice which is to be criticized almost as much as its opposite, gluttony (*gula*).

It must be admitted that John of the Cross views *distracción* (C) as a greater danger than lack of discretion (B). We *often* exhibit *distracción* (C) because of lack of self-control or because of a mistaken conviction that human nature cannot bear asceticism or because of the self-deception or subterfuge we indulge in when we say that asceticism is "positively medieval," and so forth. However, *sometimes* we may discipline ourselves too severely by thinking that our body can bear it. The danger involved in leaning more toward lack of discretion (B) than *distracción* (C), as John of the

Cross does, is that one may present very good reasons why not to overeat, say, without giving good reasons why we should eat at all. If I am not mistaken, however, John of the Cross is up to the challenge. In chapter five, we will consider the distinction between instrumental and intrinsic good in John of the Cross. Here I would like to notice that food, for example, is good instrumentally and intrinsically. Food tastes and smells and looks good precisely because it is part of the divine creation, that is, it is intrinsically good; and it is good because it leads to healthy bodily activities like meditating. A wonderful quotation from Nikos Kazantzakis's novel *Zorba the Greek* illustrates John of the Cross's attitude well, I think, with Zorba's boss providing the clue to John of the Cross's own position:

Tell me what you do with the food you eat, and I'll tell you who you are. Some turn their food into fat and manure, some into work and good humor, and others, I'm told, into God. So there must be three sorts of men. I'm not one of the worst, boss, nor yet one of the best. I'm somewhere between the two. What I eat I turn into work and good humor. . . . As for you, boss. . . I think you do your level best to turn what you eat into God. But you can't quite manage it, and that torments you.<sup>11</sup>

Neither Zorba's boss nor John of the Cross are as indifferent to food as some superficial interpretations of them would suggest.

Too much order or ascetical rigor in one's life is also bothersome to John of the Cross because it leads to drudgery (*trabajo*), spiritual boredom (*tedio espiritual*), and a waste of time. It should be noted that drudgery and boredom are aesthetic categories that are only understandable as deviations from beauty. Most bothersome about lack of discretion (B), however, is the fact that it indicates insufficient self-esteem (A, III, 13, 25; D, I, 2). As before, the more likely outcome, especially for beginners, is that they will not sufficiently deny themselves (D, I, 7). But there is today, and certainly was in John of the Cross's day, a tendency in discretion (B) toward sloth and tedium (*acidias y tedios*) in the ascetic life; sloth because it is possible to allow one's routine to make life too easy. John of the Cross is a tireless opponent to anything that smacks of Homer's land of the lotus eaters, even an ascetic rigor which produces a soporific effect by allowing one's routine to make one's decisions for one, to produce *tedio espiritual*. That is, it is possible for *ennui* to trump solitude. John of the Cross only admires the soul that has been tempted, tried, and proved (D, I, 13–14).

I repeat the point if only because John of the Cross, in particular, and Christianity, in general, are often the subjects of caricature regarding asceticism, especially by those who only notice John of the Cross's hyperbole in the condemnation of *distracción* (C): there is nothing wrong with serving the appetites; rather, there is something wrong with serving the appetites only or with allowing the appetites to have hegemony, as in the man who eats before digesting what he previously ate (M, letters, 7). Pleasure itself is caused by the desire for things that at least appear good; and even if the object of desire is not really good, the phenomenon of pleasure itself is not to be anathematized (M, letters, 12).

A final point needs to be made regarding John of the Cross's criticisms of asceticism (B). The key transition in the thought of John of the Cross is that from meditation to contemplation, a movement which I will later treat in detail. Here I would like to call attention to the fact that meditation, as opposed to contemplation, relies on sensory images, say imagining Jesus at table with his friends. Asceticism (B) in effect would squash the methods of meditation (*modos de meditaciones*), which are necessary for beginners, at least; these are methods which aim at enamoring and feeding the soul through sensation (A, II, 12).

Sandwiched in between asceticism (B) and *distracción* (C) is John of the Cross's preferred view. Three scholars who lend indirect support to this claim are: Gerald Brenan, William James, and Bede Frost. Brenan<sup>12</sup> admits that contemporary readers can get a feeling of claustrophobia when they experience the intensity of John of the Cross's ascetic fervor, but Brenan also notices that there is nothing punitive in John of the Cross's *askesis*, as some contemporary individuals might assume. Even in John of the Cross's famous doggeral:

To reach satisfaction in all  
*Para venir a gustarlo todo*  
 desire its possession in nothing.  
*no quieras tener gusto en nada.*  
 To come to possess all  
*Para venir a poseerlo todo*  
 desire the possession of nothing.  
*no quieras poseer algo en nada.*  
 To arrive at being all  
*Para venir a serlo todo*

desire to be nothing.

*no quieras ser algo en nada.*

To come to the knowledge of all

*Para venir a saberlo todo*

desire the knowledge of nothing.

*no quieras saber algo en nada.*

To come to the pleasure you have not

*Para venir a lo que no gustas*

you must go by a way in which you enjoy not.

*has de ir por donde no gustas.*

To come to the knowledge you have not

*Para venir a lo que no sabes*

you must go by a way in which you know not.

*has de ir por donde no sabes.*

To come to the possession you have not

*Para venir a lo que no posees*

you must go by a way in which you possess not.

*has de ir por donde no posees.*

To come to be what you are not

*Para venir a lo que no eres*

you must go by a way in which you are not.

*has de ir por donde no eres (A, I, 13).*

there is no use of *nada* which is not connected with *todo*. Solitude, silence, *desnudez*, poverty, emptiness, forgetfulness, detachment: none of these words have painful associations for John of the Cross. As a matter of fact, even in John of the Cross's prose works, and especially in his poetry, these words have an aura of happiness and peace.

Likewise, William James<sup>13</sup> holds that John of the Cross's ascetic spirit is "undiluted" and that he existed rather than flourished in the sixteenth century, presumably because undiluted asceticism does not allow one to flourish. Yet James admits that he is driven into vertigo regarding John of the Cross and other Spanish mystics because he must acknowledge that they showed "indomitable spirit and energy" and that they were prevented from engaging in "over-abstractness from practical life" because of their strong intellects. And Bede Frost<sup>14</sup> emphasizes that John of the Cross was not primarily concerned with detachments from things, but with detachment of spirit at the center of the soul. This is where the Word is hidden, as we will see in chapter five, but few find union with God because they do not know how to get to the center.

Spiritual centeredness (A) is distinctive because of its balance of unity-in-variety, order-in-multiplicity, and, as we will see in the



tension between hopeless profundity (D) and superficiality (E), in its intensity of experience. Two contraries cannot exist in the same subject, as John of the Cross often reminds us (for example, A, I, 4), but two complementary poles can be brought together, indeed they must be brought together if they are to function well, as in the famous dominant theme and its subtle variations in the first movement of Beethoven's fifth symphony. The soul needs to be recollected (*recogida*) in itself so as to preserve the center from centrifugal forces like asceticism (B) and *distracción* (C). This requires a certain degree of diligence and eagerness (*diligencia y gana*) or else, like uncovered hot water, which dissipates its heat, or unwrapped spices, which lose their pungency, the soul will lose its intensity at the center (A, I, 10).

The difficulty in maintaining intensity in the spiritual life is partially caused by the interior darkness of the soul, a darkness which conceals the soul's advance (A, II, 1); it is much easier to plot the progress of a diet or count the number of pull-ups one can perform. John of the Cross is always careful to keep wisdom (the Greek *sophia*) distinct from technique (the Greek *techne*), a distinction ignored by the self-help and spirituality books in shopping mall bookstores. A multiplicity of methods or techniques or computations (like counting prayers or good works, etc.) are not needed on the road to God, only true self-denial (*negar de veras*). A necessary, although not sufficient, criterion for testing the veracity of self-denial is that it leads one to the realization that "the greater spiritual state" is equivalent to "greater interiority." But if one was always on the way toward interiority one would never arrive; John of the Cross encourages one to notice the interior (spiritual) success one has already achieved in the religious life (A, II, 7, 12).

Reiterating the need for sensory stimulation, John of the Cross holds that certain places may be conducive to solitude, such as the mountains were for Jesus (Matt. 14:23), or, perhaps, as a corner of the house at daybreak may be today (A, III, 39-40). However, it is not "holy places" that make one holy; spiritual sobriety and temperance (*sobriedad y templanza*) must always act as guides (D, I, 6) because they, more than any particular place, bring tranquility (*tranquilidad*) and solitude (D, I, 13).

John of the Cross takes seriously the cliché that God humbles in order to exalt. At the beginning of the quest for God, human beings can only see their own misery, as in the above cataract example. But the enkindling of the soul by divine love burns off impurities which distort our vision. Or better, the enkindling of

divine love in the center of the soul is like a log on fire which initially is dried by the heat, then has the impurities on its bark burned off; but eventually the *core* of the log catches fire. Better still, the enkindled soul is like iron in the forge (D, II, 6, 10, 13).

Mystical wisdom, which is called secret (because the soul hides within itself), in a certain way flatters individuals, but it also lays on the individual in solitude the burden of realizing that failure to achieve union with God can only be due to itself (*la perdición del alma solamente le viene de sí misma*—see Ossee 13:9). But John of the Cross has confidence that it is not likely that those who intensely desire union with God (that is, those who run swiftly to God) will fail to achieve it. According to John of the Cross, rest and quietude (*sosiego y quietud*) and purity appoint the spiritual homes of those who desire God (D, II, 16–17, 20, 24).

The riches, delights, and satisfactions of God, thinks John of the Cross, are never absent from us. But in order to find them in the hiding places of the soul, two steps must be taken: (1) there must be a departure from things in a reflective asceticism; and (2) there must be self-forgetfulness (*misma por olvido*). By self-forgetfulness John of the Cross means love of God (S, 1, 8–9; S, 1, 20). John of the Cross's view seems to be that in condemning asceticism (B) he is also condemning too little self-respect if only because human beings are part of the divine creation. One must have a healthy sense of self in the first place before one can realize that to be *selfish* is to fall victim to an illusion. (An illusoriness to be treated in detail in chapter four.) Individuals die but God endures. When the soul is in a healthy solitude, it realizes that it is naturally and radically centered in God (*natural y radicalmente tiene el alma su vida en Dios*). John of the Cross paraphrases Acts 17:28 to the effect that in God we live and move and have our being as temporary parts in an everlasting whole (S, 8, 3). Put quite simply (and I will defend John of the Cross against the charge of pantheism in chapter four), the soul's center of gravity (*centro*) is God (S, 11, 4).

This quietude and tranquility in God (*sosiego y quietud en Dios*) is compared to the solitary sparrow perched on the highest branch, with beak toward the wind of God. This "solitary sparrow" hears the oxymoronic silent music (*musica callada*) of sounding solitude (*soledad sonora*). Although I will treat John of the Cross's use of language in chapter five, here I would like to emphasize that it is against the background of solitude, he thinks, that significant sounds and utterances can occur (a la Mahler). Hence the dominance of the electronic media takes away the precondition for mysticism

(compare S, 14, 24–27). Try finding a quiet place, say, in a college dormitory, or, what is increasingly difficult, in a library or a movie theater or even a church.

John of the Cross offers little hope for union with God in a chatty life-style where the soul cannot recollect (*recogerse*) itself in its deep interior hiding place, a rich cache created by the soul's withdrawal (*ajenci3n*). Like the inner wine cellar where the efforts of the vinedressers are improved, John of the Cross thinks that human cares and work can only be improved through solitude (S, 16, 6; S, 16, 10; S, 19, 6; S, 26, 3; S, 27, 7). Merely being alone is not enough to preserve virtue, rather one must be alone in what he calls the inner chamber of God's love (S, 31, 4; S, 33, 7). Or again, solitude is like a watered garden enclosed by a fence which, as in Robert Frost's famous poem, makes good neighbors. The purpose of this fence is to separate one's daily labors with others from one's own spiritual sabbath, thereby establishing some elbow room for one's spiritual life. Indeed, John of the Cross sometimes refers to this enclosure as a fort (S, 36, 2; S, 40, 3).

The equation of "interior" and "spiritual" in John of the Cross does not preclude there being different centers in the soul of varying levels of profundity. Even rocks are "centered" in their inanimate way (L, prologue; L, 1, 9; L, 1, 11). And animals are centered as moral patients in the sense that they perceive the world from a particular point of view which they value, as when a cow tries to avoid immanent danger. Human beings, however, have layers of centers, like concentric circles nested in each other, such that it makes sense for John of the Cross to quest for the soul's deepest center. Like rocks we are always centered in some particular place; like plants we are nutritively centered in some biosphere, breathing air, and so forth; and like animals we are centered in our sentient concerns. Only human beings, however, can consciously be aware that their deepest center is in God (L, 1, 12). It is *this* center in holy solitude, according to John of the Cross, which can create happiness in the individual even when the body is ill (M, sayings, 76; M, letters, 30).

### Against Superficiality

The vertical axis, which runs through the above diagram, should now be sufficiently explained. Next I will turn to the horizontal axis, but only briefly because I will save an extended treatment of

sublimity, which leans in the direction of hopeless profundity (D), for chapter four. The solitude, which John of the Cross defends, is not only a mean between too much order and too much disorder, but it is also a mean between experience which is hopelessly superficial, on the one hand, and hopelessly profound or sublime, on the other. Just as *distracción* (C) is more bothersome to John of the Cross than lack of *discreción* (B), so superficiality (E) is more bothersome to him than hopeless profundity (D). That is, John of the Cross's position in the center of the above diagram nonetheless leans somewhat in a northwesterly direction. It is hard to imagine him having any sympathy whatsoever for a cocktail hour spirituality.

What exactly is bothersome about superficiality (E)? For John of the Cross it is (what we might call) a "category mistake" to think that the imitation of Christ (especially the passion) is compatible with sweetness (*dulzuras*) or a syrupy sentimentality. Having a spiritual sweet tooth (*golosina de espíritu*) makes one flabby and overly concerned with exteriority, hence one is predisposed to vanity (*vanidad*); or to pretensions and rank (*pretensiones y mayorías*), as in academe; or to idle recreations (A, II, 7, 11). For example, although John of the Cross is not necessarily opposed to the cult of the saints, he is opposed to any melodramatic decoration of statues or art works depicting the saints, for this amounts to little more than a childish doll dressing (*ornato de muñecas*) or, even worse, to the worship of idols (*ídolos*) (A, III, 35).

Some degenerate into superficiality (E) because they have as their goal in religion *personal* peace, rather than union with God (D, I, 2). Hence it is not surprising that they do not find the peace they desire. Instead they find a thousand envies and disquietudes (*mil envidias e inquietudes*). It is a mistake to *primarily* look for comfort in life because this desire indicates a certain selfishness. If comfort comes, according to John of the Cross, it is as an indirect consequence of one's desire to have union with God (L, 2, 28). As one of John of the Cross's poems has it:

Do not think that he who lives  
*No penséis que el interior*  
 The so precious inner life  
*(Que es de mucha más valia)*  
 Finds joy and gladness  
*Halle gozo y alegría*  
 In the sweetness of earth  
*En lo que acá de sabor*