Maurice Maeterlinck

Ruysbroeck and the Mystics: with selections from Ruysbroeck

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M. MAETERLINCK'S INTRODUCTION TO HIS TRANSLATION OF "THE ADORNMENT OF THE SPIRITUAL MARRIAGE."

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MANY works are more correctly beautiful than this book of Ruysbroeck L'Admirable. Many mystics—Swedenborg and Novalis among others—are more potent in their influence, and more timely. It is very probable that his writings may but rarely meet the needs of to-day. Looking at him from another point of view, I know few more clumsy authors. He wanders off now and then into strange puerilities, and the first twenty chapters of *The Adornment of the Spiritual Marriage*, although they are perhaps a necessary preparation for what follows, contain little more than mild and pious commonplaces. Outwardly, at least, he has no order, no logic of the schools. He is full of repetitions, and sometimes seems to contradict himself. He shows the ignorance of a child along with the wisdom of one who might have returned from the dead. Over his involved syntax I have toiled more than once in the sweat of my brow. He introduces an image, and forgets it. There are some of his images which the mind cannot realise, and this phenomenon, so unusual in an honest work, can only be explained by his awkwardness or his extraordinary haste. He

knows few of the tricks of language, and can speak only of the unspeakable. He is almost entirely ignorant of the habits, skilled methods, and resources of philosophic thought, and he is constrained to think only of the unthinkable. When he speaks of his little monastic garden, he can hardly tell us enough about what goes on there; on that subject he writes like a child. He undertakes to teach us what transpires in the nature of God, and writes pages which Plato could not have written. Everywhere we find a grotesque disproportion between his knowledge and ignorance, his capacity and desire. You must not expect a literary work; you will see only the convulsive flight of an eagle, dizzy, blind, and wounded, over snowy peaks. I will add one word more by way of friendly warning. It has been my lot to read books generally considered most abstruse: *The Disciples at Saïs*, and the *Fragments* of Novalis, for instance; the *Biographia Literaria* and the *Friend* of Samuel Taylor Coleridge; the *Timaeus* of Plato; the *Enneads* of Plotinus; the *Divine Names* of St. Denys the Areopagite; the *Aurora* of the great German mystic, Jacob Böhme, with whom our author has more than one point of analogy. I do not venture to say that the works of Ruysbroeck are more abstruse than these works; but their abstruseness is less readily pardoned, because we have here to do with an unknown writer in whom we have no previous confidence. I thought it necessary to give an honest warning to idlers on the threshold of this temple without architecture; for this translation was undertaken only to please a few Platonists. I believe that those who have not lived in close fellowship with Plato and with the Neo-Platonists of Alexandria will not

proceed far in reading it. They will think they are entering the void; they will feel as if they were falling steadily into a bottomless abyss, between black and slippery rocks. In this book there is no common light or air; as a spiritual abode it will be insupportable to those who come unprepared. Do not enter here from literary curiosity; there are hardly any dainty nick-nacks, and the botanist in search of fine images will find as few flowers here as on the polar ice-banks. I tell them that this is a boundless desert, where they will die of thirst. They will find here very few phrases which one may handle and admire after the way of literary critics; nothing but jets of flame or blocks of ice. Do not seek for roses in Iceland. Some flower may still linger between two icebergs —and indeed there are strange outbursts, unknown expressions, unheard-of analogies, but they will not repay you for the time lost in coming so far to pluck them. Before entering here one must be in a philosophic state as different from our ordinary condition as the state of waking is from that of slumber. Porphyry, in his *Principles of the Theory of Intelligibles*, seems to me to have written a warning which might fitly stand at the beginning of this book—“By our intelligence we say many things of the principle which is higher than the intelligence. But these things are divined much better by an absence of thought than by thought. It is the same with this idea as with that of sleep, of which we speak up to a certain point in our waking state, but the knowledge and perception of which we can gain only by sleeping. Like is known only by like, and the condition of all knowledge is that the subject should become like to the object.”

It is most difficult, I repeat, to understand such things without preparation; and I believe that, in spite of our preparatory studies, a great deal of this mysticism will seem to us purely theoretic, and that the most of these experiences of supernatural psychology will be accessible to us only in the character of spectators. The philosophical imagination is a faculty which is educated very slowly. We are here, all at once, on the confines of human thought, and far within the polar circle of the mind. It is strangely cold here; it is strangely dark; and yet all around there is light and flame. But to those who come without having trained their mind to these new perceptions, this light and these flames are as dark and cold as painted images. We are dealing here with the most exact of sciences. We have to explore the most rugged and least habitable promontories of the divine “Know Thyself”; and the midnight sun hangs over the tempestuous sea, where the psychology of man mingles with the psychology of God. We have constantly to keep in mind that we are dealing here with a very profound science, and not with a dream. Dreams are not unanimous; dreams have no roots; while the glowing flower of divine metaphysic, which is here full blown, has its mysterious roots in Persia and in India, in Egypt and in Greece. And yet it seems unconscious as a flower, and knows nothing of its roots. Unhappily it is almost impossible for us to put ourselves in the position of the soul which, without effort, conceived this science; we cannot perceive it *ab intra* and reproduce it in ourselves. We lack that which Emerson would call the same “central spontaneity”; we can no longer transform these ideas into our own substance; the utmost

we can do is to take count, from the outside, of the tremendous experiences which are within the reach of only a very few souls during the whole existence of a planetary system. “It is not lawful,” says Plotinus, “to inquire into the origin of this intuitive science as if it were a thing dependent on place and movement; for it does not approach from here, nor set out from there, in order to go elsewhere, but it appears or does not appear. So that we must not pursue it in order to discover its secret sources, but wait in silence until it suddenly shines out upon us, preparing ourselves for the sacred sight, as the eye waits patiently for the rising of the sun.” And elsewhere he adds: “It is not by imagination nor by reason, which is itself obliged to draw its principles from elsewhere, that we represent to ourselves intelligible things (that is to say, the highest of all), but rather it is by our faculty for beholding them, the faculty which enables us to speak of them here below. We see them therefore by awaking in ourselves, here on earth, the same powers which we shall have to awake when we are in the world of pure intelligence. We are like a man who, on reaching the summit of a rock, perceives with his eyes objects which are invisible to those who have not made the ascent along with him.”

But although all beings, from the stone and the plant up to man, are contemplations, they are unconscious contemplations; and it is very difficult to rediscover in ourselves some memory of the previous activity of the dead faculty. In this respect we resemble the eye in the Neo-Platonic image. “It turns away from the light to see the darkness, and by the very action it ceases to see; for it cannot see the darkness with the light, and yet without it, it