Book Reviews

Jean-Joseph Surin

Into the Dark Night and Back: The Mystical Writings of Jean-Joseph Surin. Translated by Patricia Ranum; edited by Moshe Sluhovsky. Jesuit Studies Series, 19. Leiden: Brill, 2019. Pp. 548. Hb, \$210.00.

On October 27, 1655, Jesuit Jean-Joseph Surin penned a “Deed of Gift” in which he, the servant donor, made an irrevocable offering of all his honor, indeed, his entire being, to his Lord Jesus Christ. Declaring himself the enslaved property of said Lord he desired to be scorned, denigrated, seen as mad, divested of health, volition, and understanding. Consigning himself with a gesture of feudal loyalty, he attested to his “desire for no other honor in this world than to be in His grace and his love” (429–30).

This both moving and flamboyant record of the Jesuit’s personalized version of the “Contemplation on Divine Love” that concludes Ignatius Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises* was composed during the time Surin began to emerge from an eighteen-year period of paralysis and mutism that had taken hold of him when he had labored as the (rather unorthodox) exorcist of Jeanne des Anges, prioress of the Ursuline convent in Loudon, France. The dramatic theater of the nuns’ possessions at Loudon captured the attention not only of Surin’s contemporaries (fervid crowds gathered to witness the public exorcisms, royal officials were dispatched to the site, his detractors were many) but of later interpreters, notably renowned twentieth-century Jesuit scholar Michel de Certeau. De Certeau’s multidisciplinary interest in the collapse of coherent worldviews, the loss and fragmentation of religious meaning, otherness, marginality, and mysticism as a discourse that exceeds all theoretical frameworks led him to give close attention to Surin’s writings. His analyses have been the lens through which Surin himself is often considered.

This new edition of the Jesuit’s writings, ably translated by Patricia Ranum and edited by Moshe Sluhovsky, provides a welcome opportunity to confront

Surin in his own words. The volume includes a sizable portion of the surviving writings drawn from materials assembled from several French sources, some written in Surin's own hand, other printed pieces attesting to his authorship. The result is an impressive reconstruction effected through a careful work of scholarship culled from an anonymously edited 1829 publication of sections of *The Experimental Science of the Things of the Otherworld*, a 1920s critical version of other portions of *Experimental Science*, a 1990 printed version of assembled parts of both this last work and *The Triumph of Divine Love Over the Powers of Hell*, a 1957 edition of previously unpublished work, as well as additional material, notably a selection of Surin's correspondence. All of this makes this 2019 English publication a great deal more than simply a new translation.

Sluhovsky and Ranum make a stellar pair to present a clearer vision of Surin to an Anglophone readership. The concise introduction contextualizes the fascinating but often bizarre texts ably in seventeenth-century religious culture as well as the struggle within the Jesuit order as to the appropriateness of cultivating interior prayer in a community dedicated to apostolic ministry. Ranum has provided a useful glossary of French terms that require nuance to translate well. And throughout copious and often fascinating footnotes illuminate the texts, clarify obscure allusions or dialogue with previous editors' presentations.

The volume opens with *The Triumph of Divine Love*, the lengthy detailed account of Surin's interventions on behalf of the possessed Ursuline Mother Superior Jeanne des Anges that highlights the former's approach to his formidable task. Although begun in 1636, as he recorded tales of the dramatic ecclesial theater taking place in Loudon, it was not completed until many years later. In it, he presents himself as utilizing methods not familiar to fellow exorcists, namely patient inculcation of the maxims of the inner life into the energumen. In Jeanne des Anges's case, he actually whispered these maxims in her ear, causing, as he reports, her soul to surrender itself gradually and more and more radically to the interior penitential pliancy and conformity to the divine will expected of a true religious. Moreover, these maxims, sometimes sung, were also addressed to the demons that bound her thus both encouraging her to resist the demonic hold and causing a counter attack, which finally exhausted the harassing evil spirits. The dangerous by-product of this method was the transfer of the demons to the exorcist himself resulting in his prolonged collapse.

Triumph is followed by *Experimental Science* that is subtitled *Acquired during the Possession of the Ursuline Nuns of Loudon by Father Jean-Joseph Surin of the Society of Jesus* and dated 1663, well after his recovery from the collapse that long debilitated him. In it, he sets out to affirm, validated by his own

experience, that there are demons, that during his demonically induced illness he suffered seeming madness, depression, temptations to despair, and suicidal ideations, but that he also was doubly possessed by divine power and flooded with graces revealing that there is indeed a God, that love is the wellspring of all reality and that divine providence and the church hold ultimate power over all.

The volume follows with *The Spiritual Poem: An Epic* (prefaced by a helpful comment from Ranum on the significance of the epic as a literary form in the era); the short 1639 *Cantique* written during his depression; the 1655 “Deed of Gift” mentioned above; and a selection of Surin’s over five hundred letters, primarily those written just before and after his collapse.

De Certeau’s claim that the extraordinary events recorded by Surin provide insight into the dissolution of an all-encompassing cultural worldview is illuminating. But reading these texts also plunges the reader into the experiential spiritual landscape of seventeenth-century Catholic France. The teachings of Jesuit Louis Lallemant, Surin’s tertianship director, hover over the pages, as does the controversy that he and his followers, Surin included, generated as they focused full attention to the interior life. The manner in which that interiority was conceptualized had a particular cast in this era: cultivation of utter surrender to the divine, radical abandonment of the will, the necessity of tumultuous and penitential spiritual warfare with forces pitted against such cultivation alongside the recognition of an all-powerful providence. Ongoing early modern Catholic anxiety about states of passivity that had colored religious and political discourse for well over a century is evident too: echoes of the Spanish *alumbrados* and *beatas*, the looming French Quietist controversy, cross-confessional fears of listing into heretical territory, arguments about methods of discernment of spirits, gendered assumptions about human susceptibility, distrust of experience unmoored from authority, the ascendancy of the Sun King and the *ancien régime* exercising full control over all aspects of life.

All this is writ large and with theatrical flair by Jean-Joseph Surin. Perhaps what is most poignant is that when a recovered Surin finally puts pen to paper to refute critics who malign or ridicule his descent into the depths, citing the witness of luminaries like Anthony of Egypt, Catherine of Genoa, and John of the Cross in his defense, that his final word is that Love triumphs.

Wendy M. Wright

Creighton University, Emerita

wmmwright@creighton.edu

DOI:10.1163/22141332-00604007-01