Review of Robert Stefanotti, O.Carm, *The Phoenix of Rennes; the Life and Poetry of John of St. Samson 1571-1636*

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This monograph deals with the life and work of John of St. Samson, lay brother of the Carmelite Ancient Observance, reformer, mystic, author of spiritual treatises and poet. Curiously, this blind prolific Counter-Reformation era author is little known today even by his compatriots and is virtually unknown outside the French-speaking world.

Robert Stefanotti, in the chapter entitled Cultural Biography, relates that Jean du Moulin was born in 1571 in Sens, southeast of Paris, the son of Pierre du Moulin and Marie d'Aiz. The future mystic had not been born into poverty, but misfortune did not tarry in visiting him. At age three, he suffered from smallpox, the complications from which left him sightless for life. When he was ten, both his parents died. Though blind, during his childhood years he attended school where he learned at least rudimentary Latin as well as French literature. In the home of a maternal uncle he had moved in with after his parents' death, Jean discovered what is described as his extraordinary musical talents. He was allowed to cultivate such abilities with the amazing result that by age twelve he was playing the organ in church in his native town. He also came to master a number of other instruments, both woodwind and string.

Between the years 1597 and 1606, Jean resided in Paris, where he lived in the home of his older brother. These years, though "comfortable," were not spiritually sterile, for he spent his time in prayer, the practice of various forms of penance and having the lives of saints read to him. When the sibling died, Jean became virtually homeless and would roam the streets of the French capital. It was during this period that he came into contact with the Carmelites of Place Maubert, shortly afterwards becoming their organist. Constantly progressing in holiness and acquiring renown for such throughout Paris, he was soon surrounded by a cluster of youths equally zealous regarding the spiritual life. The pious association would convene regularly on the premises of the Place Maubert Carmelites, in order to pray and to exchange notions derived from reading masters of spirituality.

Jean learned of the Reform of the Carmelite Ancient Observance taking place in Touraine, under the leadership of friars Pierre Behourt and Philippe Thibault. He was accepted in 1606 into this Reform and assigned to the Carmel at Dol in Brittany. In 1612 Jean was transferred to Rennes, where he was to remain until 1630. The prestigious convent of Rennes, cradle of the movement, had a long history of being "very much at the center of large issues of Church, University and Court" (p. 24). While residing within its walls, Jean attained eminent heights of moral perfection and mystical graces. As a natural overflow of his fervor, he contributed to the formation of novices through spiritual writing and direction. To these years correspond his copious literary production,
no doubt stemming likewise from the superabundance of his intense interior life. He wrote at the behest of his superiors, “who saw his work as the full articulation of the principles which guided the Reform” (p. 24). He was thus recognized and “became known as the true spiritual soul of the Reform of Touraine” (ibid.).

The author of the study supplies a lengthy catalogue of works in poetry by John of St. Samson, most of which has not been examined critically nor much less translated into English. “The Holy Sepulchre Canticle” is chosen for close examination, with metric, linguistic, and stylistic analyses being carried out. The subject matter of the poem is the Resurrection of Christ and it was clearly composed to be performed, or more specifically, to be sung dramatically, as an insert to the Easter liturgy. Stefanotti indicates that this work, from the standpoint of the history of literary genres, represents a late flowering and at the same time a resuscitation of the medieval visitatio trope, an earlier form of sacred drama which had similarly been interpolated into the liturgical functions.

The body of the “The Holy Sepulchre Canticle” consists of four structurally connected poems. The first serves as a Prologue and is uttered by a sole, anonymous voice, while the last three take the form of dialogue. In the second and the third, the main characters are Mary Magdalene and the Tomb, which has been anthropomorphized. The final segment is constituted by the reply of the Soul, representing a redeemed mankind, to the Sepulchre. The author underscores that there is a flow of dramatic events leading from the call to conversion of the Prologue, to that of Magdalene, to the appearance before the empty yet glorious Tomb, to the transfigured Soul, which in turn invites the participation of all present. A participation, that is, “in the action of love which has been initiated by God, a pouring out of self into the mystery of a love which is all transforming.” Such leads, according to an intriguing observation, “to the later highly affective French spirituality of the mid-seventeenth through the eighteenth century... into the spirituality of the Sacred Heart, to the word heard by St. Marguerite-Marie: Mon divin Coeur est... passionné- d’amour... (p. 46).

In his analysis of the formal elements of Jean’s work, Stefanotti stresses the mystic’s preference for classical structures: in poetry, the sonnet; in music, the chanson. Among figures of speech, Jean was fond of “coupling, tripling, oymoron, often employed to express paradox (p. 66, 70). The author points to the frequent compact, polisemic employment of cornerstone terms and alludes to “the conflation of symbols,” which allows us to view Jean’s poetic texts as specifically mystical ones (p. 111). In the chapter dedicated to spiritual images, Stefanotti accentuates the influence of the Rheno-Flemish school of mysticism upon Jean du Moulin. With its roots geographically to the North, this late medieval school is characterized by a strong Trinitarian element, by the doctrine of exemplarism, and an emphasis on the notion of the image of God being impressed in the soul. Jean’s spiritual theology and his poetic imagery are indeed permeated by the Rheno-Flemish John Ruusbroec, as the research of P. W.Janssen has highlighted. Thus Stefanotti summarizes: “John of St. Samson used the tools of Baroque poetry, Ruusbroecian spirituality and the lived life of Carmel to craft his spiritual texts” (p. 129).

Granting the undeniable value of this introduction to John of St. Samson to
an audience largely ignorant of his very existence, some questions arise. From the vantage point of the history of spirituality, can we concur that John of St. Samson flourished independently? In other words, is Jean’s spirituality principally a late flowering of the Rheno-Flemish school, as Stefanotti suggests, or did it receive a significant impetus from the broader movement of the Counter-Reformation? Let us recall that his milieu included figures such as the pious Mme. Acarie, St. Francis of Sales, the Oratorians, the Jesuits, as well as the Teresian Reform of the Carmelite Order, which had been introduced into France in 1604 and quickly made headway. From the standpoint of literary historiography, a parallel question emerges. While stressing the influence of sixteenth century poet Pierre Ronsard and recognizing the Baroque traits of John of St. Samson’s literary art, Stenfanotti implies that he wrote independently of his contemporaries. Was he, therefore, completely disconnected from other confessional Catholic French poets of the age, such as Jean de la Ceppède?

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