

HEINRICH SUSO

Questions

1. What pathological features do you discover in the experience of Suso as he recounts it?
2. Mediaeval monasticism in its doctrine of celibacy flung defiance at the domination of the sex instinct. Evaluate the results of this defiance as seen in the case of Henry Suso.
3. What prevailing tendencies or ideals of his time were reflected in Suso's devotion to the Eternal Wisdom? In what respect does this relationship differ from that of Dante and Beatrice? from that of Bjerre's patient and her correspondent?
4. Discuss the relationship of religion and sex as seen in this case.
5. How do you explain such severe asceticism as we see in Suso? What are the values of asceticism?
6. What evaluation do you place on the type of religious experience represented by Suso?
7. What seem the essential features of a present-day Christian attitude ~~in~~ in the matter of sex?

References

- | | | |
|---------|--------------------------------|------------------------|
| Hocking | Human Nature and Its Re-making | chapter 42 |
| Leuba | Psychology of Mysticism | pp. 60 - 65 |
| Lippman | Preface to Morals | pp. 88 - 94, chap. 14. |

His Own StoryOf the Writing of His Life

There was a Friar Preacher in Germany, by birth a Swabian - may his name be written in the Book of the Living!- whose desire was to become and to be called a Servitor of the Eternal Wisdom. Now it happened that he became acquainted with a holy and illuminated person, who was in poverty and suffering as regards this world. This poor sufferer was a woman; and she used to beseech the Servitor to tell her something about suffering from his own experience, that her suffering heart might gather strength from it. And she acted thus toward him for a long time. When he came to see her she drew from him by confidential questionings the manner of his beginning and progress in the interior life, as well as certain exercises and sufferings which he had passed thru: all which he told her in spiritual confidence. As she found comfort and direction in these things, she wrote them down, to be a help to herself and others; and she did this by stealth, so that he knew not of it. Later when he found out this ghostly theft, he reproved her for it and, forcing her to give up to him the writing, he burnt all of it that was there. When however the rest of it was given to him and he was going to treat it in like manner, he was stopped by a heavenly message from God forbidding it. Thus what follows remained unburnt, for the most part just as she had written it with her own hand. Many good instructions were also added to it by him, after her death, in her name. (p. 5)

Of His Conversion to God

The first beginning of the Servitor's perfect conversion to God took place when he was in his eighteenth year. And though he had worn the religious habit for the five previous years, his soul was still dissipated within him; and it seemed to him that if God only preserved him from weightier sins, which might tarnish his good name, there was no need to be over-careful about ordinary faults. Nevertheless he was so kept by God the while, that he always had an unsatisfied feeling within him, whenever he turned to the objects of his desires, and it seemed to him that it must be something quite different which could bring peace to his troubled heart, and he was ill at ease amid his restless ways. He felt at times a gnawing reproach within, and yet he could not help himself until the kind God set him free from it by turning him. His companions marvelled at the speedy change, wondering how it had come over him; and one said this and another that, but as to how it was, no one either guessed or came near guessing it; for it was a secret illumination and drawing sent by God, and it wrought in him with speed a turning away from creatures. (p. 6)

Of His Preliminary Combats

Soon after this impression had been made upon his soul by God, there began within him certain preliminary combats, in which the enemy sought to lead him astray from his salvation. The inward impulse, which he had received from God urged him to turn away entirely from everything which might be a hindrance to him. The tempter met this with the suggestion: Bethink thee better. It is easy to begin but hard to bring to completion.When grace had gained the victory in this combat, there came a hostile thought in friendly form, counselling him thus:- It may be all right, that thou shouldst amend thy life; but do not set about it so impetuously. Begin with such moderation that thou mayest be able to bring it to completion. Thou shouldst eat and drink heartily and treat thyself well; and at the same time be on thy guard against sins. Be as good as thou pleasest within thyself, and yet with such moderation that the world without may not take fright at thee as the saying is. Is the heart good, all is good. Surely thou mayest be merry with people and still be a good man. Others too wish to go to heaven and yet do not lead a life of exercises such as thine. These and the like temptations pressed him hard. But the Eternal

Wisdom overthrew for him these deceitful counsels thus: - The man who tries to hold by the tail that slippery fish, the eel, and to begin a holy life lukewarmly will be deceived in both cases; for when he thinks he has them, they will have slipped from him. He too who seeks with tender treatment to get the better of a pampered and refractory body, wants common sense. He who would possess this world and yet serve God perfectly, tries for what is impossible and seeks to falsify God's own teaching. Wherefore if thou art minded to forsake all, do so to good purpose. He tarried somewhat long in these thoughts; but at last taking courage, he turned himself away from everything with all his might. (p. 8)

His untamed spirit had in the beginning to die many deaths in breaking away from frivolous companions..... One thing was a sore suffering to him. He had no one to whom he could pour out his grief and who pursued the same end in the same way that he had been called to pursue it. Therefore he went on his way of wretchedness, pining for love; and with mighty efforts he withdrew himself from creatures, - a practice which afterwards became very sweet to him.(p.8)

Of His Heavenly Visions

It happened once in the time of his beginnings, that he came into the choir on St. Agnes' Day, after the midday meal at the convent was ended. He was there alone and he stood at the lower stalls on the right hand side of the choir. It was moreover a time at which he was more than usually crushed down by a heavy weight of sorrow. Now it came to pass, that as he stood there all desolate, and with none to help or shield him, his soul was caught up in ecstacy, whether in the body or out of the body, and he saw and heard what no tongue can tell. It was without form or mode, and yet it contained within itself the entrancing delightfulness of all forms and modes. His heart was athirst and yet satisfied; his mind was joyous and blooming; wishes were stilled within him and desires had departed. He did but gaze fixedly upon the dazzling effulgence, in which he found oblivion of himself and all things.This overpowering rapture lasted about an hour and a half. When he came to himself he was altogether like a man who had come from another world. His body was in such anguish from the brief moment, that he had never deemed it possible to suffer so much in so short a time, even at death. He came to himself with a deep groan and his body sank to the ground in spite of him, as if he were in a faint. He went on his way in body, and no one saw or took note of anything in him outwardly; but his soul and mind were full within of heavenly marvels. (pp. 9 - 10)

He had from youth up a loving heart. Now the Eternal Wisdom is represented in Holy Scriptures under a lovely guise as a gracious loving mistress, who displays her charms with the intent to please everyone; discoursing the while tenderly, in female form, of the desire she has to win all hearts to herself, and saying how deceitful all other mistresses are and how truly loving and constant she is. This drew his young soul to her and thoughts like these would come to him: - Truly thou shouldst make trial of thy fortune, whether perchance this high mistress, of whom thou hast heard tell such marvels, will become thy love; for in truth they wild young heart cannot remain long without a love. These thoughts were met with contrary suggestions such as these: Shall I love that which I have never seen, nor even know what it is? A handful inpossession is better than a houseful in prospect. They who raise lofty buildings and love venturesomely have but a sorry time of it. Truly this loving dame were a good mistress did she but let her servant treat his body well and tenderly. But far from this she says: - He who seeks good food, strong wine and long sleep, can never win wisdom's love. Was there ever a suitor subjected to such hard terms as these? A thought from God answered:- By ancient right, love and suffering go together. There is no wooer but he is a sufferer; no lover but he is a martyr. Therefore it is not unjust that he who aims so

high in love should meet with some things repugnant to him. Remember all the mishaps and vexations which earthly lovers suffer, whether with their will or against it.And then he said to himself joyfully:- Yes, it must be so. She must indeed be my love and I must be her servant. And the thought came to him:- Ah, God, if I might but once see my love! If I might but once converse with her! While he thus strove to see her, she showed herself to him in this wise. She floated high above him in a choir of clouds; she shown like the morning star, and her radiance was dazzling as the rising sun; her crown was eternity; her vesture bliss; her words sweetness; her embrace the fullness of every delight; she was far, yet near; high, yet lowly; she was present, yet hidden; she forbade not to converse with her, yet no one could comprehend her. She reaches above the summit of the heavens yet touches the depths of the abyss. When at one moment he thought he saw in her a beautiful maiden, forthwith she appeared to him as a noble youth. Sometimes she showed herself as one rich in wisdom; at other times as overflowing with love. She drew nigh to him lovingly and greeted him full smilingly and sweetly said to him:- Give me thy heart, my child.Afterwards when he dwelt in thought upon the all-lovely one, he used commonly to put the question to himself and ask his love-sick heart:- Ah, my heart! from what source do all love and graciousness flow? Whence comes all tenderness, beauty, joyousness and loveliness? Comes it not from the out-bursting fountainhead of pure Godhead? Up then, my heart, my senses, my mind; up then and cast yourselves into the fathomless abyss of all lovely things. Who shall keep me from Thee now? Ah! I embrace Thee still to-day with the longings of my burning heart. And then there pressed into his soul, the primal outflow of all good, and in it he found in spiritual fashion all that is beautiful, lovely and desirable, for all was there in a way ineffable. Thus it grew into a habit with him, whenever he heard songs of praise or the sweet music of stringed instruments, or lays, or discourse about earthly love, immediately to turn his heart and mind inwards and gaze abstractedly upon the loveliest love, whence all love flows. It were impossible to tell how often with weeping eyes from out of the unfathomable depth of his outspread heart, he embraced this lovely form and pressed it tenderly to his heart. ~~As the child with its head and the movement of its body lifts itself up against its mother, and by these loving gestures testifies its heart's delight~~ And thus it fared with him as with a sucking child which lies encircled by its mother's arms upon her breast. As the child with its head and by the movement of its body lifts itself up against its tender mother and by these loving gestures testifies its heart's delight, even so his heart many a time leapt up within his body towards the delightful presence of the Eternal Wisdom. (pp. 11 - 16)

It was his custom to go into chapel after matins and sitting down upon his chair to take a little rest. He sat there but a short time until the watchman announced the break of day; when opening his eyes he used to fall at once on his knees and salute the rising morning star, heaven's gentle Queen, with this intention, that as the little birds in summer greet the day-light and receive it joyously, even so did he mean to greet with joyful longings her who brings the light of the everlasting day; and he did not merely say these words but he accompanied them with a sweet still melody in his soul.

Once at this time, while he sat thus at rest, he heard within him something which rang so tenderly that his whole heart was stirred by it. The voice sang in tones sweet and loud, as the morning star uprose:- Stella maris Maria hodie processit ab ortum. This strain resounded in him with such unearthly sweetness that it filled his whole soul with gladness and he sang with it joyously. After he had thus sung, he was embraced in a way ineffable and it was said to him at the time:- The more lovingly thou embracest me, and the more spiritually thou kissest me, so much the more ravishingly and lovingly

shalt thou be embraced by my glory. Upon this he opened his eyes and with tears rolling down his cheeks, he saluted the rising morning star according to his custom. When his first salutation had ended, he next saluted with a vena the gentle Eternal Wisdom in the words of the prayer beginning, "Anima mea desideravit te". This was followed by a third salutation, which he addressed to the highest and most fervent of the Seraphim, even to the one who flames upwards in hottest and fieriest love towards the Eternal Wisdom, and this he did with the intention that the spirit should so inflame his heart with divine love, that he might both be on fire himself and enkindle the hearts of all men with his loving words and teaching. These were the salutations which he made every morning. (pp. 19 - 20)

It came to pass once, after the time of his sufferings was over, that early one morning he was surrounded in a vision by the heavenly spirits. Whereupon he besought one of the princes of heaven to show him the manner of God's secret dwelling in his soul. The angel answered thus:- Cast then a joyous glance into thyself and see how God plays his play of love with thy loving soul. He looked immediately and saw that his body over his heart was clear as crystal and that in the centre of his heart was sitting tranquilly in lovely form the Eternal Wisdom; beside whom there sat full of heavenly longing the Servitor's soul, which leaning lovingly toward God's side and encircled by God's arms and pressed close to His divine heart, lay thus entranced and drowned in love in the arms of the beloved God. (p. 22)

It happened soon afterwards that though there was an abundance of every kind of drink before him, he left the table according to his custom, with a thirsting mouth. That same night when he lay down to rest there came and stood before him in a vision a beautiful heavenly form, which thus addressed him:- It is I, the Mother, who gave thee to drink from the little goblet the other night; and since thou art so exceeding thirsty I will in pity give thee once more to drink. To this the Servitor made answer very wisely:- Ah, purest one! but thou hast nothing in thy hand out of which to give me drink. She replied:- I will give thee to drink of that healthful drink which flows from my heart. He was so terrified at this that he knew not how to answer her, for he knew how unworthy of it he was. Then she said to him with great kindness:- Inasmuch as Jesus, the treasure of heaven, has come down so lovingly into thy heart and since thy parched mouth has so dearly earned this grace, I will bestow it on thee for thy special consolation; and it is not a corporeal drink which I shall give thee, but a healthful, spiritual and excellent drink of real and true purity. Then he let it be as she said and he thought within himself:- Thou shalt now drink thy full and be able to quench thy great thirst. When he had drunk well of this heavenly drink, there remained something in his mouth like a little soft lump. It was white and of the nature of manna; and he kept it in his mouth for a long time as a voucher for the truth of what had taken place. (pp. 61 - 62)

That same night our dear Lord appeared to a holy person in another town and said: - Go and tell my Child's Servitor from me that our dear Lady with her dear child appeared to me in a vision and our dear Lady had in her hand a beautiful drinking vessel of water. The Child and the Lady spoke loving words about you and then she held the vessel of water to the Child and asked him to pronounce his blessing over it. He pronounced his holy blessing upon the water and immediately the water became wine; and he said:- It is enough. My will is that the brother should no longer mortify himself by abstaining from wine. Let him henceforward drink wine for his wasted frame's sake. From that time forth now that God allowed it to him, the Servitor drank wine as he had done before. (p. 63)

Of the Chastisement of His Body

He was in his youth of a temperament full of fire and life; and when this began to make itself felt and he perceived what a heavy burden he had in himself, it was very bitter and grievous to him; and he sought by many devices and great penances how he might bring his body into subjection to his spirit. He wore for a long time a hair shirt and an iron chain until the blood ran from him, so that he was obliged to leave them off. He secretly caused an undergarment to be made for him, and in the undergarment he had strips of leather fixed into which a hundred and fifty brass nails, pointed and filed sharp, were driven, and the points of the nails were always turned toward the flesh. He had this garment made very tight and so arranged as to go around him and fasten in front, in order that it might fit the closer to his body. and the pointed nails might be driven into the flesh; and it was high enough to reach upward to his navel. Now in summer when it was hot and he was very tired and ill from his journeyings, or when he held the office of lecturer, he would sometimes as he lay thus in bonds and oppressed with toil and tormented also by noxious insects, cry aloud and give way to fretfulness and twist round and round in agony as a worm does when run thru with a pointed needle. In order that he might get still less rest amid these torments, he devised something further. He bound part of his girdle round his throat and made out of it with skill two leather loops, into which he put his hands and then locked his arms into them with two padlocks and placed the keys on a plank beside his bed, where they remained until he arose for matins and unlocked himself. His arms were thus stretched upwards and fastened one on each side of his throat, and he made the fastenings so secure that even if his cell had been on fire about him he could not have helped himself. This practice he continued until his hands and arms had become almost tremulous with the strain and then he devised something else. He had two leather gloves made for him such as laborers usually wear when they gather briars and he caused a brazier to fit them all over with sharp-pointed tacks and he used to put them on at night. This he did in order that if he should try while asleep to throw off the hair under-garment, or endeavor in any other way to relieve himself from the gnawings of the vile and hateful insects, the tacks might then stick into his body. He continued this tormenting exercise for about sixteen years. At the end of this time when his blood was now chilled and the fire of his temperament destroyed, there appeared unto him in a vision on Whit-Sunday a messenger from heaven who told him that God required this of him no longer. Whereupon he discontinued it and threw all these things away into a running stream. (pp. 47 -49)

Above all his other exercises he had a longing to bear upon his body something which might betoken a sensible sympathy with the painful sufferings of his crucified Lord. To this end he made for himself a wooden cross, in length about a man's span and of corresponding breadth, and he drove into it thirty iron nails, intending to represent by them his Lord's wounds and love-tokens. He placed this cross upon his bare back between his shoulders on the flesh and he bore it continually day and night in honor of the crucified Lord. Afterwards in the last years he drove into it besides seven needles so that their points passed a long way thru the cross and remained sticking in it while their other points were broken off close to the wood. He bore the wounds made by these pointed needles in honor of the piercing anguish of God's pure Mother, by which her heart and soul were wounded thru and thru so utterly in the hour of her Son's agonizing death. The first time he stretched out this cross upon his back his tender frame was struck with terror at it and he blunted the sharp nails very slightly upon a stone. But very soon repenting of his unmanly cowardice, he pointed and sharpened them all again with a file and placed the cross once more upon him. Whenever he sat down or stood up, it was as if a hedge-hog skin lay upon him. (p. 49 - 50)

Once upon a time ~~when~~ he had been so much off his guard as to take into his hands the hands of two maidens who were sitting beside him in a public assembly, though without any bad intention. He soon repented of his unguardedness and he considered that this inordinate pleasure must be atoned for by penance. As soon as he had come into his chapel into a place of privacy, he struck himself upon the cross for his misdeed, so that the pointed nails stuck into his back. He moreover laid himself under an interdict for his fault and would not allow himself to go after matins into the chapter room, his usual place of prayer to meet the heavenly spirits who were wont to appear to him there during his contemplation. (p. 51)

Once on St. Clement's Day, at the beginning of winter, he made a general confession, and that same evening when it became dusk, he shut himself up in his cell and stripping himself naked to his horse-hair undergarment, he took out the scourge with the pointed tacks and struck himself with it over the body and about the arms till the blood ran down. The chief cause of this was the bent tack on the scourge in the shape of a little hook which tore away all the flesh on which it caught. He struck himself so hard that the scourge broke in three pieces. (p. 52 - 3)

At the same period the Servitor procured an old castaway door, which he placed upon his bedstead in his cell, and he used to lie upon it at night without any bed-clothes to make him comfortable.He thus secured for himself a most miserable bed; for the hard pea-stalks lay in lumps under his head, the cross with the sharp nails stuck into his back, his arms were locked fast in bonds, the horse-hair undergarment was round his loins, and the door was very hard. In winter he suffered very much from the frost, for if he stretched out his feet in sleep as people do, they lay quite bare upon the floor and froze with the cold; and if he drew them in again and kept them gathered up, the blood became all on fire in his legs and this was great pain to him. His feet were full of sores and his legs swelled as if they were growing dropsical; his knees were bloody and smeared; his loins were covered with scars from the horse-hair undergarment; his back was wounded by the cross; his body was wasted from excessive austerity; his mouth was parched with intense thirst; and his hands tremulous from weakness..... And he endured all these torments out of the greatness of his love to the Divine and Eternal Wisdom, our Lord Jesus Christ, whose agonizing sufferings he sought thus to imitate. It was also his custom during the space of five and twenty years, provided he was staying in the convent, never to go after compline in winter into any warm room, or to the convent stove to warm himself, however cold it might be. Thruout all these years he never took a bath, either a water or a sweating bath; and this he did in order to mortify his comfort-seeking body. (pp. 54 - 56)

At length after the Servitor had led from his eighteenth to his fortieth year a life of exercises, according to the outer man - such as has been in part described above - and when his whole frame was now so worn and wasted that nothing remained for him except to die or leave off these exercises, he left them off; and God showed him that all this austerity and all these practices were nothing more than a good beginning, and a breaking thru his uncrushed natural man; and he saw that he must press on still further in quite another way, if he wished to reach perfection. (p. 64)

Of His Interior Death

Now that the Servitor had been released by God from exterior penances of the kind described above, by which his life had been imperilled, his worn-out frame was so rejoiced at this that he used to weep for joy whenever he called to mind his penitential bonds and all the cruel sufferings and combats which he had passed thru. And he said within himself:- Henceforth, dear Lord, I will lead a quiet life and enjoy myself. Oh! how earnestly and often I have longed that this comfort might be mine before I died! When he had spent several weeks thus pleasantly in these agreeable thoughts, it seemed to him that there came in a very comely youth of manly form, who brought him a pair of knight's shoes, of excellent quality with other clothing such as knights are wont to wear. The youth went up to the servitor and vested him with knight's attire, saying:-Hearken, Sir Knight. Hitherto thou hast been a squire: God wills thee now to be a knight. (pp 68 - 69)

Inasmuch as seclusion is profitable to a beginner, the Servitor resolved to remain for more than ten years secluded in his monastery from all the world. When he went from table he used to shut himself up in his chapel and remain there. He refused to hold any long conversations at the convent door or elsewhere with women or even with men, nor would he look at them. He fixed a short limit for his eyes, beyond which he suffered them not to look, and the limit was five feet. He remained always at home and would never go out either into the town or the country. His one aim was to practice solitude. (74 - 5)

During this same period it seemed as if God had given leave to the evil spirits and to all men to torment him. Innumerable were the sufferings which he then endured from the evil spirits, who in horrible assumed forms and with savage cruelty caused him so much pain and grief day and night, awake and asleep that his sufferings from this source were exceeding great. (p. 76)

Among his various sufferings there were three interior ones which caused him great torment. One of these was impious imaginations against the faith. Thus there would come into his mind the thought:- How is it possible for God to become man? with many other thoughts of that kind. The more he fought against them the more perplexed he became. God suffered him to remain under these temptations about nine years. At last when God deemed the time had come, He set him entirely free from them and bestowed upon him great steadfastness and clearness of faith.

The second interior suffering was an inordinate sadness. He had such a continual heaviness of spirit that it was as if a mountain lay upon his heart. This trial lasted for eight years.

The third interior suffering was a temptation which assailed him, that it would never be well with his soul hereafter, but that he must be damned eternally, no matter how rightly he should act, or how many spiritual exercises he should practice.

After this terrible suffering had lasted about ten years, all which time he never looked upon himself in any other light than as one damned, he went to the holy Master Eckhart and made known to him his suffering. The holy man delivered him from it and thus set him free from the hell in which he had so long dwelt. (pp. 77 - 79)