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Sturge Moore as Mystic

H. B. FURAY

I

THOMAS Sturge Moore was born in Hastings, England, in 1870, the son of a retired physician. He grew up in the suburbs of London, where after 1885 he studied art in lieu of continuing with formal schooling. In the course of these studies he came under the largely Pre-Raphaelite influence of the artists Charles Ricketts and Charles Shannon. For the next dozen years or so he was closely associated with them at their residence, The Vale, a centre of artistic and literary London in the Nineties, acting as editor for various publications of The Vale Press. He became himself a line draughtsman and woodcutter of some merit and continued active in these crafts all his life, working chiefly as an illustrator of books. In 1903 he married his cousin, Marie Appia, and thereafter lived a quiet and semi-retired literary life at Hampstead Hill, London, or (for brief periods) in Dorking and Hampshire. He died in 1944.

From the early Nineties poetry had been the growing interest of Moore's life, his first volume of poems being published in 1899. When a legacy received the same year as his marriage gave him permanent financial security, he devoted himself thereafter wholly to poetry, producing more than twenty volumes with the four-volume COLLECTED EDITION of 1931 to 1933 as the culmination.¹ The line-drawing and the occasional

¹ THE POEMS OF T. STURGE MOORE: COLLECTED EDITION, London: Macmillan, 1931-1933, 4 vols.

critical articles for artistic or scholarly periodicals which always engaged a minor portion of his time and of his mind were off-shoots of the central poetic interest: the drawings were symbolic interpretations of poetry or poetic drama, the articles (some of which coagulated into books) were discussions of artistic or poetic theory. But the work of art came first, Moore always believed. "Theory," he wrote in 1920, "describes abstractly what has been done, hardening and denuding it until its logical implication alone remains. . . ."²

There has been no theory of Sturge Moore's poetry in this, his own sense of the word. Critics have praised his talent for magnificent imaginative illumination and have bowed in respect before the passionate earnestness of his preoccupation with beauty for art and for life; and have noted the tortuous difficulty of his poetry, which for understanding demands of the reader a complete dedication of faculties, nothing less. But there has been no considered attempt to assess "what has been done" by looking deep into the poetry not just across it. He has been honored; and unread. His poetry, so far as any life but that of a circumferential interest goes, preceded him to the grave by some years.

There are, nonetheless, areas of great interest in Moore's poetry. One such area is considered in this article. A series of four poems is taken, all of which deal with the deepest obsession of Moore's life, his urgent need to lift himself out of the ruck of everydays and unite with something greater and realer than himself. The nature of this upward striving and the identity of the someone or something with whom or which union was sought reveals a great deal about Moore both as difficult poet and difficult man. He seems to have been in some sense a mystic, but a frustrate one. The cause of the frustration accounts to some extent for the utterly alien sound his poetry has in our ears: besides his tortured manner (aspects of which will be pointed out in passing) it is a deep flaw in his substance that definitively removes him from the favor of readers.

² "Man's Likeliest Children" in *THE APPLE (OF BEAUTY AND DISCORD)* I (1920), p. 18.

A word about procedure. The first poem, *THE DIFFICULTY*, is like many other poems similar to it among Moore's lyrics, adumbrative of a reality which appears in full strength only in other pieces, here the "prayer" poems: it is the foothill, they the heights. *THE DIFFICULTY*, as preliminary to its fellow poems, shows faintly what will rear up clearly later and also shows in more apprehensible dimension a falling away which is present in the later summits too, but somehow less perceptible there. The following "prayer" poems, in their turn, are somewhat complementary to each other as their titles and contents indicate and also their deliberate juxtaposition (by Moore) in the *COLLECTED EDITION*. All this prognosticates some danger of slipping into a maze, winding about through the four poems and getting thoroughly lost. We shall try to keep found by taking the poems one at a time, then giving a summary at the close to clarify how they coalesce to make a pretty complete picture of both Moore's religious aspiration and religious failure.

II

THE DIFFICULTY

He who probes but with the mind
 Shall not man's arcanum find;
 Learning hinders rather than
 Helps you sift from men the man.
 5 Quit the earth and climb a cloud!
 Call him! you had best call loud!
 Where wings fail for lack of air,
 Lark unseen, his thought trills there.
 Some dream space void is that his love
 10 May loneliness fill as hand a glove;
 Much you encounter here on earth
 His grief is, though it feed your mirth:
 For men, at sixes still and sevens,
 Sporadically glint with heaven's
 15 Joy in him; so splintered glass
 Will answer summer sun... None know...
 They luck have who conceive him... though

Fond guess with divination vies,
As many a flower in May-time tries
20 To win and hold the gaze with grace
Akin to that of a loved face.

The difficulty with *THE DIFFICULTY* is to discover what it is about. The first two lines say that it is about a search for "man's arcanum". One takes this to mean that it is a treasure hunt that we are engaged in, a hunt by man for his secret, most hidden treasure. This seems to be a person, judging from the many personal pronouns untagged with identity which are scattered throughout the poem: "Call *him!*" (line 6), "*his* thought" (line 8), "*his* love" (line 9), "*his* grief" (line 12), "heaven's joy in *him*" (lines 14, 15), "conceive *him*" (line 17). The sense flounders a bit towards the end, but by and large we take it as read that it is a concrete person who is man's treasure and in the poem is being looked for everywhere and found only in broken glints among men. The assumption, made by a natural leap of the mind from all this, is that the person is a Person and that the poem is about God in the universe. His thought trilling where wings fail for lack of air, space being void that His love may fill it, much on earth being His grief—all these support this assumption, since in the Christian view all this is verified of God and of that Person only.

Yet there are dissatisfactions: sifting from men the man (line 4) does not seem to fit; neither except by long stretching does the idea of men glinting with "heaven's joy in him" (lines 14, 15). Flogged by these dissatisfactions one goes back and works it out again; and finds that indeed he has been on a false scent.

Two bits of typical Moore entanglement naturally aid and abet this false lead. First of all, "man's arcanum" is not an external object, a treasure which man is seeking but the arcanum of man, that is, the innermost secret of what man is. Second, man seeking Man among men is a piece of three-layer subtlety so unlikely as to merit rejection; but it is indeed Moore's thought.

Any man (you, me, "he who probes") is seeking the essential core of man, the inner secret of what man is. This secret is Man, who is not to be found by learned sifting from men. This abstract essential Man is now personified (to add to the confusion: a man is now seeking "a man") and it is this personified MAN whose thought trills where wings fail, whose love is to fill lonesome, whose grief (Ideal Manhood is grieved) is to be encountered among men, glints of heaven's joy in whom (since heaven joys in the Ideal) appear among men, who is rarely to be really known but may be guessed at.

Much could be said about the congenital circuitousness of thought which this poem excellently exemplifies, the "going around the corner to reach next door"; about gaucherie (line 9, the rhythm; line 13, the tone); about subtleties of conception refined almost out of sight: the highest, truest and most abstract thought of Man the Ideal being so rarefied that it trills unseen as the lark, the secret of Man as some dream it being his need to fill the lonesome of the world with love, etc.; about technical clash between abstract thought and concrete expression thereof. But at present we are more concerned with the substance.

The poem is a clanging disappointment. To say so is to imply that one had great expectations; and this is true. The nobility and seriousness of tone, the indication that we are going after an "arcanum", then one's natural tentative leaping grasp of a lovely portrayal of God's shining presence in the world—all this strengthens anticipation of enriching delight. To come up instead, after protracted measurement, with the anonymous face of Ideal Man is to be given a stone when one asked for bread.

After the vexation one is sad. The essential spiritual tragedy of Moore's poetic life is so evident in this poem and in the many others that are like it. He had the gift of religious aspiration to an exceptional degree, Augustine's "inquietum est cor nostrum", the eager, sacrificial hunger after the best, the

highest, the most beautiful for his own life and man's. Because of this deep thrusting pressure of desire such poems as this always lift, imparting a genuine sense of altitude, of revelations about to be made. More, which is a mystery to be searched later, they are often authentic in every detail but the last: witness how patly everything here fits a different and truer picture which, alas, is after all not the poet's. He is like a scientist who painfully and at great cost gathers every last piece of solid data, puts most of it together quite expertly and accurately—and emerges with a theory that is absurd. Or like a philosopher whose premises are all valid but who because of some mental kink simply cannot conclude to anything but negation. A complexus of such poems as this one shows further that Moore was well aware of his frustration. For years he poetically climbed golden stairs to radiant doors at the top, flung them open—always upon emptiness: for that is what Ideal Man or Utmost Beauty as absolutes in themselves are. Hence right to the end poems that lift and strive to convey assurance of “the glorious answer” stand immediately beside other poems that beautifully but hopelessly settle for the world of sense, finding the ultimate “well of peace” in quiet acceptance of one's impotence to go beyond.

This is what this poem tells us about the ecstatic element in Moore. That element stands for a surge towards personal spiritual union, a surge which is represented only faintly in the present piece but will appear more clearly in the startling peak aspirations of the following poems. What is being pointed out here is that this surging rise has in it always a fall, a falling away, a failure, a betrayal of the reader's hopes. Precisely because the lift and the hope are so great, the prize that is delivered at the end is shockingly tawdry. It is no assuagement to know that Moore felt the cheat too. A man cannot give what he does not have, of course; but he should not then have promised it, either to others or—and this most of all—to himself.

III

A PRAYER

I.

Hide me for ever, hide me now,
 For all my will is frustrate. Take,
 O take my thought, as thou
 From Semele didst Bacchus take;
 5 But first, O flood me with thy might,
 Let me consume in thy delight!

So may I die, yet dying know
 Zeus was a partner to create
 This beauty ripe in me. Ah, show
 10 Mine eyes thy power, and elate
 My throbbing heart with confidence,
 Thou father of all joy intense!

Thou father of this intense pain,
 Thou filledst me with avid thought
 15 That cannot breathe this air. How fain
 Was I to live! and long have sought—
 My hopes by holiness forbidden—
 To be from thy light safely hidden.

II.

Ah, happy Semele! she was
 20 By satisfaction blinded:
 Likewise in one bright sheet of awe,
 Let me, let me, be winded:
 Free me from all that is not thine,
 All fault that only can be mine;
 25 Though flesh dread love so male and mighty,
 Whose single aim reproves all flighty
 Impuissant sparkles of desire;
 As firefly by a forest fire
 Lap thou my separate will to shine,—
 30 Be light and glory wholly thine!

III.

- To Semele's bed by midnight came,
 In the fair flower-months of her youth,
 A love she could not see or name.
 Thine ardent soul, which is but as it gives—
 35 For bliss is all its function, name and truth—
 Near her heart lived, near my thought lives.
 Ah, she grew pregnant with a son divine,
 Whose life from hers absorbed the best, till she,
 Exhausted from within, night-long did pine
 40 For thee to take him from her and set free
 That residue of weakness, all that seemed
 Oppressive to the wealth with which she teemed;
 So take my thought, so take my life from me!

The poem is woven on the loom of the classical Semele myth, which Moore took from Lemprière's old CLASSICAL DICTIONARY. The myth, as Robert Graves has recently pointed out, has many variations and ramifications, but Moore takes only the central story. Mortal Semele being with child by a disguised Zeus begged to see her lover in his true shape ("that her eyes might equals be with her heart and lips and ears", as Moore writes in another poem on the subject, CE III, 60) and upon being granted the wish was consumed in a sheet of flame by the lightning of the god's presence, this by way of punishment for her temerarious request in one version of the myth, but rather as necessary effect of perfect union with the revealed godhead in the form which Moore prefers. Her six-months child, who was to be Bacchus, was saved by being taken from her (by Hermes in the common version, by Zeus himself in Moore's) and sewed up within Zeus' thigh for his other three months to term, and thence delivered. Thus he is called "the twice-born", "the child of the double door", having had—as Moore puts it in still another poem on the theme (CE III, 61)—a "second womb".

The possibilities of the myth particularly delighted and fascinated Moore, as his several intense treatments of it show. In the present poem (which is in three sections) he begins by

taking the story as figurative of the throes of artistic creation, the artist's need and longing to be filled with the divine partnership yet also his fear of the death to earthly, human life which was entailed. This initial preoccupation grows, in the second section, into rapturous acceptance of the consuming blaze which purification will impose, a plea that thus the will to shine separate may be swallowed up "as firefly by a forest fire" in order that. . . "Be light and glory wholly thine!" Yet as the final section attests, it is still artistic creation which is at stake, since the second section's being winded "in one bright sheet of awe" has for purpose that his human residue, like Semele's, may be set free and thus his wealth of thought, even as "the wealth with which she teemed", be loosed, both alike released now from the oppression of mortal containment. The final line is therefore the prayer in summary, full acceptance of the costs of inspired artistic creation, if that gift will be given: "So take my thought, so take my life from me!"

I think the poem very fine, for a number of demonstrable reasons. For one thing it is an entirely happy wedding of meaning to myth, no mean achievement. Usually, the attempt to express spiritual insight in the bright physical terms of myth ends in a labored, artificial, explanatory sort of poem which, far from enhancing, gives the inescapable impression of separate objects carried along in either hand and occasionally rubbed together. At its most desperate this eventuates in open separation of the two elements, the careful spiritual or philosophical interpretation appearing as naked marginal notation. The difficulties of fusing story perfectly yet discernibly with one fixed interpretation are tremendous. The more subtle the fixed interpretation, the more tremendous the difficulties. This is a near impossible task to which Moore nonetheless returned again and again, with varying degrees of success.

In this poem he succeeds in the fusion, possibly because he has lighted on the one fixed spiritual interpretation for which the myth itself begs (although that begging is by no means visible to all observers). And in so reading the myth he has

again testified, albeit unconsciously, to his own spiritual perceptiveness and intellectual power.

The spiritual perceptiveness lies not only in his having seen the application in the myth, since the idea of union with divinity being mirrored in the carnal peak of espousal is fairly standard among mystical writers and could have been drawn from there; but in his having selected that one particular aspect of Semele's story, her being consumed by the lightning of love at the highest stretch of desire, which has all the splendor and strength of the physical-intercourse image but is taken at just the moment when the carnal undercurrent that usually flaws that image's spiritual import is not present. Moore frequently used the actions of carnal intimacy to paint spiritual pictures, and his care to be delicate in these cases does not always keep his canvas clear of a taint of grossness. But in this case he does so keep the canvas clear, and that is high art: there is all the striving, the elation, of the physical counterpart, the advantages for vividness of the concrete moment are seized, yet it is as if he had taken out the spiritual ecstasy, white-hot with its hopes and fears, and left the dross.

The intellectual power, of course, is manifested in the welding of supporting details to the main image. This requires his drawing out of the Semele myth an accurate interior reading of her story, the grades of desire and fear her heart must have gone through, while keeping in mind the exigencies of the parallel experience to which each point must fit mirror-wise. A lot of thought has to go into that. The result speaks sufficiently for the penetration of that thought. From the first intense breathing of the prayer as a threefold desire which we as yet do not understand, through the progressive specifications of that desire which make up the body of the poem, to the prayer's reiteration in a final line now freighted with both meaning and a story, there is no hesitation and no move even a shade off balance. All the minor and passing profundities are pieces which blend simultaneously into both frameworks, that of the story and that of its present applied meaning. The third stanza's god-given thought that is "avid" and "cannot breathe this air"; the natural dread of a "love so male and mighty";

the vision of the god's soul as being that "which is but as it gives" to the point of exhausting the receiver: all these are sensitively true of Semele in her plight and just as true of the creating artist in his. A perfect interchange of poetic identities has been achieved.

Not that difficulties are absent, but that the difficulties which do occur are not the issue of inadequacy. They are the difficulties that are like lung and breath to Moore, altogether a part of him: his native air but the thin air of the "far country" to us. So, typically, the *mise en scène* is presumed: familiarity with the Semele myth and knowledge that the poet is here speaking in his own person, hence that the "beauty ripe in me" is the poetic vision longing for expression and consequently the theme in parallel is "artistic enthusiasm". So, also typically, there are incidental crypticisms, such as the parenthetical remark, "my hopes by holiness forbidden", in line 5 of the first section's third stanza. Both this and the *mise en scène* work out exactly but both do require working out since in the Moore manner the daylight is two steps away: the first step to the *mise en scène*, for instance, is identification of the Semele myth which, however, is at once voiced in an image (the poet in his throes), and mastering that image forms the second step. Thus the poem, quite normally, lets in the light only crevice by crevice; but in this case the dawn is worth waiting and watching for.

A third native difficulty is also evident: the meaning is handed over hind-end-to. Even a brief comparative look at the three sections will show that the natural way to have presented them would seem to be III, II, I, indeed the progression of thought is then so easy and naturally mounting as to make compelling the conviction that the parts of the poem originally existed in that order. The reversal, which puts the key narrative stanza last, is illustrative of the poet's insistence on poems being wholes and to be apprehended only as such.³ And the

³ Moore held that even opening expressions of a poem need not be intelligible except in the light of roundings of the thought occurring later on. Hence no poem has any thorough meaning except as an integrated whole and no part except as integrated into the whole.

present case surely attests that there is some reason for this view. Early understanding is impaired by the existing order, but once granted understanding the artistic modulation of thought effected is far superior, just as it is more delicate but more lastingly effective in music to introduce a theme faintly and build it slowly rather than to state it at once blatantly and baldly. Further, a factor that was surely not overlooked, Section III of the poem placed first would have a function of explanation and that's all, no other richness. The same stanza placed last still carries the narrative explanation but also carries implicit within the narrative the counterpoint theme: note that there is no mention of the poet's throes in lines 7 to 12 of the third section, yet we "read" stages of the poet's throes here in much the same way as in Hopkins' explanation of counterpointed rhythm the ear "hears" the suppressed but expected beat. Lastly, the distinctive rhythmical movements of the three sections, movement both of thought and of external rhythm and tone, are infinitely more a subtle ascent of lasting impact in the present order than the same movements would be if reversed. Reversed, they would be simple statement, then a variation and initial interpretation pitched slightly higher and faster, finally a climactic interpretation dying off at the close: a fairly routine musical and rhythmic structure. This way, there is a thrust *in medias res* sounded at highest pitch and somewhat bewilderingly, then ebbing a bit to background tones; then a middle section that is quieter and tighter but still with the first rapture behind it; and finally the narrative section whose simple statement, charged as it is with echoes from the preceding sections, takes on now a tone of dignified restraint (there is something within it which is being held back), lending the poem's close a quiet and deadly gravity that convinces of sincerity.

The ecstatic element in the poem, the question of union with God, has of course been a background theme throughout all the preceding. In *ex professo* consideration of it now we shall hold down to mere statements since more intimate discussion might well infringe on matter that will come after the two following poems, they being themselves commentaries by

the poet on the identical points which would attract our comment here. Four notes, then. First, note his equation of the process of inspired artistic creation precisely with mystical union, which is what he takes the Semele consumption-by-fire to represent. Second, note the accuracy with which he conceives the qualities and the demands of this union at point of consummation (about which something will be said soon by way of clarification, i.e. the standard interpretation of mystical union). Third, note that his reading of the union seems at the stage of this poem to stop short with the pagan Zeus as divine term, not transfer at all to the Christian God in the other half of the picture. Fourth, note that acceptance of the death to self (which is a condition of the accomplishment of union) and the union itself are at this stage both steps to personal achievement, the delivery of "the beauty ripe in me."

IV

A SECOND PRAYER

Come nearer yet!

A child, I thought truth would commune
With me, if not at once, yet soon.

The day I wed

- 5 I cried the more wildly for regret,
"Come nearer, nearer still!" and fed
Impatient hope with that embrace
Which, as who washing dips his face,
Plunges the one soul in the supreme
10 Effort of another's aspiration,
And leaves both streaming with elation.

Having toiled for skill and worth, I cry—

"Let me know something ere I die!

"Not merely the measured husk and its imprint,—

"Not words left life-lorn if they more than hint,—

- 15 "Not woman known but as our limbs are known,—

"But that within me which is not mine own.

"Naught save the never seen or heard or felt,

- "Which yet precedes my thought and will, precedes
 "Every appearance wherewith I have dealt,
 20 "Is or could crown the essence of my needs.
 "Not life, not love, (for love, for life, are mere
 "Operations of adroit and complex gear,
 "Unless we do suppose transfused through them
 "This which claims fealty as of right more clear
 25 "Than thought's or wife's or child's): though this condemn
 "My every action, yet when the day's done
 "This kinder seems than I to my small son."

Either this poem deals directly with the desire for mystical union or it is the purest havoring. Moore was certainly no stranger to havoring, but the exactitude of this poem's details precludes the possibility that he is engaged in it here. Since we are thus now treating directly of mystical union, it is time to say something about that reality in order to keep our ideas and terms straight.

God gives Himself to the soul which has received His grace, and He is therefore present there "indwelling" with a presence which is special and which is above and beyond His constant general presence in the world of creatures which He has made and sustains. But this special presence of God by grace in the souls of the just is imperceptible. To those, however, who honestly and perseveringly seek closer union with Him (and that is prayer: an inner conversation with God Who is present) and are willing to make the necessary sacrifices by cutting away the distractions of created comfort, God *may* manifest Himself perceptibly, He *may* bestow upon these elect souls what is called the grace of mystical prayer.

The grace which makes a man just, the grace that sanctifies, is one thing; the grace of mystical prayer is another. Both are supernatural realities in the sense that they are outside of the range of created nature and cannot be obtained by natural striving; they must be given. Sanctifying grace is, in non-technical terms, the measure of a man's justness. It is not a matter of emotion or of savored satisfaction in any way. Nevertheless, as a man grows in essential "goodness", so he increases in grace

(or more properly vice versa, but that leads aside into technicalities). Sanctity is the possession of sanctifying grace and therefore of God's Indwelling Presence within; growth in sanctity is growth in this grace and growth in God's Presence—this becomes more deeply rooted, so to speak. All this has to do with the grace called *gratia gratum faciens*, the grace that makes a man holy, Sanctifying Grace.

Besides this central and solely necessary grace of God, there are *gratiae gratis datae*, the graces freely given. The distinction here is not that this type of grace is freely given, the other not, for the whole idea of grace of any sort is that being a supernatural reality it is always a free gift. But the central gift of Sanctifying Grace is given according to the ordinary dispensations of God's Providence to those who prepare themselves for it: it is needed for one's self and it is not refused. The *gratiae gratis datae*, on the other hand, are not an imperative need for one's self and when they are given they are given largely for the sake of others. Thus the gift of prophecy, of tongues, etc. Moreover, they are sometimes given, sometimes not; there is no "ordinary dispensation of divine providence" in the matter. A man should not pride himself on having such gifts, says Saint Paul, since he did not get them of himself and does not exercise them of himself; and charity is more important. Also, they are not even necessarily a sign of great holiness in the recipient. Very holy people have been given them, but quite ordinary and imperfect people have been given them too; for they are primarily for the benefit of others, not of the one having possession.

Now the grace of mystical prayer is somewhat of the class of *gratiae gratis datae*, although not altogether. First of all it is not the grace which makes a man just although it presupposes this grace, of course, since there is question here of progressive intimacy with God and God hardly becomes progressively intimate with one basically alienated from Him. And it further seems that this grace of higher prayer is also *gratis datae* somewhat in the same sense as prophecy or tongues, i.e. given or not wholly according to God's good pleasure; for there have been

many very holy people who do not seem to have had the grace of mystical prayer. On the other hand, although given for others in the sense that a mystic's intercessory powers with God become greater (an intimate friend now asks of an Intimate Friend), the grace of mystical prayer is still primarily a gift to and for the recipient.

This is prayer in its higher stages that is being discussed. That is to say, there is a point at which prayer passes beyond the level of normal human operation, which is a man on his knees talking to God in human terms and by the power of human faculties and in human language. When (and if) the prayer advances beyond that level of natural human achievement, the contact is made supernaturally: by God's power and in God's language, the language of pure spirit. Everything becomes different and strange; and the realities of such a union are therefore expressed only haltingly in ordinary human terms.

God is spirit. So is man's soul. But the soul is, in this life, immersed in the body, limited and contained by it so far as the operation of its faculties is concerned. To speak with God directly is to speak on the level of the purely spiritual, therefore in some sense to be "out of the body" and grasping realities which can neither be properly perceived by means of the body nor properly expressed in its terms. To express mystical experience eloquently, which means literarily and therefore imaginatively, one has to extract the essential *élan* of the mystical, then put it in terms of the closest physical counterpart of its material elements. This purifying process is the peculiar compositional agony of anyone who, like Moore, hopes to achieve anything in this matter: the physical must be purified because to the extent that it is physical it falsifies the spiritual reality to be depicted, yet it cannot be purified out of sight because only to the extent that it remains physical will it be perceptible, hence expressive of the spiritual reality to be depicted.

The term *mystical* is probably an unfortunate one, but there's nothing to be done about that at this date; it is in possession. It was not always used and only entered upon the scene in the last several centuries, giving rise to much confu-

sion ever since. Let us simply say here that *mystical* is a compromise term. One cannot say that the union with God being spoken of is merely moral since that refers to the union of wills among intellectual beings: the members of one company, the citizens of one commonwealth; and this is not enough. Nor can one say that the union in the case is physical. This is both too much (hinting at fusion of identity) and inaccurate (since it is spirits that are being spoken of). So we say *mystical*; and may define it, broadly, as the point of real contact between two spirits.

Ecstasy is also an abused term. Ecstasy is properly the suspension of the activity of the exterior senses which occurs in the highest stages of mystical union with God. It is an absorption in God carried (by God's gift) to the extent of the temporary failing of ability to exercise the lower faculties. Vulgarly and inaccurately ecstasy is interchangeable with levitation and other extraordinary phenomena. But these are rather outside the central fact of close supernatural union with God; they do not make or constitute that state in any sense but are (when genuine) rather overflow effects of it, and also are in the view of some of the mystics rather hindrances than helps. Despite these possible confusions the term, *ecstatic element*, is used for the mystical strain manifest in Moore's poetry because it seems the most accurate in the circumstances: the "being carried away" (with its external overtones) is what the poet is speaking of and striving for, not merely the quiet, core "at-oneness".

The preceding is an excursus, but quite a necessary one. It is necessary, first, to know what the realities are that are involved here; second, to know what orthodox theology teaches on these matters so that we may have some way of discerning how close Moore, who professed to be anything but orthodox, came to the orthodox reality in his writing. And we find that when he uses the word, prayer, in the title of any of his poems, he most often uses it in a surprisingly elevated and precise sense.

The present poem takes up the very point at which we felt its predecessor failed. There the desire of, and striving for, the mystical union seemed at its height to be merely a passionate craving for an apt tool to accomplishment, hence to personal aggrandisement. This is not the necessary reading of the inner tensions of that poem, but it is the impression. Moore seems to have been aware of it too; and the present poem is the corrective. There is more to union than what may be got out of it. The knowing, the piercing through to reality, the possession, are all of final and perfect worth for their own sake; there is no beyond to which this union is but a step.

The whole poem is quite extraordinarily perceptive for one ranked as an unbeliever who took what he wanted from the Christian deposit of truth and left the rest. So much so that it all but gives the lie to that interpretation of Moore's religious position, no matter how well documented it may seem to be even with the poet's own words; except that other poems even more strongly document the reservation.

The poem is concerned with that desire for ultimate reality with which every poet, if he be more than entertainer, becomes finally and totally preoccupied. It is the desire to tear the shell off things and see beyond, to the heart that makes all life beat. This is a romantic tendency, but manifest among the great romantics in a flight out to the edges of life, edges in time and space, where what is obscured by the artificial veils of civilization may perhaps be found naked and measurable. Few romantic poets indeed simply sat steadfastly where they were and went boldly inward to find the answer. Say what you will against modern poets, it is to their credit that this by and large is what they have been doing: "going within". Sometimes they slip off onto a spur line of psychoneurotic investigation, but that is only the excess of a virtue.

At bottom much modern poetry is still essentially romantic poetry in that it is still in quest of the ultimate mystery, does not simply sit at a window and dispense wisdom already possessed. The difference between modern romanticism and that of the last century is that the modern writers have recog-

nized that changes of time and place do not really help in a thrust to the heart of things, this is escape not solution. So the driving search for the unknown, the mystery, the central *truth*, has become an *imploration* instead of an exploration, the romanticism remains but its quest has become intellectual rather than imaginative and emotional.

In this sense Moore is a romantic poet. The term is often applied to him, with a flip of the hand, in dismissal. What people who thus bury him miss is that he is romantic in exactly the same sense in which every other poet of any dimension in our day is romantic, no more, no less. The only difference is that in outer trappings he conforms more to the appearance of the old and (at present) outworn Romanticism. Other poets of this time have donned a new and harder manner to match the new direction which the old impulse has taken: the beauty, where it occurs, is swordthrust beauty rather than Landseer-landscape beauty. Moore with his artist's preference for full-bodied words and figures still paints his surfaces in the old lush style. But his inner direction is at one with that of many other moderns, often indeed more profound than theirs, since where they seem satisfied with psychology he seeks spirituality and will settle for no less. Psychological truths about human nature are, as he says pregnantly of love and life in this poem, "mere operations of adroit and complex gear". Beyond is something. What?

That is the poem: the search for the ultimate secret professed openly. Moore knew it was a search for spirit, "man's arcanum". His poems are always concerned with finding this "spirit" — in its outer fragmentary revelations among human beings at moments of crisis (as in his dramatic and narrative poems) or in its more perceptible person-to-person manifestations (as in the lyrics). Perhaps, finally, it can best be found by a plunge into another's identity, into that other's spirit: that is the "two-or-one" theme which crops up so often in his poems. And here this is voiced as his personal hope of spiritual gain from his own marriage.

“Come nearer yet!
 A child, I thought truth would commune
 With me, if not at once, yet soon.

The day I wed
 I cried the more wildly for regret,
 “Come nearer, nearer still!” and fed
 Impatient hope with that embrace
 Which, as who washing dips his face,
 Plunges the one soul in the supreme
 Effort of another’s aspiration,
 And leaves both streaming with elation.”

But it was a hope that proved illusory. Sensuously satiating as this supreme physical union was, leaving both “streaming with elation”, it was not enough, it did not truly give that “beyond” of which he was avid: the communing with truth (lines 2 and 3) which was the inmost mystery, the *everything*.

So the poem, beginning its third stanza with a reference back to the previous poem’s desire of “skill and worth” and an implicit rejection of these, steadies centrally upon a cry out of the heart for that which he knows to be his (and man’s) sole treasure and which he cannot grasp.

“Let me know something ere I die!
 “Not merely the measured husk and its imprint,—
 “Not words left life-lorn if they more than hint,—
 “Not woman known but as our limbs are known,—
 “But that within me which is not mine own.”

The threefold mounting rejection of personal and beloved worldly possession is spiritual autobiography: first, the ordinary material paraphernalia of life which are but husks; next, the possible victories (and the peak agonies) of the craft that was his breath; finally, even the physical love to which he had pinned his fondest spiritual hopes. The crescendo values of these are not denied; they are simply finally weighed in the spiritual balance and found wanting. Spiritually what he must have is “that within me which is not mine own”.

"That within me which is not mine own." This phrase is startling, so much so that our first feeling is that there must be some mistake. But there is no mistake, unless the poem as a whole is a typographical error, for this line is what the whole poem is about. The same precise distinction of another presence within occurs in an author's note prefacing Moore's *Psyche* stories. There, speaking against any tendency to "petrify" the *Psyche* legend as exclusively an allegory of the soul's attainment of immortality, Moore writes:

"The soul and that which loves the soul are idle talk or both must be presumed present in each individual; their adventures are then inexhaustibly varied."⁴

These two clear statements have received no attention, if we except a passing reference by Frederick Gwynn to Moore's celebration of "man's awareness of the divine essence within and without."⁵ It is certainly true that whenever Moore, pursuing Platonism, seems on the verge of the ultimate, he shies off into abstraction. Thus in his philosophical dialogue, *THE POWERS OF THE AIR*, the Platonic Idea, of which material things are merely the faulty imitations, is admitted to be always "of something else"; and even Nemesis, Moore's bodiless fire-white goddess with whom union is sought, is only an idea of Responsibility.⁶ The "something else", then, in what appears to be the poet's supreme embodiment, is Responsibility, "an enlargement of experience on the side of purpose and daring"; which is, once again, the poet's most soaring flight fluttering off into shadow.

Yet such analyses are not compatible with what is down here in black and white. Whatever the words in this poem mean, they are not adequately explained as hunger for union with an abstraction, whether Perfect Responsibility or anything else; especially so since all such Ideas are after all a man's own creation and the object in question is that "which is not mine own", that "which . . . precedes my thought and will".

⁴ COLLECTED EDITION IV, p. 72.

⁵ Frederick L. Gwynn, *STURGE MOORE AND THE LIFE OF ART*, London: The Richards Press, 1952, p. 114.

⁶ COLLECTED EDITION IV, p. 330.

This is not to say that Moore was a complete mystic in the orthodox Christian sense. It is to say, however, that he was obviously rich in the mystic's gift of hunger and for precisely the mystic's object. Grant that and the poem is pellucid; deny it and the poem is hawering.

To the mystic all the realities which the poet rejects are also to be rejected, not (as uninformed people think) because he despises the world or is fleeing it but because he is reaching beyond it. He has become aware of a Presence within, which is never seen or heard though sometimes felt. In the face of this Reality all else seems minor and incidental. Life and love, taken as Moore takes them for physical life and fleshly love, are indeed only "operations of adroit and complex gear", although in a purer sense this present experience *is* life, *is* love. When the mystic returns to everyday, he carries back to its triviality a transfusion from his truer fealty (to use Moore's terms) and this transforms ordinary living for him and for others who are in touch with him; which accounts for the extraordinary power in action of the greatest mystics. Finally, against the white light of divine purity the imperfections of every human action stand out stark and thus the Presence "condemn(s) my every action". Yet it is a condemnation of fact not of judgment; the inevitable blemishes of limited being cannot help but be visible, but they are understood and forgiven: "...Yet when the day's done / This kinder seems than I to my small son."

This parallel has been drawn not as proof but as indication. Yet as proof it is impressive though but circumstantial. If two experiences match, intricate step by intricate step, one is naturally inclined to conclude that they are after all the same experience. This is especially so in the delicate matter of the mystical experience, wherein pitfalls of illusion are so many, each pitfall nowadays carefully labelled with an appropriate psychological term for tab. A sure tread through such a maze strongly indicates either profound scholarly investigation or authenticity. Moore the unbeliever, then, either had carefully fabricated the data of this poem or had genuinely undergone at least some of the circumstances of mystical experience. The careful fabri-

cation is hard to credit, especially in the light of the poem's intensely sincere tone. It remains that the mystic lift and drive, "the wound of love" as it has been beautifully termed, was apparently granted him in some degree, the reward perhaps of years of an often misty but always honest search for Beauty. Fulfillment was not granted, as this and the following poem attest. In consequence a frustrate mystic, he often turned away and down from the vision vouchsafed, to dear and close familiarities or to splendours purely romantic.

V

ANSWERED PRAYER

"Soon, soon!
 Mine shall it be again
 With shrilling blades a diagram
 Of the swallows' swooping game
 5 To cut on the polisht plane!"
 His knuckles stiffen and yet the tame
 Pond's persistent ripples cram
 The youngster's ears with their lapping tune
 "No, not so soon,
 10 "No, not so soon."
 O Cantor, who thy song entonest
 Within that chamber closed with lids,
 Whose fringe of lashes quite forbids
 Day peer through rose-dark where thou thronest,
 15 Is thy presence but a dream
 Of voice, the fragrance of its own theme?
 Tell me, if I conceive aright
 That spirit, as water chills to ice,
 Hardens to temper of that night
 20 Which is the truth and numbs us twice,
 Once on conceiving that *know* we can never,
 Once on accepting that bitter forever?
 Tell me, when pride can no more strive,
 If thou and thy fellows leap alive,

- 25 Race our trance over and cut clear
 A charactery
 That beggars the swallow's flight like curves
 Of wind that skates the sea,
 Or streaked and tapering cloud that swerves
- 30 Across the zenith, white and free
 In yet illegible ecstasy?
- Soon, soon,
 A spirit crystal smooth,
 That warps beneath those cursive feet,
- 35 Those swallow-like gliders fine,—
 May I receive the truth
 Swept in hierograph divine,
 And ring aloud with rapture fleet?
 What aileth thee to pause, then croon
- 40 "No, not so soon,
 No, not so soon"?

This completes the trilogy of prayer poems and explains why, having got so far, Moore did not get farther. It also explains, why, having visited the heights, he sometimes professed ultimate disillusion with them and preference for the valleys, desiring to be satisfied to "live in a tiny cage of vivid sense / And trouble naught for things by distance blurred."

The present poem starts with the picture of a boy waiting beside a pond for the freeze which will enable him once again to engage in the intricate freedom of skating. Despite the gathering cold ("His knuckles stiffen and yet...") the ripples murmur that the fulfillment of his hope will not be soon. All this is then applied to the poet's spiritual condition and his hope for the fulfillment of union.

Although it is not our primary business here, the figure and its application deserves passing attention. The unexpectedness of this figure and the twisted nature of its application to the reality is what makes the poem so extraordinarily difficult of understanding; that, and the additional fact that the burden of meaning presupposes the preceding poem just as that in turn

is a footnote to the one before it. In this figure Moore, evidently impatient to express his thought, takes his own spirit to be the pond on which "swept in hierograph divine" the character of union will be written. Clear enough in itself, in the whole poem's context this leaves the youngster and the replying ripples of the first stanza nowhere in the application; and very likely leaves the mind of the reader nowhere too. In defense it might be said that the poem is not an allegory; but the reader's mind is forced to take it as a kind of allegory or despair of clarity altogether.

But Moore is interested only in the central likeness, "the swallows' swooping game" on the pond's ice, the divine character in the hardening soul. Leaving aside his neglect (or even violation) of the subsidiary details, this central likeness in itself strikes the first dissonance in the pairing of Moore's experience with the genuine mystical process. That this process is still what he is talking about is clear from his direct address to the Cantor throned in the "rose-dark" of the "chamber closed with lids". But his conception of spirit *hardening* to temper of the night which is the truth is entirely unique. The numbing could be accurate enough, since after John of the Cross it has become traditional to speak of certain steps of the mystical process as "nights" wherein first sense satisfactions, then spiritual satisfactions are withdrawn; and the resultant effect upon the soul that is left in darkness is unquestionably akin to "numbing". But these nights are but steps to light, the numbing is but a step to re-awakened vitality. It may be that the night was as far as Moore got. But the more pertinent point is that for him this is as far as there is to get. Negation seems in his view to be the ultimate arrival.

This is the first hint of the evacuation by which the leap upward of his ecstatic nature necessarily defeated itself. It becomes clearer in the lines immediately following.

"Tell me, when pride can no more strive,
If thou and thy fellows leap alive . . ."

Here is an intrusion of paganism, of "magic"; it can be nothing else. After Zeus of A PRAYER (who was at least one per-

son) we progressed in A SECOND PRAYER to "that within me which is not mine own" which in the context seemed hardly explicable as a mere abstraction. After all the sensitive striving of the first two poems we are coming, the mind thought, to a sure profession, a sure identification. This grew even surer with the "Cantor who thy song entonest / Within that chamber closed with lids". But now it is "thou and thy fellows", and it is a "trance", and it is a final seeking for a personal triumph of truth received "in yet illegible ecstasy" and "with rapture fleet".

What aileth thee to pause, then croon
"No, not so soon,
No, not so soon"?

There may be some literary mystery about who in the tangled figure is speaking, since the pond which is the poet's spirit is hardly rebuffing itself. But there is no mystery at all, except perhaps to the poet, about the answer to the question asked. God does not give Himself fully to one who does not properly acknowledge Him.

We are right within the inmost chamber of Moore's "religion". That he had the mystic *élan*, the ecstatic lift, is undeniable; that he had it not as a mere self-injected artistic "mood" (which usually betrays its own artificiality) but as a sensitively accurate spiritual advance is also fairly well documented. It now appears that he also had to the very end a lack of sound or firm religious conviction and that this emasculated his spirituality, doomed it to failure at its climax. It is as if God had invited him and he had accepted all of the invitation but its core, which is belief. There is evidence in the poems as to what the root of this spiritual failure was; it seems to have been pride, for it takes a man who is proud beyond any one man's due portion of self-awareness to cast aside all the religious tradition of the civilization in which he lives and frame his own unique set of responses to mankind's ultimate queries.

"Thou and thy fellows . . ." What *was* Moore's conception of his goal within in this patently mystical seeking? It is hard

to say. The phrase given makes it sound like pagan godlings, personifications descending from mythology to skate expertly across the soul. But that is a bit of nonsense beyond Moore. More likely he is indeed thinking here of vitalized abstractions, Truth, Beauty, Responsibility, and other such; of Platonic Ideas and a final enrapturing REALIZATION of them. The urgency of his tone throughout these prayer poems certainly denies that "that within me" can be anything so bloodless and vapid or that the heart of the mystery can turn out to be only idiosyncratic tenets apotheosized. Yet his years of self-enclosed rumination had perhaps brought him to the point where even these, better than nothing, could seem transiently to be realities within a real holy of holies.

This view is supported by passages elsewhere in the poems. In a poem entitled NATURE he is talking throughout about the "something beyond", the reality behind appearances.

Say, our best joys be shadows cast by thought
 Beyond our bodily forms; would they be aught
 Did they no solids grace?

And he concludes:

Beauty and kindness are alone divine,
 Forms that reveal them with their glory shine:
 As men appreciatively embrace
 More and yet more of structures they knew not,
 Climbing above what seemed their destined lot,
 Their smiles predict some yet more radiant face.⁷

Here the "yet more radiant face" is explicitly stated to be Beauty and Kindness, which alone are divine. And in an essay on Matthew Arnold, published in 1938, Moore says approvingly:

Arnold had shown how God might be regarded as a name for a vast and indeterminate experience concerning a 'not-ourselves' which helps us to do right, and keep clean, so as to promote inward happiness.⁸

⁷ COLLECTED EDITION IV, p. 58.

⁸ "Matthew Arnold" in *ESSAYS AND STUDIES BY MEMBERS OF THE ENGLISH ASSOCIATION XXIV* (1938), p. 11. The Arnold reference is to "Literature and Dogma".

Yet during the last nights of his life, when he was slowly sinking to death, one of his comprehensible phrases was: "I will not regret what is not regretted by the Eternal Spirit which sits within me" — which sounds like someone a bit more concrete and personal than "vast and indeterminate experience".

Whichever way one reads the riddle of the object or person sought, there seems no doubt that the final answer of all the prayers was a denial. This also accounts for the poet's turning his ecstatic drive back to earth, as in the poem quoted earlier where he earnestly desires to be satisfied with the "tiny cage of vivid sense". Such poems leave the reader vaguely uncomfortable. The reason is that in Moore's circumstances joy in the near, tangible beauties is deliberately elected joy in being frustrate; and that, no matter how loftily phrased, is a species of perversion.

VI

The summation can be brief. *THE DIFFICULTY* showed that the ultimate treasure offered so hopefully by Moore was likely to be a disappointing vacuum. A *PRAYER* indicated the genuinity of an ecstatic realization presented with much imaginative power as applied to the dilemma of artistic creation; a more living reality than what *THE DIFFICULTY* had offered was envisioned as goal, but a flaw was still perceptible in the poet's desire for union as instrumental towards personal achievement. A *SECOND PRAYER* erased this impression of self-seeking by a sensitive and mystically accurate aspiration towards a true Reality—"that within me which is not mine own"—union with which was conceived to have ultimate value for its own sake: the giving of self was desired because it alone is the fulfillment of life's deepest drive. But *ANSWERED PRAYER* shattered the fragile perfection of the fabric in a way foreseeable from the outset in the foothill hollowness of *THE DIFFICULTY*. After all, there was no true divine treasure; the treasure was at best an apotheosized abstraction, man's union was to be with a shining shadow of man's own thought.