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W. Ong, The Barbarian Within (NY : Macmillan, 1962) | St. Ignatius' Prison Cage and the Existentialist Situation

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FOURTEEN

St. Ignatius' Prison-Cage and the Existentialist Situation

I

THE writings of St. Ignatius Loyola are filled with passages more puzzling than a pedantic approach to the spiritual life likes to own. The Basque ex-soldier is a man whom one does not get to know all at once. Not because he was calculating, or inscrutable in any melodramatic way, but simply because of his genuine depth. He acted habitually from profound motives, and it is no discredit to him to say that he was not always capable of rationalizing in so many words the springs of one or another of his actions. He says this of himself often enough in his own *Autobiography* or *Testament*.

The *Spiritual Exercises* themselves are full of minor puzzles. Their general purpose is clear enough and explicitly stated: "That a man may conquer himself and order his life without being himself determined by any inordinate affection." And the general progression within the *Exercises* corresponds closely enough to the succession of purgative, illuminative, and unitive ways to be immediately intelligible in terms of the normal psychological progression which this succession registers. But within this framework, why this or that detail of the *Spiritual Exercises* should have appealed to their writer as particularly effective is not always so clear, as our great masses of commentary make only too evident.

To some of his techniques St. Ignatius seems to attach a special force which escapes us. I do not mean here the kind of thing one encounters, for example, in the talk about knights and kings, and the problems arising when such Renaissance imagery loses force in an age when knights are, for all practical purposes, extinct, and when kings, at best, are but symbolic relics of a once functional office. Here, despite the fact that these terms have become less "numinous" than they were, we can still sense what a knight meant to the sixteenth century knight, Inigo de

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Loyola. There is a difficulty in our reaction pattern, but, given elementary historical information, no intellectual puzzle here.

It is quite otherwise with the peculiar "First Prelude" which occurs over and over again in the First Week of the *Exercises*, the picture of the soul in the body as in a prison, and of the whole, soul-and-prison, thrown out among brute beasts. This construct of St. Ignatius' has presented difficulties from the very beginning, and difficulties so puzzling that they are mostly not even touched on by commentators, and, if they are touched on, are not really faced but only blurred and set aside.

The basic text of St. Ignatius in question runs as follows:

In meditation on something invisible, as here on sins, the composition will be to see, with the eyes of the imagination, and to consider my soul to be closed up in this corruptible body as in a prison, and the whole composite as in exile among brute animals. I say the whole composite, soul and body.

This is a translation of the original Spanish of the *texto autógrafo* used by St. Ignatius himself, which reads:

En la invisible, como es aquí de los pecados, la composición será ver con la vista imaginativa y considerar mi ánima ser encarcerada en este cuerpo corruptible, y todo el compósito en este valle, como desterrado, entre brutos animales. Digo todo el compósito de ánima y cuerpo.¹

In the often reprinted 1548 "Vulgate" version prepared in proper Renaissance classical Latin by the Jesuit Latinist, Père André des Freux (Frusius), and approved by the Pope's censors together with the less "elegant" Latin text now known as the "Versio Prima," we find the following:

Sin autem speculationi subest res incorporea, ut est consideratio peccatorum nunc oblata, poterit loci constructio talis esse, ut si per imaginationem cernamus animam nostram in corpore isto corruptibili, velut in carcere constructam; hominem quoque ipsum, in hac miseriae valle, inter animalia bruta exulantem.²

Although this "Vulgate" version was approved by St. Ignatius and the divergence from the original is here slight enough, it is plain that St. Ignatius' imagery had presented difficulties in Père des Freux. St. Ignatius' original is "la composición será ver" (*the composition will be to see*), and this is attenuated in Père des Freux's hands to "poterit loci constructio talis esse, ut si . . . cernamus" (*the composition of place*

pas de verso