

The Republic • General Influence on Christian Thought • Spanish Mystic Poets

"Dark Night of the Soul"

St. John of the Cross (1542 -1591)

1. *On a dark night, Kindled in love with yearnings - oh, happy chance! - I went
forth without being observed, My house being now at rest.*

2. *In darkness and secure, By the secret ladder, disguised - oh, happy chance - In
darkness and in concealment, My house being now at rest.*

3. *In the happy night, In secret, when none saw me,
Nor I beheld aught, Without light or guide, save that which burned in my heart.*

4. *This light guided me More surely than the light of noonday
To the place where he (well knew who!) was awaiting me -
A place where none appeared.*

5. *Oh, night that guided me, Oh, night more lovely than the dawn,
Oh, night that joined Beloved with lover, Lover transformed in the Beloved !*

"Consider then what would happen if such a soul had been differently trained from childhood or had been liberated from the love of food and similar pleasures that are attached to us at birth like leaden weights. Supposing, I say, he were freed from all these kinds of things that draw the soul's vision downward." (Book VII, 213)

It was inevitable that the influence of foreign writers should have been considerable in a country which in the sixteenth century had such a high degree of culture as Spain. Plotinus, in a diluted form, made his way into Spanish mysticism as naturally as did Seneca into Spanish asceticism. Plato and Aristotle entered it through the two greatest minds that Christianity has known - St. Augustine and St. Thomas. The influence of the Platonic theories of love and beauty and of such basic Aristotelian theories as the origin of knowledge is to be found in most of the Spanish mystics, St. John of the Cross among them.

Plotinus (205-270) a Roman philosopher and the originator of neoplatonism. He was born in Asyut, Egypt, though his education and cultural background were completely Greek. Plotinus' doctrine that the soul is composed of a higher and a lower part - the higher part being unchangeable and divine (and aloof from the lower part, yet providing the lower part with life), while the lower part is the seat of the personality (and hence the passions and vices) - led him to neglect an ethics of the individual human being in favor of a mystical or soteric doctrine of the soul's ascent to union with its higher part.