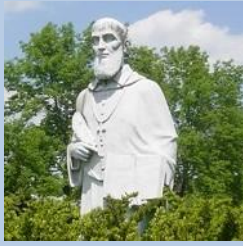
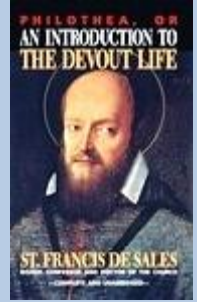


Heritage Week 2008 - Tuesday, January 20th



LITERATURE ROUNDTABLE

celebrating the 400th anniversary of the publication of
The Introduction to the Devout Life



A Saint and Physician Write about Healing:

Literary Cures by Savoy's Francis de Sales and Antoine Despine

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I was invited here tonight in part because of a translation project I have worked on for many years which has recently, and finally, been published. The job of translating into English an 1838/9 medical monograph by pioneering physician Charles-Humbert-Antoine Despine (1777-1852) began in 1999; this work has been a central focus of my scholarly activity in some form or another for 10 years. Because this project has been part of my life for so long, it defines how I approach and see many things; this explains why my remarks tonight reflect especially the perspective of a translator.

Antoine Despine was born in Savoy 210 years after St Francis de Sales was born there. Part of France since 1860 but an independent duchy during their lives, Savoy is not the only thing St. Francis and Despine have in common. Both men were well-educated and worked

tirelessly.¹ Both corresponded a tremendous amount with those in their care. Francis's secretary "insisted that when Francis was in Annecy he wrote 20 letters per day ... and in his own hand" (Ravier 120). Both Francis and Despine embraced the needs of every individual, regardless of class, gender, education or, in Despine's case, ability to pay for services. The celebrated writer Madame de Stael, who greatly esteemed the physician and his work, apparently teased that she should disguise herself as a poor person so as to get more immediate attention from Dr. Despine (P. Despine 19). Both Francis and Despine, practical men, valued careful, systematic observation as a means of understanding human nature and the human body. Both appeared unflappable in the face of criticism, but were capable of defending their work with passion. Both were accused of sorcery (McKeown and Fine 150, Ravier 67), and finally, Francis and Despine each held administrative positions and encountered influential political, religious, and literary figures but never abandoned their fundamental missions to the common people.

Most relevant and interesting among the similarities for our discussion this evening is Francis's and Despine's vocations as healers. St. Francis clearly cared for spiritual health, but he also ministered to the physically ill, as did the Sisters of the Order of the Visitation, a religious community he founded with Jane de Chantal.² Despine, a practicing Catholic who was deeply interested in mystical ecstasies for both religious and medical reasons,³ treated

¹ André Ravier, author of *Francis de Sales: Sage and Saint*, called St. Francis's work rhythm "inhuman" (30).

² There are also reports that invalids touching Francis's coffin were miraculously healed of their infirmities (Ravier 254).

³ Despine wrote in a travel journal about spending evenings reading the Bible and the biography of Sister Anne-Catherine Emmerich, who experienced ecstatic episodes and the stigmata. For more on Despine's interest in her, and on the transcription of her visions by poet Clemens Brentano see McKeown's 2006 article, "Visions as Illness and Inspiration: Young Estelle L'Hardy and Sister Anne-Catherine Emmerich in works of Doctor Antoine Despine and Poet Clemens Brentano" in the *Journal of Christianity and Foreign Languages*, 7, 29-43.

patients with physical and nervous disorders for over 50 years in Aix-en-Savoie.⁴ He treated them with the most modern forms of hydrotherapy and electricity, and dared to use the much debated, controversial animal magnetism, now called hypnotism, to treat nervous disorders.

Might Francis's and Despine's work as healers not be somehow related to their common roots in Savoy, a region boasting 50 mineral springs by the middle of the nineteenth century? Some of those springs had been recognized as having healing qualities since Roman times. St Francis himself spoke of the merits of the baths in Thonon, on the Versoie plateau,⁵ which he himself had apparently used. Indeed, there are countless references in the *Introduction* to words used to describe thermal treatments: purgation, cleansing, washing waters, rest, purification, springs, heating and reinvigorating the body. Many more terms describe illness and the work of doctors: balms, remedies, cures, poisoning, infirmity, medications, surgeons. Furthermore, there are striking similarities between the counsel Francis proposes in his *Introduction* to people seeking spiritual healing and the counsel in manuals of thermal establishments for people seeking physical healing. Penitent sinners and patients alike must follow the guidance of a spiritual director or a physician and there must be frank communication between them; both the devotional and medical processes are open to all but are different for each person, depending on personal circumstances; the community has a role to play since no one makes progress in isolation; early morning spiritual exercises or ingestion of waters before breakfast is optimal; a disciplined routine is most beneficial. Finally, both spiritual director and doctor are themselves on journeys towards spiritual or intellectual betterment which are advanced by interaction with the repentant sinner and the patient.

⁴ This town is now called Aix-les-Bains.

⁵ See www.hotelarcenciethonon.com/chapitre17_fr.html. Jan. 2009.

Where St. Francis and Despine differ markedly is in writing style. Translating Despine's lengthy, complex monograph for contemporary readership was slow, painstaking work. Its completion would have been impossible without the cooperation of our three-person team: each of us brought a different, essential strength and knowledge base to the project. Together, we translated, interpreted, reorganized, corrected, edited and annotated the original, which was apparently never revised by Dr. Despine. To think that St Francis's *Introduction* was translated into Latin, Italian, English, Spanish and Flemish during his life-time and that by 1656 it had been translated into 17 languages astonishes me. Such an accomplishment would not be possible if the work were overly complex, disorganized, or unclear in parts, as was Despine's work. Our translation team has conjectured about why Despine did not edit the monograph and why some parts are poorly written. One likely explanation is that the physician was over-worked and simply had no time to reread his lengthy study. To dedicate time to revisions would have been too costly professionally, not to mention personally; Despine's family sometimes complained of his absences. The physician may also have been anxious to spread the news of this successful cure, since it had been achieved against all odds with the enigmatic animal magnetism; other doctors and their patients would benefit from this success. Finally, Despine was developing some theories while working with patients; explanations of phenomena he understood poorly are particularly confused. One gets the impression that the physician is "thinking aloud" as it were, or that he is using the task of writing to work through his yet unformed, imprecise ideas.⁶

⁶ For how the translation process paralleled this physician's healing work see McKeown's 2007 article, "Restoring Literary Wholeness to the Fragmented Account of Antoine Despine's Magnetic Cure of Estelle L'Hardy's Dissociative Disorder" in the *International Journal of Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis*, 55, 4, 486-496.

Whatever the reason, the final condition of the monograph on which we worked suggests strongly that Despine did no revisions. Conversely, we know that St. Francis carefully revised his *Introduction*. He even corrected mistakes made by the publisher of the second edition for a third edition. The quality of Francis's work has been noted by translators. A group of seventeenth-century English priests in Paris who noted substantial changes to the original in the first English translation by John Yakesley (or Yaworth) chose to publish another one truer to the original. In the preface to their translation they wrote:

It has been formerly translated by a revered person of our country; but he in his great humility exposing it to the reviewing of others it fell into the hands of some, who, enlarging the author's style by many unnecessary paraphrases, have in divers places confounded his sense and make the book less portable. In this edition we hope we have remedied both these inconveniences. The first by following the true sense of the author, and his own expressions, as near to the life, as the two languages will meet. (qtd. in Ryan 18)

Twentieth-century translators also note qualities of St Francis's writing style. John Ryan writes of the work's "originality, its completeness, its sincerity, its balance, its penetration and its style" (13). Further on he speaks of "the symmetry of the Saint's thought" in the *Introduction*, "one of the clearest statements in religious literature . . ." (14). Elisabeth Stopp writes, "He had the gift of moving the will without any showy eloquence but by relying on God in a clear and disciplined presentation. . . ." (19) The Reverend Bernard Bangley, author of a modern interpretation of the *Introduction* and here this evening notes, "It takes the reader

by the hand. A person at almost any stage of spiritual development is gently guided down the clearest path imaginable into a deeper and more authentic religious life" (5). The respect translators have had for St Francis's original speaks volumes about the work's power to be understood. St. Francis used the French language skillfully, as noted by eminent literary historians Saint-Beuve and Jean Calvet, who called him "the eloquent apostle of Savoy" and an "artist" (267, 54; translations mine). The work's overall clarity also speaks volumes about the Saint's own understanding about his own theology. Unlike Despigne, who sometimes struggled with his material, Francis appears certain and confident about his subject matter. Ravier notes, "It was essential for him to be very sure of his theology, of his thinking, of his language, to dare to reveal himself in this way" (184).

Much has been made of St. Francis's language. His choice of words, his sentence structure, coherent paragraphs and clearly labeled chapters make his prose fluid and his logic easy to follow. Short, logically sequenced chapters, simple analogies and real-life examples to illustrate points, parallel approaches to different spiritual challenges, the review of important ideas and recurring themes all contribute to an overall sense of organization and coherence. This clarity of organization and expression, Francis's insights about what is eternal and universal about human nature, and his focused, moral purpose explain why some literary commentators have considered Francis a classical writer. Jean Calvet wrote of Francis's "religious classicism" (qtd in Kleinman 32). Ruth Kleinman argues that the *Introduction* is "the equivalent in its field of classicism in French literature and art ... " (32). Calvet proposes that the *Introduction to the Devout Life* is also an "Introduction to classical French" (64; translation

mine). Stopp claims that St. Francis laid “the foundations of the great prose of the classical period in French literature” (16).

Francis’s Renaissance education in Paris and Padua would have exposed him to the classical ideals of the ancients. He would also, however, know the very *un-*classical literary baroque tendencies of his own day. At the very least, the literary academy Francis established in Annecy, one of whose members was Honoré d’Urfé, a novelist in the baroque or précieux tradition, would have informed him of current literary trends. Indeed, some literary critics see baroque, rather than classical, elements in Francis’s *Introduction*. In an introduction to DeSales’s *Introduction* appearing with the literature for this week’s events, Father Thomas F. Dailey writes, “His imagery fuses sense elements and intangible concepts; his comparisons simultaneously unite a naturalistic appreciation of this world with a spiritual fervor the next world” (5). To these baroque elements in the *Introduction* Imbrie Buffum adds Francis’s emphasis on personal transformation and on becoming, his depiction of God in very human terms, and his use of short scenes from everyday life to illustrate spiritual realities. Indeed, Francis’s numerous, sometimes silly analogies taken from everyday life in Savoy, especially when used to illustrate profound theological truths, exemplify baroque qualities of excess, tension, surprise, and union of opposites. Many odd combinations and Francis’s talk of transformation and change contrast with the classical ideals of permanence and order.⁷

Despite the apparent contradiction between these two styles, it is possible to speak of their co-existence in the *Introduction* without disparaging Francis’s work. In fact, to emphasize one to the exclusion of the other does not do the book justice. Although Francis took pride in using language effectively, his agenda was spiritual in nature; writing was a tool to achieve his

⁷ Henri Peyre defines French classicism as “baroque domté,” or baroque that has been “tamed” (16).

goals, not an end in itself. I suspect he would not have been at all concerned about conforming to stylistic baroque trends or to classical ideals if not doing so meant better illustrating spiritual and theological truths. Similarly, St Francis would likely have borrowed from both traditions if doing so improved the communicative power of his work.⁸ This, in fact, appears to be what he did. The classical ideals of clarity and order seem to have guided Francis's style, or *how* he wrote and organized his thoughts. The baroque sensibilities, particularly of opposition and of change, conformed better to his religious content. Buffum explains that "the dogmas of Incarnation and Transubstantiation are of particular interest to the baroque artist" (103). Indeed, the unlikely union of the human and the divine, the goal of the devotional life, reflected Catholic Incarnation theology, centered in the great mystery of God made man. Transformational change conveyed the essence of a Eucharistic Church which affirms God's presence in consecrated bread and wine; communicants receiving the "heavenly meat" are themselves transformed: "you will become completely beautiful, completely good, completely pure" (Pt. 2, Ch.21; translation mine).

As baroque and classical elements function constructively together in the *Introduction*, so, in creation, can the material and spiritual, the human and divine. To bring these together is precisely the purpose of devotion and is the central lesson of Francis's *Introduction*. Given the enduring international success of the *Introduction*, it is fair to say that its baroque and classical elements, although in principle at odds with each other, actually served the author's purpose of guiding people of all kinds to holier lives. Ravier explains, "It was his personal response, the response surging from his personality. . . . the truths that he explains are neither scholastic

⁸ Wendy Wright and Joseph Power describe St. Francis's sources as "many and eclectic" (28).

nor didactic nor literary: they come from the heart and speak from the heart. They instruct and they charm" (184).

We noted earlier that Francis de Sales's and Despine's vocations as healers may be rooted in their births in Savoy, where medicinal thermal springs had dotted the mountainous landscape for millennia. The following quote, in which Francis compares how we use words to how a surgeon wields a knife, helps summarize my remarks about literary style and healing: "Above all, you must be exceedingly exact in what you say; your tongue when you speak of your neighbor is as a knife in the hand of a surgeon who is going to cut between the nerves and the tendons. Your stroke must be accurate, and neither deeper nor slighter than what is needed. . . ." Francis may have used words with accuracy and deliberation, like a skilled surgeon; Dr. Despine, alas, did not. He was, first and foremost, a man of science. Although Despine participated in the revival of Francis's literary Académie / Société Florimontane in 1851 (Aussedat 8), the last year of his life and 235 years after it was disbanded, he was not a writer by education or profession. Nevertheless, Despine's monograph, reprinted in 5 large cities, including Paris and London, in 1840, appealed to a large medical public. Although imperfect in its literary expression, colleagues looked to Despine's publication for guidance in the treatment of nervous disorders.⁹ Even today, Despine's innovative and generous healing work inspires psychologists in search of mentors in the field.¹⁰ In his own way and in his own setting, Despine lived a constructive life, a good life, a charitable life; in short, he lived what St Francis would likely have called a devout life. The physician's tireless,

⁹ For a study of the relationship between Despine and French psychologist and neurologist Pierre Janet (1859-1947) see Carole Koepke Brown's 2008 article, "Pierre Janet's addition to Charles-Humbert-Antoine Despine's 'old but very curious' Estelle L'Hardy monograph" in *The Journal of Trauma and Dissociation*, 9, 3, 389-409.

¹⁰ For more on Despine's impact today, see Fine's "Antoine Despine: Magnetizer and Pioneer in the Contemporary Treatment of Dissociative Disorders," and Kluff's "Appreciating Despine" in McKeown and Fine's *Despine and the Evolution of Psychology: Historical and Medical Perspectives on Dissociative Disorders*.

attentive and dedicated commitment to the sick stands as an inspiring example of St Francis's call to holiness in our personal daily lives: "to be perfect in our vocation is nothing else than to fulfill the duties which our state of life obliges us to perform, and to accomplish them well, and only for the honor and love of God."

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