

On Light (James W. Lillie)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)

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In his 56th Discourse (On faith and those who say it is not possible to live in the world and achieve the perfection of the virtues), Saint Symeon the New Theologian presents us with the following story.

“In our own time, there was a young man, about twenty years old, by the name of George, who lived in Constantinople. He was a good-looking specimen, elegant in shape, manners and gait... During the day, he was in the palace of a patrician, from which he went out on a daily basis and managed everything necessary for the people in the palace... At night, he shed tears from his eyes and did ever more prostrations, down to the ground. When he stood in prayer, his feet were together and fixed firmly in one place...



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At the time of prayer, no member of his body moved, not did he turn his eye to see anything or look up, but he stood in this way, unmoving, as though he were a

column of stone or without a body at all. So one day, when he was standing thus in prayer, saying 'God, have mercy upon me', more with the mind than with the mouth, suddenly he and the place where he was standing were flooded with divine radiance from above. The young man forgot that he was in a house, under a roof, because he saw light all around and didn't know whether he was even standing on the ground any more. He was not concerned at all with worldly matters, nor did any thought enter his head, such as those which normally occupy corporeal people.

He was completely in the presence of immaterial light, and it seemed to him that he, too, had become light. He forgot everything around him and was filled with tears and ineffable joy. Then his mind ascended to heaven and he beheld another light, brighter than that close at hand... Once this vision had passed and the young man had come to himself he was (as he said), completely filled with joy and wonder, and he wept with his whole heart. And with the tears came sweetness. He then fell upon his bed and, as he did so, the cock crowed, announcing the middle of the night. Soon afterwards, the church bells sounded for matins... This young man had not kept lengthy fasts, nor slept on the ground, nor worn a hair shirt, nor become a monk, nor had left the world in the body, yet... he seemed an angel in a man's body".

Although Saint Symeon's Greek is not notoriously difficult, I did consult the translation made in 1886 by Archimandrite Dionysios Zagoraïou, a hermit on the small island of Piperi, opposite the Holy Mountain. This work was drawn to my attention by Elder Aimilianos, the former Abbot of the Holy Monastery of Simonopetra on Athos, on my very first visit there. He was kind enough to lend me his copy, though I was less than enthusiastic at the time, because a) I knew hardly any Greek and b) it was heavy and unwieldy and I had to carry it all the way back to the port of Dafni.

Some years later, when I had learned a little more Greek, I was asked to translate a book by the Elder, *The Authentic Seal*, and, in doing so, came across this passage.

“Allow me, before continuing, to tell you about a monk I knew, who- and we all go through such difficulties- went through a critical time at his monastery... And so this monk of ours was at a loss to know what to do. Walking was of no avail. Night suffocated him. And one night, because of the suffocation he was feeling, he opened the window of his cell to get some fresh air. It was dark- about three o’clock at night. And as he was tired, he went to close the window, in the hope of getting a little rest. But it was as though all around him- all the darkness outside- as if it had become light! He bent down to see where the light was coming from! But it wasn’t coming from anywhere.

The non-existent dark became light and even his own heart was light... Nothing was hidden in the darkness. Everything was in the light: the wooden beams, the windows, the church, the earth he was treading, the sky, the tap which was running all the time, the crickets, the fireflies, the night birds everything could be seen there, everything... And all together they were singing the Prayer, saying the Prayer. And then strangely his heart opened, too, and began to dance, began to beat and take part involuntarily in the Prayer itself...What was happening he did not know... He knew only that he was standing before the holy altar, before the invisibly present God and was conducting the service. And as he struck the keyboard- let us put it that way- of the heart and of the altar, his voice reverberated up to the altar above the heavens”. (*The Authentic Seal*, Ormylia Publishing, 1999)

Both these narratives are obviously about the authors themselves. How else could they know such details? Nikitas Stithatos, the biographer of Saint Symeon, has no doubt that “George” is the saint himself; and anyone who knew Elder Aimilianos would have no difficulty in identifying the “monk” he describes. But the other striking element they have in common is that what is clearly a vision of the Uncreated Light occurred under difficult circumstances. “George” was spending a great deal of his time in the service of a patrician, in the “world”, with all the responsibilities this entailed, while Elder Aimilianos was at a low point in his spiritual struggle.

We live in an age in which the attack on the senses is unrelenting: every shop has piped music; the wretched television intrudes into almost every home and onto every retina; take-away food is the norm for many people; and the sweetest smell available to most people is that of pollution. But the worst that the present age can do to us is to convince us that, under these conditions, mere survival is enough. It isn’t. The number of people who have experiences such as those of Saint Symeon and Elder Aimilianos will be very limited, but the rest of us can still find inspiration

in their example to live in the joy of the world which the Lord has created for us.

W. J. Lillie