

Reading mystical texts

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IT IS OF COURSE ONLY AN ASSUMPTION that ‘mystical texts’ make sense at all. That said, I am going to designate as ‘mystical’ texts those texts that describe what, since the Neoplatonists, has been called the vision or contemplation (*theoria*) of God.¹ They are concerned with a primordial, enduring fascination. They centre on a *unio mystica*,² or an ‘experiential knowledge of God’ (*congnitio Dei experimentalis*). This knowledge has far-reaching effects on the soul, and develops in different ways, for which there are many different names. In the end, however, the language centres upon the idea of a union between the human person and God. Though this takes place more or less in secret, it nevertheless impels those involved to make it known; and there are certainly erotic and sexual associations. Thus the language of the mystics is marked not just by apophatic idioms, but also by discourses of going beyond or going out (*excessus*), especially by paradox. Ancient and mediaeval commentaries on mystical experience already exemplify these, and the point became still more sharply evident when ‘mysticism’ came to be a distinct branch of knowledge in the sixteenth century.³

It is now taken very much for granted that the tradition of such mystical states of mind in Christianity has its roots in Neoplatonic ideas. Whenever mystical impulses come to the fore in Christianity, the Neoplatonic influence can be seen. A scholar who points out these connections, and accepts that they are there, need no longer be defensive in the face of a Christianity determined to insist on its own originality. The reserve that led people to distinguish sharply between Christian and non-Christian ideas about union with God, through such strategies as a cleavage between natural and supernatural mysticism, has had its day. The Christian impulse towards the mystical is in no way discredited by the Neoplatonism connected with it; on the contrary, Neoplatonism, throughout the history of Christian spirituality, has always worked as a stimulus. It conveys a tradition of philosophical need, a need for an *intuitus mysticus* that at once breaks up and breaks through discursive thought, and for linguistic forms that transcend and reconcile the dissonant contradictions of contingency. Human experience is somehow – at least episodically – released into unity with the

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absolute. That constitutes its freedom. Whatever else it does, the mystical text is a text about union (union between humanity and God, between humanity and the absolute), despite – or rather through – all its apophatic negations. And sometimes this union can be expressed only at the cost of clarity and comprehensibility.

The mystical attraction of Neoplatonism

It is the idea of union, then, which governs the grammar and the dialectics, the content and the imagery, the poetry and the structure of mystical discourse. And therefore what the Neoplatonists wrote about union has had a decisive formative influence on Christian mysticism. Here we find philosophical reflection on what the One is – reflection at once ethical, speculative and experiential. They also offer some thoughts on how this union is to be attained, for example by means of distinctive ‘exercises’.⁴

To illustrate the point, let us take a text from the *Sententia ad intelligibilia ducentes* of Porphyry (c. 232–305), a work that can be taken as a compendium of Neoplatonic philosophy and mysticism.⁵ Moreover, the fact that the great humanist, Marcello Ficino (1433–1499) translated this small work into Latin, shows the theological relevance of this work:

About the virtues. One set of virtues belongs to the citizens, another to the person who is ascending to contemplation, who is thus called a contemplative. A third set is the virtues of people who are already perfect contemplatives, who have already contemplated. Another sort are the virtues of the spirit within the self, in so far as it is purified from the soul.

While ‘citizens’ strive for a ‘moderation of passion’ through the virtues of prudence, courage, temperance and justice, the ‘contemplative’ aims at a purification and at a ‘separation from the things of here’ in body and soul. The goal of these practices and exercises is ‘freedom from affection’ (*apatheia*) and ‘becoming like to God’, for through them the soul can purify itself ‘for uniting with the begetter’. At the third stage, ‘wisdom’ and ‘prudence’, the fruit of mental activity, build on the political and contemplative virtues. Regarding the fourth sort of virtues, Porphyry affirms:

The fourth sort of virtues is that of the paradigm virtues, which are to be found in the *nous* (the mind or spirit). Superior to the virtues of the

soul, they are the pattern of those things to which the virtues of the soul are likenesses. It is *nous* in which they are all at once, as it were, models: wisdom is *nous* as it knows; self-attention is temperance; the fulfilling of one's own duty (i.e. justice) is the performance of one's own activity; courage is sameness, and a remaining pure of self-dependence, through abundance of power.

Porphyry wrote a text against the Christians, in which he comprehensively attacked key figures, teachings and doctrines of Christianity such as the divinity of Jesus Christ, the integrity of the apostles, the Christian doctrine of God and the resurrection of the dead. Moreover, he called the gospels the work of charlatans and regarded Jesus as a criminal.⁶ But none of this negates that claim that Christians may have adopted his fundamental thought-forms.⁷

The energy behind this text of Porphyry's, and indeed behind a whole range of other Neoplatonic texts, is pedagogical: it is aiming to initiate the reader into non-discursive thought. The texts of the tradition are dominated by the ideas of self-knowledge and contemplative asceticism – ideas which the practitioners of this way of life appropriate not just through the intellectual effort of reading texts, but also existentially, through themselves trying to become what the texts speak of. Thus the four sorts of 'virtue' referred to in Porphyry's text – civic, cathartic, noetic and paradigmatic – are four sorts of training for the spirit, so that it can become apt actually to assimilate the reality of which the text speaks. What is at stake is a practice of contemplation in four steps. On the first step, one learns how emotions can be controlled and how the personality can somehow be integrated towards the goal of contemplation. The cathartic stage ends in *apatheia*, in the full detachment of the self from its bodily constitution, a self that identifies itself as not identical with the body. The third stage, of noetic virtue, allows the soul a still deeper level of self-discovery: 'without that which takes precedence over the soul (the *nous*), the soul cannot see what belongs to it'. Behind all three kinds of virtue lies the soul's capacity for introversion, its ability to remain in contemplation and to become one with the object of contemplation. Attention, concentration, control of thoughts, absorption into the reality presented to the soul, are all states fostered by these three sorts of virtue. Porphyry thus develops a systematic account of the self in contemplative terms, in terms of a staged progression in inner transformation. In this, the self's capacities for self-awareness, for purification of consciousness, and for the concentration of attention, are extensively developed. The goal is the

formation of 'wisdom', which is taken to be the most fundamental expression of these capacities.

This is the force of the claim made by Sara Rappe: that the Neoplatonists gave to their successors a developed structure of thought, articulated with a quite rare insistence – a structure of thought centred on a fundamental human capacity for unitive intuition, grounded in lived self-awareness.⁸ Since self-awareness is always moving towards actual self-knowledge, and since the pull towards the abolition of the difference between subject and object in this model of knowledge is so self-evidently non-discursive, the only thing to be explained is the process by which one arrives at this point. The underlying point is that wisdom is not to be attained straightforwardly and without effort; rather it requires a process of initiation leading into the necessary dispositions, and then a mystagogy in the proper sense, so that this necessary ascesis can arrive at its goal in an appropriate fashion. Only then is non-discursive, intuitive, contemplative knowledge (i.e. knowledge that happens without reference to an object) possible.

The Christian transposition

In Christian writing about the history of spirituality, the change from a discursive to a non-discursive, or unitive, discourse is interpreted as an active process by which the understanding is changed. The process is expressed in terms of the difference between *meditatio* and *contemplatio*. Thus the Neoplatonic thought-forms, with their significance ripe for future development, came to operate in the context of a Christian tension between action and contemplation. The ancient questions lived on fruitfully in Christian spiritual practice, because already in antiquity the tension between action and contemplation gave rise to a host of problems that could not be resolved in any simple way. Christian variants on classical discussions about *theoria* and *praxis* have done much to shape Christian life at large, especially the historical development of consecrated life. The great problems of antiquity have left a rich and significant legacy for subsequent periods.

John of the Cross

It is time to turn to a specific example, the figure of John of the Cross (1542–1591).⁹ John's whole life and work bear witness to an option for contemplation that he never renounced, even amid all the confusion arising from the activity that was thrust upon him. It is a great pity that we have none of John's juvenilia, which might have given us some sense of his early knowledge and experience regarding mystical

theology. However, his major works have survived – in two cases, the *Spiritual canticle* and the *Living flame*, in authentic versions, and they give us a very comprehensive and accurate sense of his teaching.

John lived in a circle of people who were struggling to restore an ancient order, with strong eremitical ideals, to its former radicality. Like the hermits living on Mount Carmel in Palestine since the thirteenth century, the discalced Carmelites aimed to live a contemplative life in community, with the obligation to keep mystical silence, and to restrict contact with the outside world to a minimum. Such a form of life has implications for the rhetoric of any mystagogical texts aimed at initiating people into it. Obviously spiritual leaders would want to set out their teachings and experiences for other religious, friends and associates, in a systematic treatise that would then stimulate further spiritual experience. It is in this form that esoteric knowledge and beliefs are handed on, what indeed is named 'mysticism'. *Mystikos* originally means 'secret' or 'hidden', something somehow emancipated from the public pressures of normal means of communication. Such knowledge is normally disseminated only in a small group, not to people at large. Early Christian mysticism was still very conscious of the secret quality of the faith, and of the need to protect it from too crude an exposure in public, even if there is also a latent sense that the material does have relevance more widely.

It was not, however, the sense that teachers should set out their doctrine systematically which moved John of the Cross to write. The decisively formative event for his writings was his spell in prison in Toledo, for more than eight months (1577–1578), the consequence of his commitment to the Teresian reform. In solitary confinement within a cell that was very cold in winter and sweltering in the summer, he was tortured by confreres who objected to his reform movement. It was here, to occupy his mind during the many hours of forced inactivity, that John wrote poems, inspired by biblical passages that he knew by heart. The Johannine prologue inspired him to write Romances about the Trinity, the Incarnation and the salvation brought by Christ; Psalm 137, about the Israelites in Babylon, inspired in him a Romance of consolation regarding his own plight; there were reflections about the dark night of faith. Most significantly, he wrote most of the *Spiritual canticle* here, inspired by the Song of Songs, in which the experiences of closeness to God and distance from God are interpreted in terms of a love affair. Eight years later, in 1586, he would very carefully complete this poem, with nine new stanzas.¹⁰ After his imprisonment, he would

also write extensive prose commentaries on his poetry, in an austere, scholastic idiom.

John was artistically gifted, and aware of his culture. It is not surprising, then, that lyric poetry initially satisfied him as a linguistic medium for his experience of God, and indeed that it fascinated him. The suggestive, evocative forms of poetry are close to the mystical form of experience, and especially suited to convey realities that are individual, and only to a small extent more generally applicable. The mystical is tied to figurative language, allegory, symbol, rhyme, rhythm – forms that leave things unsaid. A poem leaves a sense of something ineffable behind what is said, something that comes into language only asymptotically, to a certain extent in the form of mere desire. What is said in the poem shares essentially in the ineffability of what is to be said, but in such a way that, over and above any imagery, this ‘something more’ in what is being said can nevertheless somehow be sensed.

John’s life-option, taken when the Council of Trent was closing in 1563, was for a contemplative life. John describes contemplation as follows: ‘a loving and peaceful attentiveness to God’, ‘rapturous communication, unendurable to nature, in the imparting of God’s spirit’, ‘a secret and peaceful and loving inflow of God . . . which fires the soul in the spirit of love’.¹¹ ‘*Mística teología*’ and ‘dark night’ are synonymous with these expressions. What is meant is less a set of teachings than a living reality with a dynamic of change. Throughout his life, John was concerned with the living communion of love between God and the soul. However, it was not that he saw himself as compelled, in his situation, to give a report of the searing events of his own soul. What John says about himself and his personal love-relationship with God is extremely scanty. He speaks always in the form of an objective report or of a pedagogical exposition – in other words, like any mystic, he keeps the lived mystery of his love for God secret. Nowhere in his writing does his personality obtrude, as though he wanted to recount his personal successes and failures, his encounters, the details of his life. Quite unlike Teresa, he keeps his life and his vocation hidden from us, even if his contemplative vocation is in another sense unmistakable.

What John calls ‘contemplation’ is often today called ‘meditation’. John, however, follows Christian tradition in making an exact distinction between meditation and contemplation, whereas we today, influenced by Asian practices, identify ‘meditation’ with transpersonal, non-conceptual contemplation. For John meditation is primarily a

matter of human activity, something preparatory to a contemplation in which human activity recedes and God's self-communication becomes central. John can name contemplation at once 'dark' and 'simple', a secret wisdom, a knowledge arising out of love. A reader aware of the history of Christian mysticism will recognize the closeness to Denys the Areopagite (c. 600), who defines *theoria* or *contemplatio* as an experience of God extending to states of utmost receptivity to God; secret and hidden objects are apprehended, but in a way that strictly excludes sensory or cognitive perceptions of individual realities. Already in his work there is a complex dialectic between *theos eros* (divine love) and *noeron phos* (the light knowledge), both of which are essential to the apprehension in question. Nevertheless, John's interest in the transition from meditation to contemplation represents an advance on Denys, who presents the matter systematically. John presents the transition from objective to non-objective attention as a lived event, psychologically observable, that happens at a particular point along the spiritual path. In the course of the relationship between God and the human person, the person seeking God with loving attention receives a *noticia*, an intimation of God, which then becomes a 'loving inwardness' with all the characteristics of an erotic relationship, including a union with God conceived in bridal terms, exultant, vehement, passionate.

How should we read mystics?

The example of John of the Cross shows that no mysticism can exist independently of the structures and ideas present in the religious *Zeitgeist* and culture. John's sharp distinction between meditation and contemplation, and his identification of the mystical with the transition between the two at once reveals his dependence on a Neoplatonic conceptual legacy, and a life lived out of an authentic Christian heritage. In other words, linguistic strategies such as those of the Neoplatonists can survive across centuries and across different cultures. What is at stake here only becomes clear if one reads the texts genetically, in other words with a sense of the history of how they came to be.¹² Any reading of a mystical text must refer to its manifold religious and cultural contexts, a point that is probably generally recognized today. Baron von Hügel's plea, in his classic *The mystical element in religion*, for an 'inclusive mysticism' (as opposed to an 'exclusive mysticism' understood as 'pure' and 'absolute') needs to be read in terms of the fact that history is only ever 'mixed'.

At the same time, over against a reading of mystics orientated towards scholarly knowledge, there stands always, provocatively and persistently, another kind of reading – a ‘naïve’ reading as it were, directly concerned with wisdom, with perceiving and identifying what is spiritual. It is always belying the complexity of scholarly reading by taking from the texts a message that can be lived out devoutly here and now. Then people speak spontaneously in the idioms of metaphysics and mysticism: God, the world, infinity, soul, being, contemplation. Enlightenment and postmodern epistemologies cannot avoid this human reality – a reality that is more to do with how we shape our lives than with how we understand them.

It is very surprising that in all religions the great majority of religious texts are commentaries. The point needs to be made, because it is not generally recognized.¹³ The proportions are not different when it comes to mystical texts. Precisely those who speak most about *experience* refer to texts on which they comment. Perhaps a fundamental reticence prevents mystics from giving witness directly to their experience, and leads them to take a text as a kind of intermediary between their experience and their report. In John’s case, this procedure becomes extraordinarily complex, since he is at once the person who wrote the original texts being commented on – the poems that report directly on the human experience of love with God – and who at the same time is writing a commentary on them. Moreover, there is a further complication. In some cases, for example the *Spiritual canticle*, there lies behind the whole yet a third text, in this case the Song of Songs, and this is the fact which further complicates the issue. In other words, what we customarily call an experience of union can be reproduced linguistically only through complex literary procedures. Some are tempted in the case of John to regard the commentary as less important than the original poetic text, writing it off as too Thomist or too scholastic.¹⁴ But this in no way detracts from the complexity of the matter. In the end all we have are the texts, not the people who wrote them. Precisely for this reason, texts – and especially mystical texts, which by their nature have a tendency to fuse with the reader’s experience – are thus never just texts in isolation, but rather part of something far more. What is this ‘more’? What might it be? Anyone who is in any way captivated by these questions can only remain baffled by them.

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NOTES

- 1 See the magisterial article, 'Contemplation' (1953), in *Dictionnaire de spiritualité*, vol 2, coll 1643–2193.
- 2 See Alois M. Haas, 'Unio mystica: Hinweise zur Geschichte eines Begriffs', in *Erkennen und Erinnern in Kunst und Literatur* (Tübingen, 1998), pp 1–17.
- 3 On the background issues here, see Michel de Certeau, *The mystic fable*, vol 1, *The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries*, translated by Michael B. Smith (Chicago, 1992).
- 4 See Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a way of life: spiritual exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, edited by Arnold I. Davidson, translated by Michael Chase (Chicago, 1995).
- 5 The work has been edited by Erich Lamberz (Leipzig, 1975); the extract discussed here is *sententia* 32, 11 22–35. On the representative quality of this text, see Sara Rappe, *Reading Neoplatonism: non-discursive thinking in the texts of Plotinus, Proclus, and Damascius* (Cambridge, 2000), p 17, n 94. There is an older English translation by Thomas Davidson in *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 3 (1869), pp 46–73, in which this text appears as *sententia* 34 and with different line numbering. This present translation has drawn on Joshua P. Hochschild, 'Porphyry, Bonaventure and Thomas Aquinas: a Neoplatonic hierarchy of values and two Christian approaches' (www.nd.edu/~ndphil/papers/Dayton.html), and on the transcriptions of the Greek in his footnotes.
- 6 Porphyry, *Against the Christians*, edited by R. Joseph Hoffman (Amherst, 1994).
- 7 Rappe, *Reading Neoplatonism*, pp 17–21.
- 8 Rappe, *Reading Neoplatonism*, pp 19–21.
- 9 For further general information on John, see such resources as the introductory material to the two standard translations (E. Allison Peers, Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodríguez); E. Allison Peers, *A handbook to the life and times of St. Teresa and St. John of the Cross* (London, 1954); Iain Matthew, *The impact of God: soundings from St. John of the Cross* (London, 1995).
- 10 See Kevin Culligan, 'From imprisonment to transformation: John of the Cross in Toledo', *Carmelite Studies* 8 (2000), pp 209–239.
- 11 *Dark Night*, 1.10.4; *Canticum*, 14/15.8; *Dark Night* 1.10.6 (trans Kavanaugh/Rodríguez).
- 12 See Kurt Flasch, *Nikolaus von Kues: Geschichte einer Entwicklung* (Frankfurt am Main, 1998), especially p 344.
- 13 See Paul J. Griffiths, *Religious reading: the place of reading in the practice of religion* (Oxford, 1999), pp 77–109.
- 14 See, for example, Hans Urs von Balthasar, 'Juan de la Cruz', in *Johannes von Kreuz, Lehrer des 'Neuen Denkens': Sanjuanistik im deutschen Sprachraum*, edited by Ulrich Dobhan and Reinhard Körner (Würzburg, 1991), pp 41–98.