LITERATURE OF MYSTICISM IN WESTERN TRADITION

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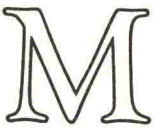

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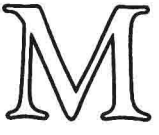

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In memory of
O. P. Melvin

'Oh Lov what hast Thou don!'
Thomas Traherne

Preface

A central claim of these essays is that mysticism cannot be well discussed separately from a framework of faith. Consequently, I speak about some aspects of literature of mysticism in the Latin West because the culture and language which most fully claim one's allegiance – in which, so to speak, one has most faith – provide the best means for coming to terms with a subject which suggests that without faith is no understanding.

I concentrate on literature in order to maintain that if one is to describe the mystical fact in words, the combination of passionate conviction, discrimination and insight which characterises great poetry and the critic's reaction to it, is the most adequate means for grasping the essentially analogous relationship between spiritual experience and tradition. The manner in which mysticism is, in this sense, a kind of poetry of religion is best understood by looking at the writings of those who are first mystics and then authors, rather than at the work of poets who write on mystical subjects, but who may or may not be mystics. Of course, this priority cannot be rigorously maintained, but it is a tendency of the ensuing discussion.

I was prompted to write on mysticism because my earlier books led me naturally to it, and because the present state of discussion on the subject called for comment from the point of view of literary criticism. In the influential *Sacramentum Mundi*, the theologian Heribert Fischer writes that 'critical hermeneutics is urgently required; especially for all types of "literary" mysticism', and strong recent contributions by philosophers (for instance Katz (ed.), *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*), and researchers in comparative religion (for instance Staal, *Exploring Mysticism. A Methodological Essay*) make Fischer's observation all the more pertinent. I therefore found it inviting to attempt some response, in however small a way.

At the end of each chapter is a selection of texts which are

relevant to matters raised in the argument, and which seem to be striking in their own right, or part of a coherent literary expression of the life of contemplative prayer. The end notes are intended to document the discussion and to provide a guide for further reading.

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P.G.

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CHAPTER ONE
Mysticism, Faith and Culture

Solitude is not isolation. The latter is savage; the former a mode of access to mystery, enhancing life with subtlety of feeling, compassion and understanding. A person deprived of solitude becomes a cog in a machine, unaware of his own inner life or the inner lives of others. Yet solitude sought merely as a refuge from the general human condition courts misanthropy: a person is neither wholly unique nor wholly typical, but within the twin anonymities of particular and general discovers a human identity.[1]

The heart of what is loosely called mysticism lies in experience which our capacity for solitude reveals. *Mystics claim to know the secret things of God disclosed in a particular way to their innermost selves, and then undertake to express their knowledge for the benefit of humanity at large.*[2] While stressing that the Kingdom of God is within, however, mystics deny that their experience is just subjective. As the familiar paradox maintains, God is transcendent and immanent, the soul-spark in each of us as well as the single goal outside us towards which we strive. When mystics write about such matters, they not surprisingly stress the inadequacy of words, though often using many words to do so, therefore depending on language to proclaim its limitations. And yet, although caught with something unutterably unique to say, mystics also reassure us that we are more alike with respect to the ineffable than we sometimes think. They remind us how, habitually and for practical purposes, we ignore the Spirit which is present in the immensely queer fact that we know at all. Attention to facts at the expense of attention to mental processes from which facts emerge, they tell us, blinds us to ourselves[3] and to that essential solitude 'wherein', as St John of the Cross says, 'the soul attains to union with the Word, and consequently to all

refreshment and rest'.[4] The ground sustaining our everyday acts of perception should itself therefore receive attention, even though we continually confound our efforts by bringing forward for analysis what lies anterior to analysis: the process of knowledge, it seems, remains always richer and more strange than the mind can grasp or words can say.

'These deeds must not be thought/After these ways; so, it will make us mad', advises Lady Macbeth, who is, of course, herself incipiently mad, having (for practical purposes) murdered her king. Her aim is efficiency above all, and so she insists on seeing 'these deeds' objectively. In unlikely sympathy with her logic – and in language strangely echoing her condemnation of her husband's haunted desire to be 'founded as the rock' – Sir Karl Popper points out the futility of practical people (and he means especially scientists) being too introspective. 'The quest for certainty, for a secure basis of knowledge,' he writes, 'has to be abandoned'.[5] Of course Popper is correct: if everyone kept on defining terms, no work would get done, and definitions do not guarantee practical effectiveness. In this respect at least, he and Lady Macbeth are in accord. But the main, obvious difference between them the mystics would have us see first. On the one hand, things *must* be considered with the kind of introspection and self-scrutiny that might indeed make us mad, and in Lady Macbeth's derangement we see that subjectivity cannot without peril be neglected. Although her final state of mind parodies the wholeness induced by higher stages of contemplative prayer, it points to the same spiritual dimension of reality. On the other hand, despite their stress on subjectivity, mystics are empirical. Like Popper, they are not overconcerned with terms, and attend hardly at all to the formal word, 'mysticism'. If a vision is not testable, says the Irish mystic AE, ignore it:

> The religion which does not cry out: 'I am today verifiable as that water wets or that fire burns. Test me that ye can become as gods'. Mistrust it. Its messengers are prophets of the darkness.[6]

If character is not transformed, if good works do not follow, say the Christian saints, we are to doubt that we have had a religious experience. 'If you see a sick woman to whom you can give some help', writes St Teresa, 'never be affected by the fear that your

devotion will suffer, but take pity on her: . . . . That is true union with His will.'[7]

Verification by works, however, is not the same thing as a scientist's empirical verification, and AE's statement must strike us as overambitious. The mystic, after all, talks about a God whom we cannot test as we can, say, the specific gravity of water. Yet the mystic's claim is not for that reason unconnected with the actual world, any more than concepts like 'beauty' and 'goodness' are meaningless because we cannot observe or handle or measure them directly. They are, rather, ideas which enable us to see ordinary things differently, with greater coherency and richness. 'God', as John Wisdom points out,[8] is a preposterous notion which calls for our serious investigation because it enriches experience, and because (as the mystics insist) such enrichment results in a transformation of character. The willingness of contemplative saints to be empirical thus compels our attention, even though we, and they, acknowledge that God, who is known first by faith, cannot be proved by empirical means.

Mystics, then, remain practical while asking that we consider the workings of our secret selves. Objective and subjective, particular and general, they maintain are reconciled finally in the Supreme Reality, the source and end of Being.[9] This they claim to know experimentally, just as they say that their special knowledge must be founded in faith and reflected in love for others, preserving such canons of mortality (and, Père Poulain adds, of science)[10] as men have found true. If mystical experience is to be tested, therefore, against moral and scientific wisdom, we must consider it a part of culture, and, in so doing, we face also the question of faith as a cultural phenomenon.

When we teach a child its colours by laying out an assortment of coloured threads, we are then at the mercy of the child's coming to see that some are blue and some yellow. Meanwhile we repeat the conventional sounds, suddenly become vacant in all their arbitrariness: 'blue', 'yellow'. Relief comes when the child takes up our sounds and points to the right threads, and within such a synthesis coming alive with meaning, lie the roots of faith without which there is no human truth.[11] The child takes us at our word in order to discover the meaning of discourse; just so, the mystics would take us back to a child's simplicity of faith, as they would have us see also beyond our worldly sophistica-

tions.

Whatever analysis one offers of mysticism's relation to culture will be, therefore, in the end, an analysis of faith and culture combined. Faith, because mysticism addresses the tacit dimensions of knowledge which we accept, like children, without knowing how; culture because it is the mirror in which we come to recognise, assess and communicate the quality of such faith. Clearly, we cannot keep apart, in some Cartesian manner, a subjective area within which to locate 'mystical experience', as distinct from an area of public knowledge or 'ordinary experience'. Faith itself is obscurely conditioned by culture, and mystics tend to meet the God described in their creeds; at any rate as far as we can tell from what they tell us.[12] All of which serves to confirm how finally irresolvable is the relationship of mysticism to tradition, so that it is futile to press for a solution exclusively in terms of either 'pure experience' or 'culture', as the following examples indicate.

The most influential, recent proponent of the contribution of 'culture' to mysticism is R. C. Zaehner. In *Mysticism Sacred and Profane* Zaehner denounces Aldous Huxley's claim in *The Doors of Perception*, that an experience induced by mescalin is equivalent to the Beatific Vision. This kind of uncritical syncretism, says Zaehner, is an insult to religion and an abuse of the accumulated wisdom of centuries of careful enquiry. Zaehner goes on:

> While Huxley was still contemplating . . . ineffable realities, the investigator intervened and asked him about human relations. And here we come to a crucial and most important part of the experiment, as Huxley himself clearly saw. 'One ought to be able', he said, 'to see these trousers as infinitely important and human beings as still more infinitely important.' Unfortunately this was far from being the case: 'in practice it seemed impossible'.[13]

That grey flannel has its mysteries nobody denies. But insight into the nature of flannel that leaves the observer unconcerned about real differences between a man and his trousers seems spurious, somehow disappointing. It produces the same kind of feeling we have on learning from Darwin that his pursuit of science atrophied his ability to respond to poetry and the arts, and affected his capacity for friendship.[14] We feel uneasy that some-

thing, somewhere, went wrong. The same point comes to light, interestingly reversed, in an anecdote concerning Descartes who, in a fit of enthusiasm about a philosophical point, once slapped his patroness, Queen Christina of Sweden, on the thigh, after which she discreetly had a small table placed between them. Whereas with Darwin we worry that too much objectivity might diminish us personally, with Descartes we discover that the man was not, after all, as neatly divided as his philosophy. The activity of 'pure thought' does not, even for him, operate in isolation from the body-machine. The enthusiastic gesture redeems a human complexity that Descartes' theory simplifies, and shows us a fuller, more surprising dimension than we had expected. In some such way, people *are* richer, more surprising,[15] and more complexly involved in the world and in that web of attitudes and evaluations and institutions which we call culture, than are stones, or grey flannel, or scientific theories. Admittedly, there is a difference between mystical knowledge and the kind represented by Darwin and Descartes, but the claims of *sapientia* are rooted in *scientia*, and the highest mystics insist that their special knowledge is an illumination, or completion, of the ordinary knowledge which we all share, and not its negation. Zaehner is therefore right: something in Huxley desired keenly to escape the terrifying, painfully complex human clamour, and to flatten the extraordinary diversity of sacred and profane knowledge to his own preferred 'suchness'. The whole story of Huxley's battle with himself on this account, however, is not told in *The Doors of Perception*, and Zaehner does not relate it either.[16]

The main point remains: those who, with Blake, see heaven in a grain of sand, sometimes conclude too readily with Huxley (seeing heaven in a piece of flannel),[17] that *homo mysticus* is everywhere the same, that a 'perennial philosophy' stands at the heart of all religions, despite cultural differences, as a core of truth which we can isolate and test for ourselves.

Since the nineteenth century, growing sophistication in comparative studies of religion would seem, indeed, to encourage the perennial philosophers. Mankind being one, a careful search into what mankind, at its noblest, believes, should reveal some consensus: what rises might well converge, and in a sense it does. We can hear the Golden Rule in a variety of tongues; we are exhorted, perennially, to seek enlightment and to avoid world-

liness; at the root of religion we are asked to acknowledge a recurrent *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*.[18] There is good reason, in short, to affirm the enduring sameness and consistency of mystical teachings among the world's great religions.

In recent years, the journal *Studies in Comparative Religion* especially has given voice to a group of scholars who, with force and eloquence, have put the case for a proper understanding of this point of view. 'They were clearly men under authority', writes Jacob Needleman in their praise, 'to speak from an idea without veering off into apologetics and argumentation':[19] refreshing, yes, to have learned people discuss, without footnotes, how man is a metaphysical creature for whom the science of quantification does not account; how in the wonder of his intellect he can grasp at his own spiritual being, of which he finds a record in symbols shared by the world's great religions.

The doyen of this school is René Guénon,[20] a French orientalist who died a convert to Islam, and taught that a catastrophic downward spiral of Western civilisation began with the loss of a vital sense of metaphysics. Catholic Christianity had once sustained, in the West, a link to 'Primordial Tradition', now broken almost beyond hope of repair by a 'reign of quantity' introduced by the modern rise of science. Guénon holds out little hope for Western civilisation unless by a revitalising assimilation of Primordial Tradition from the East, where it is relatively unadulterated (though grievously threatened) by technology and empire-building.

Guénon writes with intellectual penetration and elegance. His central thesis commands attention, though it is scarcely novel; yet originality is Guénon's least concern. Truth is 'original', he claims, only if we take 'original' in a literal sense, for truth is now as always, and we can only repeat it, as the great religions have done from time immemorial. Guénon then posits an intellectual élite, who perennially detect the pure metaphysical content of 'original' truth, and he distinguishes these few from the masses immersed in worldly concerns on the plane of manifestation, receiving tradition through picture images and creeds.

Zaehner has harsh words for Guénon, mainly because the élitism seems arrogant.[21] By what authority, asks Zaehner, does Guénon presume to unravel critical and spiritual problems deriving from the course of entire civilisations? Such an endeavour is, like Huxley's, too simple, and retreats from

particulars to an abstract, gnostic haughtiness.

To read Guénon's *The Crisis of the Modern World* is to feel most acutely the weight of Zaehner's reservations. What the intellectual élite knows, we are told, will be known, intuitively, to the intellectual élite, and Guénon refuses to express this knowledge further, or to proselytise by providing argument or evidence. Moreover, the entire enterprise of modern science and modern Western civilisation is denounced with disturbing confidence: ('"profane" science, the negation, that is to say, of true intellectuality'). From amidst the elegant prose we catch the enthralled gaze not seeing many of us at all, 'since it would be enough if there could arise a numerically small but firmly established élite to act as guides for the mass'.[22]

By contrast, however, Guénon's *Symbolism of the Cross* (trans. A. Macnab, London: Luzac, 1975), offers a compelling, imaginative, and beautifully organised analysis of a particular symbol, and Guénon's gifts appear here at their best. It could be argued that, by not considering this book, Zaehner fails fully to assess Guénon's achievement. Nevertheless, the central complaint in the long run seems correct: perennial philosophy conceived in terms of a superior intellectual caste tends to dwell in a rarefied air that scarcely nourishes common humanity. And yet, there is more to tell; for a favourite gesture of learned commentators who generally agree with Zaehner on this issue is in turn to rebuke him for being doctrinaire. In the preface to *Mysticism Sacred and Profane* Zaehner makes it clear that he is a Catholic; therefore he does not bring 'complete objectivity' (p.xiii) to bear on his subject. But the problem is not just belief; rather that Zaehner permits theological judgement to interfere with matters of classification. In his eagerness, for instance, to distinguish theistic mysticism (the crowning experience of which is the Christian Beatific Vision) from monistic mysticism (which identifies the soul or self with the divine, and teaches doctrines of absorption), Zaehner is insensitive to the real depth of religious experience in traditions which he opposes to his own. His eggs are in *two* baskets, one critic says, instead of many.[23]

It is easy to see that, brought to extremes, objections against the perennial philosophy tend also to be objections against the metaphysical roots of religious experience itself, which (Guénon is correct to say) we grasp intuitively, not by demonstration. At the opposite extreme (as Zaehner points out) lies an etiolated

hauteur which disdains the rough embrace of particulars, confusing life with principles and reducing faces to physiognomy. General and particular, faith and experience, culture and perennial truth thus present themselves finally as polarities: on each side we encounter a boundary beyond which the analytical mind may not proceed, and yet the opposites cannot exist in separation, and call for synthesis. The most clear-headed writing on such subjects, consequently, will define the boundaries to present us finally with paradox, and thereby place the question of mysticism within limits of human discourse and, so, of culture. The *best* writing, however, will go on to invest such descriptive accuracy with a quality of personal perception, communicating a sense of how one manages to transcend paradox by dwelling within it in a human manner. An expression in language of this personal quality we can call *poetry*; expressed in action, as a mode of life concerned with the dialectic between experience and culture and with respect to man's ultimate values,[24] it is *mysticism*.

The mystic, to summarise, takes his stand within a radical act of acculturisation where reason calls on faith to enable the human acquisition of truth.[25] So placed, he knows as a child does, with simplicity and tentativeness, except that the mystic is more self-conscious than a child and remains deliberately open to mystery beyond the reach of analysis, intimated by that elusive, perpetually hidden communion of self and world, wherein personal judgement and evaluation are formed. Poised thus at the limits of reflection between subject and object, faith and experience, solitude and human community, the mystic has much in common with the poet, but with this difference: the poet is not essentially concerned with man's ultimate destiny, and the perfection he seeks is that of the poem he writes.[26] Likewise, the mystic is not essentially concerned with art, but pronounces his vision of an ultimate synthesis in the One Source of all manifestation, within which our partial creative efforts will be taken up and made whole. The mystic moreover claims to know something of this all-embracing synthesis by means of a special, abnormal venture in experience, wherein the secrets of God are encountered in a manner incommunicable through ordinary discourse. He therefore stresses two things: first, that we all have within us the seeds of mystical experience, which we detect by reflection on the fiduciary character of ordinary knowledge; second, that the spiritual energy which reflection discovers at the

heart of language and culture is, in special states of contemplative prayer, illuminated in a glorious silence which language subserves, and mirrors imperfectly.

At this point, the crafty serpent of ineffability again twinkles at us. Mystics tell us they cannot say what they experience, though claiming just as firmly to have had fundamental insight into the nature of reality. Yet, again, reason holds firm to what it can. There is nothing unacceptable in writing about the way of silence in many words; no incompatibility in the hermit's embracing solitude for love of the city. Silence, after all, is understandable only to those who speak; solitariness to those whose nature is social; faith to those who have reason.[27]

Problems raised by ineffability rather have to do with knowing when to relinquish the pressure of reasoned enquiry, and when to apply it. One point against Zaehner is that he tends to move overhastily from descriptions of experience to generalising about experience itself, and in so doing he relinquishes reason too soon. But although Professor Smart criticises Zaehner for confusing theological belief with classification of documents, the professor wisely stops short of absurdities engendered by illusions that his own kind of argument can produce a final answer, and affirms what Zaehner began by confessing: understanding religious experience depends on commitment.[28]

This argument has insisted, therefore, on the futility of discussing mystical experience outside some framework of belief, and in subsequent chapters I confine myself to literature of mysticism in the Latin West, by which I mean a tradition extending, roughly, from St Augustine through the Western church of the Middle Ages, and into the modern scientific societies of Western Europe. I do so not for exclusionist reasons, but the reverse: this is the way which permits, for the present author, fullest articulation of the question. Still, one proceeds cautiously, for in Western tradition mysticism has not been officially defined, even though, as one commentator says, it is 'the truly dynamic element in the church',[29] and has consequently demanded careful appreciation. Madmen, after all, perennially attest that they walk with angels, the hysterical that they see God, fanatics that the Spirit leads their armies: and all these may speak true, or none of them, or some. As always, the disgusting, the magical, the spurious and superstitious bid to be taken seriously, whence has arisen a patient tradition of directing souls,[30] and of