CONTEMPLATIVE TRADITION

One of the awful things about writing when you are a Christian is that for you the ultimate reality is the Incarnation, the present reality is the Incarnation, and nobody believes in the Incarnation; that is, nobody in your audience. My audience are the people who think God is dead.

Flannery O'Connor

In my view, the context most pertinent and enlightening for the study of Donne, Herbert, and Vaughan, as well as Traherne, is the rich and complex Christian contemplative or mystical tradition, with which their own visions are most in accord. This is to imply that their most important actual or probable sources and influences, direct or indirect, are the Bible, Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, Church Fathers, and Renaissance Humanists, and that to these one should add, either as direct sources and influences or at least as spiritual brethren, such names as Richard of St. Victor, St. Bonaventura, Meister Eckhart, Jan Ruysbroeck, the author of The Cloud of Unknowing, Walter Hilton, Julian of Norwich, St. John of the Cross, and Jacob Boehme, to list in chronological order but a few Christian mystics among the many contemplatives whose major ideas correspond closely to these poets' ideas and whose writings may therefore illuminate their poems.

A major assumption of this book, then, is that much of the poetry of Donne, Herbert, and Vaughan may best be understood and appreciated through the perspective and within the context of Christian contemplative tradition, including of course the effect of the Bible, Plato, Neoplatonism, and Aristotelianism on that tradition. The great speculative Christian school of mysticism, especially between Eckhart and Boehme, forms a curiously well-integrated tradition (and one which might be considered roughly equivalent to a Christian branch of the Perennial Philosophy). Renaissance and later medieval mystics were familiar with earlier Christian mystics as well as with the Church Fathers, many of whom were themselves
contemplatives, and with classical writers. Even Plotinus himself, the pagan Neoplatonist who so remarkably affected Christianity, like other Neoplatonists often employs Aristotelian vocabulary, argumentation, and ideas. The numerous strands of this complex contemplative tradition are more variously and closely interwoven than might at first glance appear. Even if the reader finally does not share the view that this broad yet interconnected Catholic-Protestant tradition provides the most illuminating context for the Anglican poets Donne, Herbert, and Vaughan, I trust the reader will nevertheless find that numerous poems are elucidated by this book’s approach and methods and that the very confused subject of mysticism in these poets is somewhat clarified.

Drawing upon all of the authors mentioned above and other mystics, modern scholars provide an analytical overview of ancient-medieval-Renaissance contemplative tradition or, more precisely, different aspects of it as it existed in the Renaissance and was known to seventeenth-century and later writers. These aspects include the stages, types, and characteristics of mystical experience, the kinds of “vision,” and some key contemplative ideas, such as regeneration and the distinctions between the two selves and between meditation and contemplation. This century has produced valuable scholarship on mysticism, and one cannot reasonably expect to improve much upon the brilliant work of distinguished authorities. Thus, availing itself of the more pertinent scholarship, this chapter presents a synthetic account of contemplative tradition, grounded in the many mystical writings of antiquity, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, via some of the best (for our purposes) modern authorities. But as a scholar of mysticism, I hope also in other ways to make various, direct contributions to the subject. Thus, in addition to the relevant work of twentieth-century experts on mysticism, I will also, as needed, directly consider in this and later chapters contributions of the Bible, Plato, Aristotle, and numerous specifically mentioned mystics and Church Fathers. This twofold method should afford an efficient, scholarly way of providing the necessary background and concepts of a very complex subject in an orderly, clear, and accurate manner.

The anonymous Benedictine author of Medieval Mystical Tradition and Saint John of the Cross, who surveys the meanings of the words meditation, prayer, and contemplation, points out that in the twelfth century and later there existed the scale or order, going from lowest to highest, of lectio divina (prayerful reading of some portion of the Scripture), meditation, prayer, contemplation. Contemplation
was understood as "an experimental union with God which no meditation can produce, but for which a soul may pray. . . . The soul is 'athirst,' 'aglow with love,' and God's answer is contemplation—obviously the 'infused contemplation' of modern spiritual theology. Since there can be no question of real 'beginners' reaching this stage, we can see how gradually, as this meaning became attached to contemplation, that word came to be synonymous with contemplative or mystical prayer. Meditation and contemplation came to mean an earlier and a later kind of prayer, and no longer a mere difference in degree in one and the same prayer . . . the latter [contemplation] is a free gift of God." [9].

Although the word "meditation" was sometimes used interchangeably in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries with the closely related words "prayer" and "contemplation," the terms did, however, also retain in those centuries the same distinct medieval meanings. As St. John of the Cross writes, "the state of beginners comprises meditation and discursive acts" [Flame, III, 30, in Complete Works, III, 68]. Meditation, Louis Martz points out, "cultivates the basic, the lower levels of the spiritual life; it is not, properly speaking, a mystical activity, but a part of the duties of every man in daily life" [The Poetry of Meditation, 16]. Even more than as a set form of prayer, meditation was understood as a lower, early, or pre-mystical stage of the spiritual life, which may very well employ certain forms of prayer. It was considered an almost indispensable preparation for the progressive realization of mystical experience or contemplation, the higher level and goal of spiritual progress. To be a meditative poet, therefore, is to be at least potentially a mystical poet, to be, in any event, in the early stages of and in progress toward the contemplative life, and we should indeed expect to find meditative poems in the body of a mystical poet's work.

In the Middle Ages and during the Renaissance, spiritual life and progress were frequently but not always charted by the threefold stages of the Purgative Way, Illuminative Way, and Unitive Way or, more simply, Purgation, Illumination, and Union. The stages of spiritual growth through which the mystic passed were sometimes rendered as more than three, depending on the degree of generality or particularity desired. As exemplified by Richard Rolle's The Form of Perfect Living and the anonymous Contemplations of the Dread and Love of God, different spiritual writers preferred different systems of stages. During the Renaissance, however, the time-honored trifold system was basic and continues so to the present day. Like the more numerous stages of other systems, the three stages, well-
known to seventeenth-century writers, are, of course, to be understood as diagrammatic, as an approximate and useful map, not as the actual territory of the mystical life, with its multivariated peaks, plateaus, and valleys. It is helpful to relate this traditional threefold schema in a general way to the traditional distinction between meditation and contemplation. We may say that meditation, the early period of the spiritual life, generally corresponds to Purgation, and contemplation, advanced periods of spiritual life, corresponds to Illumination and Union. Meditation may lead to contemplation, and the early stages may lead to the later ones. To determine whether a writer is or is not a mystic is in part to make a judgment about his progress in these familiar, well-described, and traditional terms. It must be emphasized that there is no absolute disjunction but rather a continuity, interrelationship, and movement back and forth between meditation and contemplation and the stages of the mystical life. For example, “Saint John of the Cross not only says that progressives, who have begun to receive graces of mystical contemplation, should return to active meditation whenever they ‘see that the soul is not occupied in repose and (mystical) knowledge.’ He adds that meditation is an ordinary means of disposing oneself for mystical prayer. ‘In order to reach this state, [the soul] will frequently need to make use of meditation, quietly and in moderation’” [Merton, 89–90]. Indeed, we might well find both meditative and contemplative elements in a single poem.

The above description reveals the basic, essential way a seventeenth-century writer would regard both the via mystica and the significance of meditation and contemplation. Evelyn Underhill details two more stages in addition to the time-honored threefold division of Purgation, Illumination, and Union. We need not be concerned with Underhill’s preliminary stage of Awakening, which precedes Purgation, for our three poets, two of them Anglican ministers, were undoubtedly awake to and believed in the reality of divinity. But the additional, advanced purgative stage of the Dark Night of the Soul, which follows Illumination and which Underhill bases primarily on the work of the great 16th-century contemplative, St. John of the Cross, provides a refinement that will be of particular value to the distinctions we will need to make with respect to Herbert and especially Vaughan. A large part of Underhill’s classic work on Mysticism is devoted to describing the traditional mystic stages. For present purposes, it may suffice to quote Underhill’s introductory briefer description of the stages from Purgation to Union.
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The Self, aware of Divine Beauty, realizes by contrast its own finiteness and imperfection, the manifold illusions in which it is immersed, the immense distance which separates it from the One. Its attempts to eliminate by discipline and mortification all that stands in the way of its progress towards union with God constitute Purgation: a state of pain and effort.

When by Purgation the Self has become detached from the “things of sense,” and acquired those virtues which are the “ornaments of the spiritual marriage,” its joyful consciousness of the Transcendent Order returns in an enhanced form. Like the prisoners in Plato’s “Cave of Illusion,” it has awakened to knowledge of Reality, has struggled up the harsh and difficult path to the mouth of the cave. Now it looks upon the sun. This is Illumination: a state which includes in itself many of the stages of contemplation, “degrees of orison,” visions and adventures of the soul described by St. Teresa and other mystical writers. These form, as it were, a way within the Way: a moyen de parvenir, a training devised by experts which will strengthen and assist the mounting soul. They stand, so to speak, for education; whilst the Way proper represents organic growth. Illumination is the contemplative state par excellence. . . .

Many mystics never go beyond it; and, on the other hand, many seers and artists not usually classed amongst them, have shared, to some extent, the experiences of the illumined state. Illumination brings a certain apprehension of the Absolute, a sense of the Divine Presence: but not true union with it. It is a state of happiness.

In the development of the great and strenuous seekers after God, this is followed—or sometimes intermittently accompanied—by the most terrible of all the experiences of the Mystic Way: the final and complete purification of the Self, which is called by some contemplatives the “mystic pain” or “mystic death,” by others the Purification of the Spirit or Dark Night of the Soul. The consciousness which had, in Illumination, sunned itself in the sense of the Divine Presence, now suffers under an equally intense sense of the Divine Absence: learning to dissociate the personal satisfaction of mystical vision from the reality of mystical life. As in Purgation the senses were cleansed and humbled, and the energies and interests of the Self were concentrated upon transcendental things: so now the purifying process is extended to the very centre of I-hood, the will. The human instinct for personal happiness must be killed. This is the “spiritual crucifixion” so often described by the mystics: the great desolation in which the soul seems abandoned by the Divine. The Self now surrenders itself, its individuality, and its will, completely. It desires nothing, asks nothing, is utterly passive, and is thus prepared for Union: the true goal of the mystic quest. In this state the Absolute
Life is not merely perceived and enjoyed by the Self, as in Illumination: but is one with it. This is the end towards which all the previous oscillations of consciousness have tended. It is a state of equilibrium, of purely spiritual life, characterized by peaceful joy, by enhanced powers, by intense certitude. [169–170]

Although Christianity has been insistently monotheistic over against the polytheism of paganism, the Church does recognize what may mistakenly appear to some as a kind of pantheism. Strictly speaking, it is not pantheism but the omnipresence of the one God that is recognized. An important factor of the mystic experience is the discovery of the immanence and/or transcendence of God. To the catechism question “Where is God?” the proper response is “everywhere.” To the enlightened mystic, when the veils of custom, convention and selfish solicitude are removed and the third eye opened, God appears in the features and faces of human beings and in the forms of Nature as well as being wholly transcendent. Hence, mystical experiences may be “extrovertive,” aware of immanent divinity through the redeemed senses, or “introvertive,” conscious of transcendent divinity beyond all the senses. In his admirable and lucid discussion of world-wide mysticism, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, W. T. Stace introduces these terms, which correspond to terminology used by Rudolf Otto and Evelyn Underhill, and he adds that both the extrovertive or outward and introvertive or inward experiences “culminate in the perception of an ultimate Unity—what Plotinus called the One—with which the perceiver realizes his own union or even identity. But the extrovertive mystic, using his physical senses, perceives the multiplicity of external material objects . . . mystically transfigured so that the One, or the Unity, shines through them. The introvertive mystic, on the contrary, seeks by deliberately shutting off the senses, by obliterating from consciousness the entire multiplicity of sensations, images, and thoughts, to plunge into the depths of his own [self]. There, in that darkness and silence, he alleges that he perceives the One—and is united with it” (61–62). By examining the detailed evidence from both Western and Eastern mysticism, Stace is able to present a list of characteristics, like lists by other writers on the subject, of both types of mystical experience.

In the extrovertive type, the primary and central point around which all other “characteristics revolve is the apprehension of a unity taken to be in some way basic to the universe,” frequently though not altogether satisfactorily expressed in the formula “All is
One. The One is . . . perceived through the physical senses, in or through the multiplicity of objects (79). From this first characteristic, the second follows: "the more concrete apprehension of the One as an inner subjectivity, or life, in all things" (131).

In the introverted type, the nuclear characteristic is "the Unitary Consciousness, from which all the multiplicity of sensuous or conceptual or other empirical content has been excluded, so that there remains only a void and empty unity" (110). Inevitably following from this primary point is the second characteristic of being nonspatial and nontemporal.

The remaining characteristics of both extroverted and introverted mystical experiences are identical for both:

3. Sense of objectivity or reality
4. Feelings of blessedness, joy, peace, happiness, etc.
5. Feeling that what is apprehended is holy, sacred, or divine
6. Paradoxicality

To this, we should add three qualifications: the extroverted type may also exhibit the characteristic of timelessness; a serious omission from Stace's account, as R. C. Zachner remarks, is love, which we will include along with feelings of blessedness, joy, etc.; and a complex mystical experience may exhibit both extroverted and introverted elements. Generally, contemplative experience is distinguishable as being of one type or the other. But many mystics have both extroverted and introverted mystical experiences, sometimes on different occasions, sometimes on the same occasion. Often, one type of mystical experience will lead or predispose a contemplative to the other type.

Whether a mystic experiences one or the other type may depend on (or perhaps it determines) the extent of Platonism or Aristotelianism in his thinking. Plato and some but by no means all Neoplatonists almost exclusively or at least preferably incline toward introverted mystical experience and tend not to share the extroverted Hebraic-Christian praise of and joy in God's "very good" (Gen. 1:31) visible creation. When mystics write of not being able to apprehend ultimate reality with the bodily, fleshly, or conventional eyes or senses they are referring either to nonsensuous introvertive mysticism or to the necessity of purgation so that eventually one may sensuously perceive ultimate reality with a pure heart through cleansed senses. The idea that it is Christ who enables us to see with purified hearts in either the introverted or extroverted way goes back to the
earliest days of the Church. St. Clement of Rome, the first-century bishop and Apostolic Father, whose *Epistle to the Corinthians* portrays an early Christianity of inwardness and the Spirit and yet simultaneously of powerful brotherhood, observes that through Christ "we see as in a mirror the spotless and excellent face of God: through him the eyes of our hearts were opened" (Bettenson, *The Early Christian Fathers*, 29). In *The City of God*, St. Augustine writes: "Thus, it was with his 'heart' that the Prophet says he saw. . . . Now just think, when God will be 'all in all,’ how much greater will be this gift of vision in the hearts of all! The eyes of the body will still retain their function and will be found where they now are, and the spirit through its spiritual body will make use of the eyes" (trans. Walsh et al, 535). Redeemed vision in extrovertive experience is seeing not with the senses, but, as William Blake knew, with the heart through the cleansed senses. As opposed to seeing objects in some generalized, rationalistic, abstract way, which ultimately comes to thinking about rather than actually looking at them, contemplative extrovertive vision means Christ in us seeing, means our seeing with fully open eyes rather than with closed or indifferent eyes, seeing felicitously into the particular-universal suchness or quiddity of an object with regenerated or enlightened heart and senses rather than seeing in such a way as mentally to abstract an essence from the object, as if essence and object could ever really (that is, in fact, not just in mind) be dualistically separated. Extrovertive mystical experiences would therefore more likely give rise to (or arise out of, depending on whether or not experience precedes philosophy) an Aristotelian rather than a Platonic metaphysic, insofar as we understand Plato as asserting the separation of Forms and matter and Aristotle as insisting upon the fusing of the universal form with the particular material thing into the complete unity of the individual object. Contrariwise, introvertive mystical experiences would more likely give rise to a Platonic rather than an Aristotelian metaphysic. In other words, Plato puts emphasis on the transcendental nature of ultimate reality; Aristotle stresses its immanence.

One of the important differences, then, between Platonism and Aristotelianism on the one hand and Christian mystical theology on the other is that, whereas the former philosophers tend to regard ultimate reality as either transcendent or immanent, Christian mystics paradoxically see God as both transcendent and immanent. In this sense, Christianity represents a synthesis of the two great ancient influences on Western thought, a synthesis which is reflected in the apophatic [negative] and cataphatic [affirmative] branches of
Christian mystical theology, as discussed, for example, by Dionysius the Areopagite in Chapter 3 of his Mystical Theology. Apophatic theology concerns the dark, non-sensuous relationship of the self and the ineffable God dwelling in Divine Darkness, concerns the self's movement upwards or, better, inwards (an idea very familiar in Augustine) to the transcendent God. Cataphatic theology concerns God's manifestation of his divinity to the redeemed senses (or, as Augustine says, to the "heart") in and through the universe, which God created and pronounced "very good." In the Divine Names, a work on what we can say about God, Dionysius rather succinctly sums up cataphatic and apophatic theology, epitomizes the mystic's experience of immanent divinity and of the wholly transcendent Godhead: "God is known in all things, and apart from all things" (VII.3). In a beautiful, paradoxical passage from his account of his search for God through the memory, Augustine at greater length suggests the transcendent and perhaps also the immanent discovery and love of God:

But what is it that I love when I love You? Not the beauty of any bodily thing, nor the order of the seasons, not the brightness of light that rejoices the eye, nor the sweet melodies of all songs, nor the sweet fragrance of flowers and ointments and spices; not manna or honey, not the limbs that carnal love embraces. None of these things do I love in loving my God. Yet in a sense I do love light and melody and fragrance and food and embrace when I love my God—the light and the voice and the fragrance and the food and embrace in the soul, when the light shines upon my soul which no place can contain, that voice sounds which no time can take from me, I breathe that fragrance which no wind scatters, I eat the food which is not lessened by eating, and I lie in the embrace which satiety never comes to sunder. This it is that I love, when I love my God. (Confessions, trans., F. J. Sheed, X, vi)

From the immanence and transcendence of the omnipresent God, it follows that at any stage of the contemplative journey the "object" of the mystic may be any one of four possibilities. (The word "object" is in quotation marks because in the mystical experience the usual division between subject and object appears unreal or merely conventional; subject and object, though mentally distinguishable, are experienced as actually one or at least as inextricably interconnected.) First, if the "object" is the natural world or, more usually, some particular part(s) of it, the mystical experience is designated, to employ W. H. Auden's terminology, the Vision of Dame Kind, which medieval phrase we could render in modern terms as Mother Nature. Secondly, if the "object" is another human being
with whom the mystic shares erotic love, the experience is called a Vision of Eros. (Needless to add, this does not mean that every sexual experience is a mystical one; sexuality often exists without Eros; other criteria, including the presence of at least some of the above-noted characteristics, must be satisfied as well for an experience to be designated a Vision of Eros.) Thirdly, if the “object” is other individuals toward whom the mystic feels not erotic but brotherly love, the term employed is the Vision of Philia. And fourthly, if the “object” is the transcendent divinity, the experience is named the Vision of God. Auden’s discussion of these four kinds of Vision, based upon consideration of Catholic-Protestant contemplative tradition as it would be known to seventeenth-century and later writers, introduces a book, *The Protestant Mystics*, which contains selections from numerous Protestant mystics, including not only the Anglican poets Donne, Herbert, Vaughan, and Traherne, but also such sixteenth-and seventeenth-century Protestant writers as Martin Luther, Jakob Boehme, Samuel Rutherford, Jeremy Taylor, Richard Baxter, and George Fox, as well as later Protestant mystics.

The first three Visions (of Dame Kind, Eros, and Philia) are primarily of the immanent or extrovertive type. The Vision of God is of the transcendent or introvertive type. Because the “object” of the Visions of Eros and Philia includes another human consciousness, these Visions often display as well some introvertive characteristics, especially the Unitary Consciousness. Although the Visions initially, as it were, differ in “object,” in a strict sense ultimately they do not: for it is God that is through the redeemed senses sought in nature, the beloved, or other humans, just as it is God that is directly, inwardly, sought in the Vision of God. And although the mystical stages of Purgation, Illumination, Dark Night of the Soul, and Union usually are applied to the Vision of God, they may also profitably be applied to the other Visions. In the stages of Purgation and Dark Night of the Soul, the individual is painfully aware of the absence of the “object” of his vision. In Illumination and Union, the mystic feels the presence of or is joyfully united to the “object” of his Vision.

The end or purpose of passing through the stages of mysticism in one or another kind of Vision is to effect a radical transformation of self, called “regeneration” or “rebirth”; movement through the stages is the regenerative progress. “Regeneration,” as intended here, is the heart of the contemplative experience and not just a Christian
commonplace. Andrew Louth remarks that “for most of the Fathers (with only rare exceptions) the ‘mystical life’ is the ultimate flowering of the life of baptism, the life we receive when we share in Christ’s death and risen life by being baptized in water and the Holy Spirit” (53). There are, as it were, two “baptisms,” one of the letter and the other of the spirit, one of piety and the other mystical, though both are called “regeneration.” Baptism of the spirit, regeneration in our sense, is not merely verbal or intellectual grasp of certain principles nor a merely superficial conversion, but rather that deeply realized, radical, and thoroughgoing change in one’s mode of consciousness which is both the true beginning and center of the mystic life. This is the kind of regeneration that authoritative writers on mysticism, such as Evelyn Underhill, describe: “The true and definitely mystical life does and must open with that most actual, though indescribable phenomenon, the coming forth into consciousness of man’s deeper, spiritual self, which . . . mystical writers of all ages have agreed to call Regeneration or Re-birth.” Underhill points out that mystics frequently refer to this phenomenon as “the eternal Birth or Generation of the Son or Divine Word” (Mysticism, 122).

In the words of the fourth Evangelist: “Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit. He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal” (John 12:24–15). This and other biblical passages are metaphors for the same transformation, the same experience of hating, giving up, the illusional, egoistic life to realize the life of the true self. This central paradox of gain through loss, of life through death, embodies a traditional distinction important to understanding so much in Donne, Herbert, and Vaughan: the distinction between the outward and inward man, Greek psyche and pneuma, Hebrew nephesh and ruach, the man “himself” and the divine, supra-individual Being. St. Paul, whose trichotomous conception of human nature includes soma (body), writes: “The first man Adam was made a living soul [psyche], the last Adam was made a quickening spirit [pneuma]” (1 Cor. 15:45). Unlike their rough biblical English equivalents, soul and spirit, the terms psyche and pneuma, which we may translate into modern English as lesser life and greater life or, more strongly, as false self (ego) and true self, should not carry for the modern reader ambiguous, irrelevant, and distracting meanings after the terms are discussed in this and subsequent chapters.6

In a discussion of flesh, soul, and spirit that typifies the best
patristic thinking on the subject, Irenaeus follows Paul’s trichotomous conception of human nature and further clarifies for us the distinction between psyche (soul) and pneuma (spirit):

There are three elements of which, as we have shown, the complete man is made up, flesh, soul, and spirit; one of these preserves and fashions the man, and this is the spirit; another is given unity and form by the first, and this is the flesh; the third, the soul, is midway between the first two, and sometimes it is subservient to the spirit and is raised by it: while sometimes it allies itself with the flesh and descends to earthly passions... Soul and spirit can be constituents of man; but they certainly cannot be the whole man. The complete man is a mixture and union, consisting of a soul which takes to itself the Spirit of the Father, to which is united the flesh which was fashioned in the image of God... men are spiritual not by the abolition of the flesh... there would then be the spirit of man, or the Spirit of God, not a spiritual man. But when this spirit is mingled with soul and united with created matter, then through the outpouring of the Spirit the complete man is produced; this is man made in the image and likeness of God. A man with soul only, lacking spirit [Spirit], is ‘psychic’; such a man is carnal, unfinished, incomplete; he has, in his created body, the image of God, but he has not acquired the likeness to God through the spirit [Spirit]. [Bettenson, *Early Christian Fathers*, 70–71]

Bettenson notes that “Irenaeus does not clearly distinguish between ‘spirit of man’ and ‘Spirit of God’ bestowed on man. It is often impossible to know which he means” (70, n. 1). The ambiguity may well be deliberate to suggest the ultimate unity of man and God, for Irenaeus earlier writes that “God who is the totality of all these must needs include all things in his infinite being” (65).

Traveling the *via mystica* accomplishes the most supreme act of Self-knowledge: it is to undergo the transformation from being the first Adam to becoming the last Adam, from psyche to pneuma, from egohood to Selfhood. It is to make that spiritual journey whereby man’s divine image is restored. And since, as Irenaeus remarks, “first we were made men, then, in the end, gods” (Bettenson, *Early Christian Fathers*, 69), it is to be transhumanized, in Dante’s phrase, from a human into a god. For the three Christian poets of our study it is, in short, to become Christlike. “For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive” (1 Cor. 15:21–22). What it means “to become Christlike,” beyond what is said in this chapter, is a large part of the burden of the following chapters.
Traditionally, the Bible has been regarded by Christian theologians and mystics as a definitive myth extending from Creation to Apocalypse. Its unity depends upon the series of movements related to the process of creation, fall, redemption (and apocalypse) in the coming (and second coming) of Christ. In biblical terms, this spiritual progression, successfully completed, may be spoken of as the regaining of Eden or Paradise, or the recovery of that divine, creative, and redemptive image which is hidden within man, or the restoring of divine Sonship. When Jesus was baptized, “the Holy Ghost descended in a bodily shape like a dove upon him, and a voice came from heaven, which said, Thou art my beloved Son; in thee I am well pleased” [Luke 3:22]. Luke goes on to draw up the genealogy of Jesus, “being [as was supposed] the son of Joseph,” continuing on back to “Adam, which was the son of God” [3:23–38]. As Adam was the son of God, so is Jesus, the last Adam. Since the Fall alienated every man, Adam, from God, every man has to become again the son of God through the redemption of Christ; psyche must become pneuma, the lesser life or false self (in modern parlance) must become the greater life or true self: this is the basic meaning of the key mystical idea or overriding archetype of regeneration or rebirth. The myth of the Fall and the archetype of rebirth designate the same realities. As every seventeenth-century English poet might be expected to know, a human is an Adam, either the first or the last, and spiritual progress consists in rebirth, in the movement from one Adam to the other. Just as a Buddhist must discover his Buddha nature, a Christian must become Christ or Christlike. A Christian mystic does so in this life; that is, the mystic experimentally discovers his own divine nature or Sonship and is reunited to divinity in this life. The mystic undergoes a metaphorical death, the death of the first Adam, in order to undergo a metaphorical rebirth or resurrection as the last Adam, Christ. In a sense, we may say accurately that the mystic is precisely that person who understands and actually experiences the mythic, poetic meaning of God’s Word. In this regard, we shall observe important differences between Donne, Herbert, and Vaughan.

Beside biblical authority, these poets had the confirming word of mystical tradition. One of mysticism’s fundamental articles of faith is the doctrine, derivative in Christianity from Genesis, that man is made in God’s image, that, in the words of Dean Inge, “since we can only know what is akin to ourselves, man, in order to know God, must be a partaker of the divine nature” [6]. The idea that the true self in the depth of the particular individual is identical with or at least like unto divinity is expressed most succinctly in the
Sanskrit formula *tat tvam asi* ("that art Thou" or "you are It") and is found pervasively in worldwide mystical literature. We confine ourselves to the Christian contemplative tradition concerning the mystical stages and this central, key idea of the lesser or false and the greater or true selves.

Purgation is the means that through God's grace accomplishes the transformation of the lesser, false self (first Adam) to the greater, true self (last Adam). In that Neoplatonism adapted by the Churc Fathers, the way whereby the self ascends to God (or to Being as designated in the *Phaedo*, to the Good in the *Republic*, to Beauty in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, to the One in the *Philebus* and Plotinus' *Enneads*, for a few examples) is Plato's way of moral and intellectual purification. In the *Theaetetus*, Plato makes the point that it is only by becoming godlike that we can know God. Plotinus teaches that the self in its lapse from its original goodness falls into the "Place of Unlikeness," a phrase taken from Plato's *Statesman*, and must return to God (or the One) through its likeness to him; fallen selves become "dwellers in the Place of Unlikeness, where, fallen from all resemblance to the Divine, we lie in gloom and mud" (*Enneads* I.8.13). Writing on Plotinus, Andrew Louth remarks, "unlikeness, difference, obscures the soul's simplicity and likeness to the divine. The 'way,' then, will be recovery of its simplicity, of its kinship to the divine. This will involve purification, both in the sense of the restoration of its own beauty, and in the cutting off of what has sullied that purity. The soul is to seek for itself, for its true self, and in doing that it is seeking for the divine, for the soul belongs to the divine, it has kinship with the divine" [42–43].

For the early Church Father Origen, who attended the school of Ammonius Saccas, the teacher of Plotinus, and whose work is permeated by Platonism, the Song of Songs, as his *Commentary* on it so clearly shows, is the book on the height of the mystical life, the self's union with God. Among the many ideas he develops in his interpretation of the Song, one of the most important is that of the three stages of the mystical life, subsequently called Purgation, Illumination, and Union. Origen's *On the First Principles* (of Christian theology) attempts to overcome or reconcile the classical dualism of form and matter by deriving all of reality from a single principle. Like the One of his younger contemporary, Plotinus, Origen's God is transcendent, an absolute unity beyond discursive thought. In accounting for the world of matter and change as an emanation from this transcendent principle, an intermediary is necessary, and
this is the role of Christ, who is regarded as the Logos or the hypos-
tatized Divine Wisdom of the transcendent deity.

To other mystical Fathers, like Dionysius the Areopagite and
Gregory of Nyssa, God is utterly transcendent and unknowable to
the rational intellect, which is at the center of the psyche. This idea
of the absolute darkness of the Godhead and the Christian doctrine
of creation ex nihilo, which (unlike Platonic and pantheistic ac-
counts of creation) posits a greater distance between Creator and cre-
ation, increase the need for an intermediary. In other words, among
other matters, the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation, for Origen
and the later Fathers, reconciles the classical dualism of form and
matter and the dichotomy of the transcendent and the immanent.
In the words of St. Athanasius, credited with defending against the
Arians at the Council of Nice the Trinitarian view that Christ was
always God the Son and that when he became man as the son of
Mary he remained wholly God and wholly man, "God became man
that man might become God" (De Incarnatione, 54, iii, cited in
Watts, Behold the Spirit, 131). While the expression is not always as
memorable, the idea is of course widespread in the Fathers and
others: thus, for example, Irenaeus, "Our Lord Jesus Christ, the word
of God, of his boundless love, became what we are that he might
make us what he himself is"; and Clement of Alexandria, "the
Word, I say, of God ... became man just that you may learn from a
man how it may be that man should become God" (Bettenson, Early
Christian Fathers, 77, 177). And in "There Is No Natural Religion,"
Blake directly concludes, "Therefore God becomes as we are, that we
may be as he is." Christ is the way and example; the resurrection is
in and of the body as well as the soul. Other persons potentially share
in the Incarnation, the possibility of redemption thereby held out to
them. For the Fathers generally, as for Augustine, who develops from
Plotinus the idea of the regio dissimilitudinis, the land or place of
unlikeness (Confessions, VII, x), the self's likeness to God has been
restored in the Incarnate Word. And under the influence of Augus-
tine, "image theology" makes its way to medieval and Renaissance
Christian writers. Christ's Passion and Crucifixion are emblems of
and models for the fallen or false self's purgative way. For the Chris-
tian, the symbol of one's ultimate essential identity with divinity
and the paradigm of union (and of illumination in that it is a tempo-
rary or incomplete union) is the Incarnation, the immediate and final
meaning of which is the redemption or regeneration of the first
Adam, the lesser, false self, and the uniting of man and God. In the
words of Irenaeus, God's "Word is our Lord Jesus Christ who in these last times became man among men, that he might unite the end with the beginning, that is, Man with God" [Bettenson, Early Christian Fathers, 76–77].

Writing on "the fundamental dogma of mystical psychology," Abbé Bremond further clarifies and expands the meaning of "the distinction between the two selves: Animus, the surface self; Anima, the deep self; Animus, rational knowledge; and Anima, mystical or poetic knowledge... the I, who feeds on notions and words and enchants himself by doing so; the Me, who is united to realities." "My Me is God," St. Catherine of Genoa asserts, "nor do I recognize any other Me except my God Himself." "What is life?" Meister Eckhart asks, and boldly affirms: "God's being is my life, but if it is so, then what is God's must be mine and what is mine God's. God's is-ness is my is-ness [istigkeit], and neither more nor less." With direct pertinence, the great Flemish mystic Jan Ruysbroeck makes the psyche-pneuma distinction in the terms of created and uncreated nature: "all men who are exalted above their created nature into a life of contemplation are one with the Divine clarity, and they are the clarity itself. And they behold and feel and discover themselves, by means of this Divine light: they discover that they are this same single deepness, according to the manner of their uncreated nature... And so contemplative men attain to that everlasting image in which they are made." Quotations such as these from the contemplatives could be multiplied indefinitely. The terminology may differ, even considerably, in various writers of the contemplative tradition, but the idea remains essentially the same, as when, for example, Blake writes with his characteristic directness: "Man is all Imagination. God is Man and exists in us and we in him" ("Annotations to Berkeley's Siris"); and, from "the Laocoon," "The Eternal Body of Man is The Imagination, that is, God himself." Besides using "Imagination," Blake elsewhere employs the terms "the faculty which experiences," "the Poetic Genius," and "the true Man" to designate what we have here been referring to as the true self.

Purification, then, is the process whereby the various prideful effects of the Fall (and of every person’s fall) are undone and overcome so that one may regain one’s Sonship or essential divinity, the process whereby one may undergo that humble ego-crucifying which conduces to the self’s highest exaltation. "He that shall humble himself shall be exalted" [Matt. 23:12; see also Luke 14:11, 18:14]. It should, however, be emphasized both that purification is an ongoing process and that different stages of the via mystica may be simul-
taneously present, as Underhill points out: "the purgation of the senses and of the character which they have helped to build is always placed first in order in the Mystic Way; though sporadic flashes of illumination and ecstasy may, and often do, precede and accompany it. Since spiritual no less than physical existence, as we know it, is an endless Becoming, it too has no end. In a sense the whole of the mystical experience in this life consists in a series of purifications, whereby the Finite slowly approaches the nature of its Infinite Source . . . " [Mysticism, 203–204]. As Christ's sermon on the mount tells us, blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Purification leads to vision and enlightenment, but these latter in themselves are and help to provide a further "purification" leading to still deeper and intenser vision and enlightenment, so that one may see the divinity within as Gregory of Nyssa suggests in From Glory to Glory and in his sermon on the sixth Beatitude [The Beatitudes].

One of the reasons that purification is an ongoing process proceeds from the fact that, from a modern psychological point of view, numerous false selves exist or come into existence and must be purged away. Because the Bible and contemplative tradition generally refer to only the lesser life or false self and the greater life or true self (sometimes using various synonyms or other phrases for "life" or "self"), it suffices, for the sake of tradition and simplicity, to speak of the false self as representative of any one or more false selves. And, although there usually are many purgations and illuminations, as mystics regularly report, it also generally suffices simply to employ the traditional schema of Purgation, Illumination, and Union as a diagram of the via mystica. On occasion it will help to amplify this schema, such as in the elaboration of the Dark Night of the Soul by St. John of the Cross. Similarly, other characteristics of mystical experience in addition to those discussed by W. T. Stace will on appropriate occasion be mentioned. Nor should we expect to find every characteristic in every contemplative poem. Some are more important than others. For example, the first-listed characteristics of the Unifying Vision and the Unitary Consciousness are much more pertinent for determining whether a poem or an experience presented in a poem may be contemplative than the last-listed, alleged ineffability. Furthermore, we will not find all four Visions in each of our three poets, Donne, Herbert, Vaughan, as we do, for example, in their later contemporary, Traherne. Indeed, while each of the three sought the Vision of God, each seems to have more fully experienced a different Vision than the others, which is yet another distinguishing feature of their poetry and helps to account for some of the differ-
ences in their work. Although all of this chapter’s material on mysticism will be useful and helpful in our subsequent study of seventeenth- and twentieth-century poets, not all of it is required for each poet. Where necessary and appropriate, the following chapters will avail themselves of the perspective and light provided by contemplative tradition, the master revelations, and will draw on or elaborate the preceding discussion and introduce needed refinements of it.

There is one additional refinement to be made here. A wisdom even greater than the doctrine of purgation obtains among the Christian contemplatives and helps to account for their sometimes according larger significance to the Incarnation than to the Crucifixion, even though the Crucifixion is to them so vitally important. They have the abiding and deep awareness that, in Eckhart’s words, “nothing is as near to me as God is. God is nearer to me than I am to myself. My being depends on God’s intimate presence.”

Donne, Herbert, and Vaughan would have read in the Psalms that “Thou art near, O Lord” (119:151) and would have learned from St. Paul’s preaching to the Athenians that God is “not far from every one of us: for in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring” (Acts 17:27–28). “But Thou wert more inward to me, than my most inward part,” St. Augustine similarly affirms, “and higher than my highest.”

As the self ascends to God, it discovers its essential Self. Self-knowledge and knowledge of the divine are, if not identical, at the least intimately interwoven. Recognizing the unworthiness of one’s fallen nature, and all that implies, is itself prelude and key to discovering one’s “more near” or “more inward” Being and ultimately to entering wholly into the state of effulgent beatitude. But only the true Self, not the fallen ego, can accept and affirm, can act. It even chooses to act as if it were fallen and in need of crucifixion. God acts and is; man, on his own, can neither act meaningfully nor be. The psyche is indeed an illusion, a fiction, however tenaciously it may foolishly persist in refusing to die and let eternal life be. By means of the Incarnation and Redemption, the psyche, would-be usurping pretender, learns and assumes its proper subordinate place; one sees through the convention, and it also becomes a blessing.