

Critique of Dogmatic Servitude (and of Mysticism)¹

By *inner experience*, I understand what one usually calls *mystical experience*: states of ecstasy, of rapture, at least of meditated emotion. But I am thinking less of *confessional* experience, to which one has had to hold oneself hitherto, than of a bare experience, free of ties, even of an origin, to any confession whatsoever. This is why I don't like the word *mystical*.

Nor do I like narrow definitions. Inner experience responds to the necessity in which I exist—and human existence with me—to challenge (question) everything without acceptable rest. This necessity was in play despite religious beliefs, but its consequences are much more complete if one does not have these beliefs. Dogmatic presuppositions have given experience undue limits: someone who already knows cannot go beyond a known horizon.

I wanted experience to lead me where it was leading, not to some end given in advance. And I say at once that it does not lead to a harbor (but to a place of bewilderment, of nonsense). I wanted nonknowledge itself to be the principle—for this reason I have followed with a fierce rigor a method in which the Christians excelled (they engaged in this path as far as dogma permits). But this experience, born of nonknowledge, remains there decidedly. It is not ineffable, one does not betray it if one speaks of it, but to questions of knowledge, it steals from the mind the answers that it already had. Experience reveals nothing and cannot be the basis of belief or set out from it.

Experience is questioning (testing), in fever and anguish, what man knows of the facts of being. That in this fever, he has some apprehension, of whatever kind, he cannot say: "I have seen this, what I have seen is this"; he cannot say: "I have seen God, the absolute in the depths of the world";

he can only say, “what I have seen escapes understanding,” and God, the absolute, the depths of the world are nothing if they are not categories of understanding.²

If I said decisively: “I have seen God,” that which I have seen would change. In place of the inconceivable unknown—wildly free before me, leaving me wild and free before it—there would be a dead object and the thing of the theologian—to which the unknown would be subjugated, because, in the form of God, the obscure unknown that ecstasy reveals is *subjugated to serving me* (the fact that a theologian can leap out of the established order after the fact signifies simply that the order is useless; it is for experience only a presupposition to be rejected).

In any case, God is linked to the salvation of the soul—at the same time as to other *relations between the imperfect and the perfect*. Now, in experience, the feeling that I had of the unknown of which I have spoken is uneasily hostile to the idea of perfection (servitude itself, the “must be”³).

I read in Dionysius the Areopagite: “Since the union of divinized minds with the Light beyond all deity occurs in the cessation of all intelligent activity . . . [they] praise it most appropriately through the denial of all beings” (*Divine Names*, I, 5).⁴ It is this way from the moment in which experience reveals or does not reveal the presupposition (to such a degree that, in the eyes of the Areopagite, the light is a “ray of darkness”; he would go so far as to say, according to Eckhart: “God is nothingness”).⁵ But positive theology—founded on the revelation of the Scriptures—is not in agreement with this negative experience. A few pages after having evoked this God that discourse only apprehends through negation, Dionysius writes: “He has dominion over all and all things revolve around him, for he is their cause, their source, and their destiny” (*Divine Names*, I, 7).⁶

On the subject of “visions,” of “words,” and of other “consolations” common in ecstasy, Saint John of the Cross witnesses if not hostility at least reserve. For him, experience only has meaning in the apprehension of a God without form and without mode.⁷ In the end, Saint Teresa herself only valued “intellectual vision.”⁸ Similarly, I maintain that the apprehension of God, even without form or mode (“intellectual” vision and nontangible), is a stop in the movement that brings us to the most obscure apprehension of the *unknown*: of a presence that is no longer distinct in any way from an absence.

God differs from the unknown in that a profound emotion, coming from the depths of childhood, is initially linked in us to his evocation. The

unknown on the contrary leaves us cold, does not make us love it before it overturns everything in us like a violent wind. In the same way, the upsetting images and middle terms to which poetic emotion has recourse touch us without difficulty. If poetry introduces the strange, it does so by way of the familiar. The poetic is the familiar dissolving into the strange and dissolving ourselves with it. It never dispossesses us entirely, because the words, the dissolved images, are charged with emotions already experienced, pinned to objects that link them to the known.

Divine or poetic apprehension is on the same level as the fruitless apparitions of the saints in that we can still, through it, appropriate that which surpasses us, and, without grasping it as a real possession, at least link it to ourselves, to what we have already touched. In this way, we do not die entirely: a thread, undoubtedly tenuous, but a thread links the apprehended to the self (having shattered the naive notion I had of Him, God remains the being whose role is set by the Church).

We are only totally laid bare by proceeding without trickery to the unknown. It is the share of the unknown that gives the experience of God—or the poetic—its great authority. But in the end the unknown demands an empire without shares.⁹