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## Initiation: The Mystery of Death

The mystery of love is greater than the mystery of death.

—Oscar Wilde, *Salomé*

The more it wounds, the more it heals . . .

—St. John of the Cross, *The Living Flame of Love*

### Prefatory

The affecting thought from the finale of Wilde's strange, sad drama may be wiser than he ever dreamed, and not just because it echoes the Song of Songs and its "love is strong as death" (8:6). It is a theological statement, intended or not, and it is the faith of this essay. Further, it is the faith of this essay that in some sense the mystery of love and the mystery of death are one and the same mystery. And this premise has potential to open before us a unifying vision not only stronger than death but older than death. That is, it can access primordial life before death.

This essay is a mystical interpretation of death and dying, in the "dark night" of which it would "initiate" us into the divine vision: To see the way God sees, to think

the way God thinks, to love the way God loves. By no means does this presume any special revelation, for we are not without sufficient record of the way God sees, thinks, and loves. True, initiation into “the mind of God” has its potential for self-delusion, perhaps a reason that the exercise of this part of the biblical record, the mystical dimension, has often been reserved to the monastery. “Nocturne,” a major symbol of mystical passage in this essay, was in fact at one time part of the first office of the new day, recited at midnight or in the darkest early hours—and it may be time to translate it from the cloister to the world. As Flannery O’Connor wrote in her letters, *The Habit of Being*: “Right now the whole world seems to be going through a dark night of the soul.”<sup>1</sup> And, as I think she knew—having been cut down early by lupus—these words have special application to death and dying. But death and dying, in von Balthasar’s words, can be “anticipatory glory.”

If any of this should seem intimidating, be assured that mysticism can be very ordinary. That is, like death, it is accessible to all. We shall try to see how much like death mysticism can be.

### What Is Mysticism?

First, what really is “mysticism”? A mysticism that could be defined would not be very mysterious, and mysticism *is* mysterious. If mysticism, especially as it might relate to the scriptures, is *not* mysterious to the reader, then he or she can forego this foundation and advance immediately to the following section, “Mysticism and Death.” I usually begin my seminars on mysticism and spirituality by suggesting that the students check their dictionaries at the door. Mysticism is both exclusive and inclusive, and nothing that can be said about it exhausts it. The classic formulation is “direct experience or knowledge of God.” But this tells us nothing of the character of this knowledge, experience, or, of course, of God. Indeed, the idiom of mysticism is paradox, and it is both the be-

ginning and the end of religion. That is, properly understood, religion begins in theophany, the divine apparition or revelation, as, for example, the Burning Bush, and ends in theophany, the divine apparition or revelation. In terms of sacred literature, we know the latter as the Book of Revelation. Mysticism returns to the source, anticipates the end, and—should it be necessary to add—respects the “middle,” that is, it respects history, itself a mysterious vehicle of more than human disclosure. As Marc Bloch puts it, “Religious experience is historical experience.” Time is vital but provisional.

Mysticism has been likened to molten lava that, upon crystallizing, becomes religion. This is by no means intended to slight religion. Both are really complements. Mysticism without religion is apt to put itself beyond judgment, reducing itself to either individualistic or rationalistic “metaphysical” speculation at best: of occult chicanery at worst. Accordingly, some religionists have sometimes held mysticism as suspect, “beginning in mist and ending in schism.” But religion without mysticism is subject to its own perils. Religion without mysticism or a depth spirituality can reduce to arid moralism, on the one hand—an overdose of the “thou shalt nots”—or to external habit, on the other. Given this, it is small wonder that many religiously sensitive personalities have foresworn institutional religion. Moreover, mysticism may have its charismatic or pentecostal variants, and it is both ironic and sad when the two, mysticism and the charismatic/pentecostal, see only the *aberrations* of the other, identifying the first with “navel-gazing” and the second with hysteria, when *in principle* they are expressions of a common Spirit. It is not the Spirit which is divisive! This anomaly is rather Matthew Arnold’s “ignorant armies” fighting “by night,” or what I have elsewhere characterized as “the demon of division.” Like any spirituality, mysticism is a gift of the Holy Spirit, but its accent is upon the relatively less dramatic gifts, like wisdom. The mystical accordingly is likely to be more open to wisdom traditions universally than the

charismatic and, ironically, expressed more by silence than by tongues. But the two meet, or should meet, in nurture of the greatest of the gifts: Love. If the word *mysticism* is still objectionable, one may simply call it spiritual or contemplative theology.

But the reality, as over against the word, is another thing and, I submit, a biblical thing. This is only another way of saying, as I hope we shall see, that a Christian mysticism, while perhaps introducing unfamiliar language (because, as indicated, it is language all too often reserved to the monastery), in principle complements rather than contradicts a more basic “evangelical” conversion. *Ideally*, the mystical can in fact presuppose the evangelical—and possibly vice versa. This construction may be the sense of an obscure passage in Hebrews (6: 1–3) about leaving “the elementary doctrines of Christ” and going “on to maturity.” It is small wonder that the challenging figure of the mountain pervades spiritual literature.

The main point of the foregoing is to affirm the inherent compatibility of the mystical and the evangelical. This compatibility is in principle demonstratable in the person of St. Francis of Assisi. Francis, “the herald of the great king,” may be the greatest “evangelical” of the medieval world; and interestingly, as the recipient of the stigmata has also been considered the person who had the greatest mystical experience of that very mystical age. And if we can believe Bengt Hoffman, *Luther and the Mystics* (1976),<sup>2</sup> there is something mystical about the founder of the Evangelical Church. More generally, the mystical side of the Reformation is seen in its radical fringe, e.g., the Quakers. Regardless, soon enough the two spiritualities, the mystical and the evangelical, were estranged by mutual incomprehension. My own sense is that the best people now wear the conventional labels rather lightly, preferring ecumenical common nouns to sectarian proper nouns. Scripture is intended presumably to open, not close, ourselves.

We shall draw upon the treasures of the Western mystical and spiritual traditions, allowing them to fix our

meaning of the terms. And this is a tradition, I submit, as rich as any, though it has suffered much from the anti-contemplative bias of our pathetically preoccupied and rationalistic modern world. Our foremost classic is, of course, the Bible, and both the Old and New Testaments are replete with mystical experience. One of the first great mystical experiences is, as suggested, that of Moses and the Burning Bush (Exodus 3:1–15), but we might, for simplicity's sake, see our mystical tradition descending historically from Abraham's departure by faith for a promised land (Genesis 12:1). Abraham put Western religion firmly "on the path," as is said nowadays, but for the mystic the promised land is not so much territory without as it is a temple of the Spirit within. And if we might appropriate St. Augustine, we get there "not by steps, but by love."

Still, mysticism is not just a pietistic "religion of the heart," but one of the whole person. And a Christian mysticism is not just concerned with Christ-worship but with Christlikeness. Years ago the English Benedictine, Dom Aelred Graham, asked his terrible question, "Have we substituted Christ worship for being Christlike?" Recourse to the debris of our history leaves little room for doubt. It seems evident enough and perhaps human enough that we have elevated Christ on a pedestal, distancing Him from ourselves, conscious or not, *as a rationalization for not following Him*. This observation is not by any means to tamper with Christ's divinity, only to suggest something of the vagaries of *our* humanity. We are only human. Yes, and the human Christ may be a bit too intrusive.

Nothing of this dynamic is to suggest that mysticism is an "athletic" spirituality that sets itself above the lesser breed. It requires, as we shall see, not so much effort as assent. It demands not so much dogged attachment to some heroic agenda as it does detachment. This is simply a "letting be," as Meister Eckhart had it, to what we really are.

But what are we? This is another mystery. The human is a creature who shoots the moon but does not re-

ally know himself; indeed, fears himself—and rightly so—if an awesome Kingdom *is* within. In fact, our shadowy and repressed *fear* of self-knowledge has been seen by Abraham Maslow<sup>3</sup> as Sigmund Freud's greatest discovery. We may mask fear of our destiny with a diversionary panic of activity, becoming that estranged creature who defines itself by what one does rather than by what one is—not much comfort when one is unable to do very much. Fortunately, we are more than we do, and even more than we seem. We may not always look like it, but we are made in “the image and likeness of God,” affirmed even after the Fall (Gen. 9:6); and the aim is to *realize* this image and likeness. This kind of self-realization may entail, paradoxically, self-effacement. Paul is a great evangelical theologian, but he is also a mystical theologian, and he illuminates the matter of self-effacement in one of the most magnificent passages of scripture:

And we, with our unveiled faces reflecting like mirrors the brightness of the Lord, all grow brighter and brighter as we are turned into the image that we reflect (2 Cor. 3:18).

If Paul is intimating that ours can be a destiny that is more than merely human, John, one of the most mystical of sacred writers, is more explicit:

My dear people, we are already the children of God, but what we are to be in the future has not yet been revealed; all we know is that when it is revealed, we shall be like him (1 John 3:2).

John is, of course, the evangelist of “indwelling” and “abiding.” And he not only writes of the unity of Christ and the Father, he maintains that *we* should have the same kind of unity with Christ as does Christ with the Father. And that this is not just verbal or even moral unity is suggested by Paul's very “prayer,” one of the most astonishing passages of Holy Writ—and astonishing not just in its content but, regrettably, in its neglect:

Out of his infinite glory, may he give you the power through his Spirit for your hidden self to grow strong, so that Christ may live in your hearts through faith, and then, planted in love and built on love, you will with all the saints have strength to grasp the breadth and the length, the height and the depth; until, knowing the love of Christ, which is beyond all knowledge, you are filled with the utter fullness of God (Eph. 3:16–19).

Paul here is balanced, yet bold, and in a single sentence, he has given us a synopsis of mystical theology.

Let me in passing call our attention to just five points. First, Paul is describing a process not an instant solution, a process that is clearly a gift, a grace: “may he give you.” Obviously, this denotes no claim to what C. S. Lewis called “inherent luminosity.” Secondly, “your hidden self” alludes to a distinction between appearance and reality, a distinction that goes back at least to Paul himself (Rom. 7:16–22). It is widely known in our time, especially through the influential writings of Thomas Merton, as the distinction between the true and the false self, with the latter being a mere psychic illusion or social construct. It is a mask, yet we *are* more than we seem. And we are more than we seem for more than one reason, because, thirdly, we are a part of a larger body: “all the saints.” God’s gift has a communal character, a prudent counterweight to any pretensions of our all too naturally imperious egos. Fourthly, we are called to “knowing the love of Christ,” something “beyond all knowledge.” This disavowal of intellectualism reinforces the communal character of the previous point, affirming that the experience is at least as accessible to the simple as it is to the savant. It is also an oblique but clear expression in Paul himself of what is generally known as negative theology, which is the substance of our next chapter and which we can defer until then. Fifthly, and climactically, Paul concludes with his awesome phrase, “filled with the utter fullness of God,” something for which he obviously felt no

need to apologize. But this, generally known to theology by such technical terms as the Eastern Church's *theosis* (literally, "filled with God") or "divinization," is consummated *in glory*—i.e., on "the other side"—another counterweight to the mundane chicanery and manipulative reveries of potential supermen. Generally, Paul seems to avoid language as bold as "the utter fullness of God," but when he says that the "mystery"—and please note that word—is Christ "in you" or "with you," (Col. 1:27) he is maintaining *essentially* the same thing. He is declaring that the "incarnation" is not just unique and singular, pure and simple, but a continuing, historical process. Put inclusively, he is speaking not just of incarnation, but of "incorporation." This incorporation is but an application of the Pauline doctrine of the "mystical body of Christ," lent perhaps a new pertinence. The standard formulation descending from the Church Fathers corroborates. As Athanasius phrased it, "The Logos was made man so that we might be made God."<sup>4</sup> But divinization is a process of grace, not of nature, for grace *is* illimitable. Let us again note that our mysterious vocation is fulfilled in glory.

Paul bespeaks an extraordinary experience, but a mystical experience is not necessarily Pauline. That is to say, it is not necessarily like the dramatic experience Paul had en route to Damascus. We might well find this fortunate; after all, Paul was blinded. An authentic mystical experience is not necessarily—and this is an understatement—the experience that *we* might be looking for, for example, an experience of unalloyed bliss. We are all too suggestible. And we may have a real mystical experience and not understand it till much later, which is another way of saying that we may have such an experience and not necessarily know it at the time. This is not because it is so ordinary—though the mystical genius is in reality that of the ordinary and unaffected, and not the "esoteric"—but because *we* are ordinarily so spiritually insensitive and myopic. The spiritual is just the deepest part of ordinary life. It is "deep" calling to "deep" (Ps. 42:7), that is, it is the "deep" of God calling the depths of



humankind. In such matters, spiritual direction is very helpful. Ignatius Loyola, himself a spiritual master, seems to have spent a lifetime divining, or digesting, if you will, the meaning of his great experience at Manresa. Mystical experience, then, is not a substitute for mystery or for faith, but is itself mysterious. It is dialectical or inclusive, and it deepens mystery even while it illuminates it. It enlarges horizons, including our awareness of their infinity.

We have illuminated, it is to be hoped, in some foundational way, what is intended by the term. To recapitulate and enlarge, mysticism, while inexhaustible, is or is like:

A practical art, more concerned with being than knowing. Still a "science," or as Evelyn Underhill once characterized it in her standard, *Mysticism*, "the science of reality." It distinguishes appearance from reality, including the appearance and reality of the self, retrieved by self-effacement. Having broken with surface value, having never been estranged from the source, being the Source, it is the arbiter of appearance and reality.

"Dialectical" or inclusive "logic," venturing beyond *apparent* contradiction to deeper and mysterious unity. Paradox, and paradox that forswears mere reason for something deeper and richer.

Liberation *and* conformity. Liberation from self. Conformity to love.

In the beginning, "heart trouble." Shipwreck.

Union by love. Being *in* Love. Being-in-Love.

"He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30).

A spirituality not just of sainthood, but of Christ-hood.

The Zen koan, or riddle to break through vain intellectualism and induce enlightenment, wherein the

disciple asks, "Who is the Buddha?" and the master replies, "Who are you?"

"Seeing the way God sees . . . " Therefore, Zooey in the climax of J. D. Salinger's gem, *Franny and Zooey*, breaks through to his overwrought sister, Franny, by the revelation that we ought to shine our shoes for that most homely, unsung, and *apparently* least mysterious of creatures, the anonymous "fat lady"—for "the fat lady is Christ."<sup>5</sup> This is not vulgarization but vision. And if the "virtuous" object that they did not see Christ, the Gentle One's irrefutable reply is insofar as you did this to the least" of these, "you did it to me" (Matt. 25:40).

It begins, then, with vision, which may be no more than taking another look. Shall we?

## Mysticism and Death

The author would be the first to acknowledge that, theologically, there is nothing especially novel in the foregoing section. But when we build upon its foundations and advance to the subject of mysticism and death, we may be venturing into a relatively unexplored horizon. That there is an intimate connection between the mystery of death and mysticism is an essential conviction of this essay. At first sight this claim might appear implausible, and for several reasons. First, by the end of the seventeenth century, mysticism was generally reserved to "extraordinary" experience—a grace of the privileged few—and there is nothing more apparently *ordinary* than death. Whether a consequence of this kind of theological constriction or not, something of a theoretical vacuum was created, and sensational popularizers rush in where religious professionals fear to tread. Popularizers too readily confound mysticism and the occult.

Modern culture, increasingly dominated by popular culture, has suffered from a vulgarization of mysticism.

Mysticism has come to mean whatever one wants, which means it is no longer very mysterious. In some circles it is reducible to, if you will, *Dancing in the Light*, I dread to say, even if its author, Shirley MacLaine, has brought pleasure into the lives of many people. But everywhere in the contemporary spiritual marketplace there is a one-sided and insidious *fixation* upon the pleasure principle: upon light (a light that is all but palpable), euphoria, psychological and physical well-being, the rationality that forecloses a healing initiation into the deeper ironies of Carl Jung's "shadow," and above all St. John of the Cross's "dark night of the soul." Euphoria, for one thing, readily obscures moral sense. Naturally, everyone wants light and euphoria, but a fixation upon them anesthetizes rather than conscientizes. The thing is to seek God, not euphoria. And God, of course, is not necessarily euphoric.

Popular spiritual fare lacks what Rudolph Otto, in a famous book, *The Idea of the Holy*, characterized as the *mysterium tremendum* and the *mysterium fascinans*, a confrontation with the overwhelming mystery that fills us at once with dread *and* fascination. A synthesis of the two might subsist in "awe." Awe, even more than joy, may be the ultimate religious emotion—and awe is inclusive of joy. Moreover, there is in the spiritual marketplace a confusion of what the spiritual masters call "secondary effects" with mysticism proper. Secondary effects are such things as real or imagined visual experiences, trance states, and out-of-body experiences. One can have these without mysticism, and mysticism without these. They can be artificially induced by drugs and by other means, but the great masters would say that a mystical experience cannot be induced. We can and ought to be disposed to it, but we cannot induce it. The infinite is not mechanically at the disposal of the finite.

Given the foregoing prejudices and predispositions of popular culture, the idea of a connection between mysticism and death might understandably seem strange. Death is not a very marketable commodity. Still, our connection has been glimpsed or understood by various mys-

tical writers, though I have never seen it articulated in any systematic way.<sup>6</sup>

We speak of "the mystery of death." The very word *mysticism* seems rooted in death. That is, it has remote associations with "the mysteries," the pre-Christian esoteric and exotic cults whose objective was immortality and which flourished in the ancient world. Since official religion was more of an arid state cult, civic in its ends, it could not meet the deeper needs of the people, especially with the inevitable ebbing of political morale in the later Greco-Roman world. Accordingly, "the mysteries" represent, among other things, a popular outlet for emotionality and an effort to come to terms with the riddle of death. They had, for example, primitive rituals of rebirth. But they also had, ironically, rituals of castration.

Enter to these mysteries the apostle Paul.<sup>7</sup> Paul was fully aware of the vagaries of the mysteries, including some of their magical and lurid practices, but he legitimated *the term*, only infusing it with a new content and meaning. Paul, as it were, offered a corrective to the vulgarized spiritual fare of his day, obsessed as it was with "signs and wonders." To the spiritually starved, anxiety-ridden pagan world, he proclaimed that *the* "mystery (*mysteriōn*) hidden for ages" had at last been fully revealed, and revealed as the experience of Christ (Col. 1:26). "Mystery" was rendered from the Greek into the Latin *sacramentum* and the English "sacrament," itself rooted in the Greek verb "to initiate." Accordingly, in our sacrament of initiation, baptism, Paul can proclaim that, to underscore our connection, we are "baptized into his death" (Rom. 6:3). To which he adds, encapsulating the longing of humankind universally—a longing sung by Dante as that for *La Vita Nuova*—that we might have "a new life." Thus is this mysterious "new life" rendered inseparable from death. Death can be seen, on the one side, as *the* centrality of religion, as the centrality of the Paschal *Mystery* of the Easter liturgy attests.

Rationalism may find something objectionable in this kind of accent, viewing it as confirmation of its own

worst suspicions that religion is a human invention and a desperate, if not puerile attempt, to evade the menace of death. I do not know how many rationalists there can be in the face of something as “unreasonable” as death, but the concern here is not to evade death but to confront it. But, as we have suggested, religion *begins* with the mystery of death, and the modern classic of the irrepressible Miguel de Unamuno, *Tragic Sense of Life*, makes an unforgettable case study that, in this respect, nothing has changed in the intervening millennia. Still, rationalists are right and perhaps even more inspired than they know to expose the neurotic potential of religion, what the prophet of the death of God and self-styled “antichrist,” Friedrich Nietzsche, called the petty and craven *ressentiment* of so many of his complacent religious contemporaries. And religion, like anything else, is in perpetual need of purification and reform.

Religion is about more than death. And death, to be sure, is to be resisted as well as accepted. The record for the resistance to death of the growing martyrologies of, say, Latin America, make this painfully manifest. Among them one can hardly avoid mention of Oscar Romero of San Salvador, slain at the altar in 1980. His very last words were from the text that could well serve as our leading motif: “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone, but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (John 12:24). The point is that death is a religious experience and, potentially, a mystical experience.

The allusion to mystical experience can serve to get us back on track with the mystery of death and mysticism. Let us contemplate the “logic” of mystical union. And let us risk simplification, for reality is more subtle than logic. There are various types of “union with God,” including a strictly “natural” union, enjoyed by all humankind, for existence is theologically unthinkable without God holding us in being. But if “mystical union,” as it were, a real presence to the Real Presence, a consciousness of communion, “a timeless moment,” is more than a natural union—and I submit that this is the consensus of

the spiritual masters—where or when is *full* union with God and the Blessed to be realized? *In death*. If this is the case, mystical experience is or can be a foreshadowing of death. Or as von Balthasar put it, mystical experience is “anticipatory glory.” A foretaste of heaven is what we allude to, and it would seem that there cannot be a foretaste of heaven without a foretaste of death. And the constitution of humankind is such that it cannot endure full union and survive. We are as bubbles—and the bubble would burst. This is only to say that mysticism and death are very close. As St. Thérèse of Lisieux, whose life was dramatized in a beautiful film some years ago, described her mystical experience: “I burned with love and felt that one more minute, one more second, and I would be unable to bear the fire without dying.”<sup>8</sup> There are even pagan variants from classical mythology. Semele was burned to death because she unwisely insisted upon seeing Jupiter.

This construction of a subterranean connection between mysticism and death seems consistent with both scriptural and historical texts. The Jewish scriptures, of course, understandably, against the background of the pagan milieu and its confusion of God and humankind, stressed the transcendence of God: God the Creator as “the Other” standing over and above the creation, the divine inviolability, the divine remoteness. Scripture is not a scientific tract, fortunately, but an art and profuse with all the ambiguities of art. Therefore, Isaiah, in his great mystical vision, can proclaim, “I saw the Lord Yahweh seated on a high throne” (6:1), but the more constant refrain is that “no one may see God and live.” And Isaiah, by the way, seems almost to have himself perished in his experience: “I am lost” (6:5). Moses, in the theophany of the Burning Bush, covered his face, “afraid to look at God” (Exod. 3:6). When Moses is later emboldened to ask to see God’s glory, he is informed: “Man cannot see me and live” (34:18–20). This is the characteristic refrain of the Old Testament (Exod. 19:21, Lev. 16:2, Num. 4:20), applied even to hearing “the voice of the living God speaking from the heart of the fire” (Deut. 5:26). The holy was so sacrosanct that if even an animal touched the sacred mountain

it was to be stoned (Exod. 19:13). Still, transcendence, I hope it goes without saying, is not to imply a polarized "dualistic" or childlike "vertical" conception of heaven and earth: "Heaven and earth are filled with your glory" (Isa. 6:3, as enshrined in the *Sanctus*). Heaven begins here.

With the incarnation and the New Testament, there is a rather novel accent upon the immanence of God, God-with-us; moreover, Jesus of Nazareth is the most accessible of men. But the glorified Christ of the Resurrection is more mysterious in his comings and goings, appearing and disappearing unaccountably, as all but a ghost, allusive of the older affinity of mysticism and the mystery of death. He had had his own "initiation" into death. Paul's extraordinary experience on the road to Damascus did not result in more than death of the "old man," but it was enough to blind him for three days (Acts 9:9). And when in Corinthians he alluded to a mystical experience fourteen years earlier he could still not determine whether it was "in the body or out of the body" (2 Cor. 12:2). At the very climax of the New Testament, the old association is confirmed: "When I saw him, I fell at my feet as though dead" (Rev. 1:17).

Martyrdom reinforces the affinities between mysticism and death. Traditionally considered the most privileged Christian death, Karl Rahner denominates martyrdom a suprasacrament—sacrament being, in the Augustinian formulation, "a visible sign of invisible grace." This certainly holds for the first Christian martyr, Stephen, and for some of the early fathers. Rarely has the mystery of death and mysticism been so intimately and even visibly related as with Stephen. At the very act of being stoned, he cried out: "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God" (Acts 7:56). His mystical vision and his moment of death were synchronic. The evolution of mysticism has been seen in direct continuity with the history of martyrdom. That is, when the "red" or material martyrdom of the saints abated, with the age of Constantine and toleration, the vacuum was filled—direct experience of God—by the "white" or metaphorical martyrdom of *mortification*, by a

dying unto self. This takes us beyond logical to linguistic affinities, and they are profuse, as the term *mortification* can suggest. Most relevantly, the Latin for both "ecstasy" (*excessus*) and "rapture" (*raptus*) are derivative of forms of the verb, "to die."

We have progressed from the scriptural record to the historical record. Or if you prefer, we have progressed to the continuity of revelation in time. And here I believe we shall find a continuing evidence of our connection, at least in the classic texts of some of the greatest mystical experiences. I shall cite but three.

The first is the great experience of St. Augustine (d. 430) and his mother, Monica, at Ostia. The text, incidentally, seems one of relatively few of a joint mystical experience. Augustine begins in his *Confessions* by indicating the setting: "Now the day was approaching on which she was to leave this life . . . she and I were standing alone, leaning in a window which looked onto the garden." But after having made the setting so concrete, he continues:

Our talk had reached this point: that the greatest possible delight of our bodily senses, radiant as they might be with the brightest of corporeal light, could not be compared with the joys of eternal life. . . . Then, with our affections burning still more strongly . . . we raised ourselves higher and higher and step by step passed over all material things . . . and we came to our own souls, and we went beyond our soul to reach that region of neverfailing plenty. . . . So we said: if to any man the tumult of the flesh were to grow silent, silent the images of earth and water and air . . . if there were silence from everything . . . and . . . He Himself alone were to speak . . . would not this be: "Enter into the Master's joy"? (IX,10)<sup>9</sup>

The experience is indeed mysterious, and Augustine can deal with it only by indirection. But our point is that Monica shortly *did* "Enter into the Master's joy" (incidentally, alluding again to the great text of Matt. 25:31-46).



That is, after the experience her joy was complete, and she several times asked, "So what am I doing here?" It was her *Nunc dimittis*—"Now dost Thou dismiss Thy servant" (Luke 2:29). And within approximately a week she had departed. It is as though the mystical experience and her own experience of mortality were two parts of one process.

Our second experience is that of St. Francis (d. 1226) at Mount Verna, and it has recently been deemed by Ewart Cousins as the greatest mystical experience of the Middle Ages,<sup>10</sup> a very mystical age. This is his famous stigmatization, the reception of the wounds of Christ, themselves witnessed by contemporaries. Interestingly, this also occurred towards the end of his life, and after his reading an account of the Passion. His earliest biographer and contemporary, Thomas of Celano, recounts that Francis saw:

*in the vision of God* a man standing above him, like a seraph with six wings . . . fixed to a cross . . . the sharpness of his suffering filled Francis with fear . . . and so he arose, if I may so speak, sorrowful and joyful . . . and while he was thus unable to come to any understanding of it and the strangeness of the vision perplexed his heart, the marks of the nails began to appear in his hands and his feet, just as he had seen them a little before in the crucified man above him.<sup>11</sup>

There is so much that could be said about this experience. Francis, as it were, painted with the stigmata, has become almost an icon of Christ. The figure in the vision parallels our earlier one of Isaiah (6:1–7). We might add that the larger text indicates that the experience was preceded by the prayer of Francis not just to worship Christ, but to be *like* Christ, even to the point of the Cross. The wounds of the stigmata represent a mystical sharing unto Christ's death. And the experience of Francis at Mount Verna can be seen as his synthesis of that of Mount Calvary and the mount of the Transfiguration

(Matt. 17: 1–8), possibly the greatest mystical experience of the New Testament.

One aspect of the experience of Francis has general import and calls for an elucidatory aside. The text seems to speak all but unconsciously of a peculiar coinherence of “fear” and joy: Francis “arose, if I may so speak, sorrowful and joyful.” The text’s author need hardly apologize for an *apparently* ingenuous and naïve expression of a sophisticated theological truth.

This truth is “the coincidence of opposites.” This great truth, like mysticism, can be “ordinary” experience, i.e., accessible to all. William Blake saw it essentially as second nature for children and saints. Great emotion, as for example, at a wedding, is likely to be a coincidence of opposites (“sorrowful and joyful”). A rainbow is a product of a coincidence of opposites, i.e., of rain *and* shine. Poetry, as opposed to prose, is likely to inscribe a coincidence of opposites. A great mystical experience is assuredly a coincidence of opposites.

The “logic” of the coincidence of opposites is inclusive and existential rather than categorical and notional, and it is a mystical logic. That is, it is a decidedly mysterious logic, such as “the first will be last” and of Christ *as* “the first and the last” (Rev. 1:17). The logic of the coincidence of opposites respects *both* ontological unity (“coincidence”) *and* empirical plurality (“opposites” even). Opposites can magnetize, and the coincidence of opposites accommodates both focus and infinity, harmonization and “horizons.” Like anything else, including Holy Writ, this kind of logic is subject to abuse. The doggerel of the violent denizens of Anthony Burgess, *A Clockwork Orange*, for example, *confounds* life and death. There is a proper androgeny *and* gender confusion. Mircea Eliade, in his seminal *The Two and the One*, goes so far as to speak of the “satanic hermaphroditism”<sup>12</sup> of Aleister Crowley, a jaded magus lionized in occult circles in the 1960s. In light of the perils of normlessness and anarchy, mystical logic must be understood in context—inclusive of its “works.”

Our great formulator of the coincidence of opposites was, of course, Nicholas of Cusa (d. 1464). As bishop, mystic *and* scientist he was also something of its enfleshment. God, Cusa perceived, was a coincidence of opposites, e.g., transcendence and immanence; again, in the Christian dispensation, "one" and "three, i.e., singular and plural."<sup>13</sup> Our late incarnation of the coincidence of opposites was Thomas Merton (d. 1968). Merton was more poet than theologian (or a theologian in the original sense), but he could on occasion conceptualize a mystical experience as follows:

This realization at the apex is a coincidence of all opposites (as Nicholas of Cusa might say), a fusion of freedom and unfreedom, being and unbeing, life and death, self and non-self, man and God. The "spark" is not so much a stable entity which one finds but an event, an explosion which happens as all opposites clash within oneself.<sup>14</sup>

Language is predicated of boundaries, and Merton is adumbrating a bracketing or collapsing of boundaries: Totality. And as Anthony Padavano wrote of Merton and, I believe, of mystics universally: "Nothing is clear because everything is present."<sup>15</sup> In short, clarity is sacrificed to comprehension. And clarity is sacrificed to depth. Mystical enlightenment is not just about clarifying obscurity but obscuring premature clarity.

Let us now return to our texts, so we might better appreciate how, in Francis's experience, the saint was "unable to come to any understanding of it." Even seers "see through a glass darkly." But *we* might now be better able to understand that admixture of fear *and* joy, which is really awe, perhaps the highest religious emotion. And it is awe, fascinatingly, that characterizes so many faces in the religious art of the later Middle Ages.<sup>16</sup> *After* the great age of the mystics, the more saccharine (*or* lacrimose) conventions predominate. The preservation of creative tension that is second nature to mystical logic has dissipated.

One should also note Merton's coupling of "life *and* death" (emphasis added). Interpenetration of life and death pervades the text of Francis, who died, incidentally, two years after the experience. We have, of course, espied this factor in St. Monica in the text from the *Confessions*. This coinherence of life and death would seem, finally, to undergird generally our advancing an association of mysticism and death. But strictly speaking, the two associate as a coincidence of opposites. To impetuously dissolve the tension between the two is to court death, not mysticism. Death "dissolves," as does, unfortunately, a divorce a marriage; it is *mysticism* that is a coincidence of opposites. We best regard both unity and distinction. The irreducible mystery subsists in how mysticism and death could not be closer together—or farther apart.

In studying mysticism we do well to focus not so much on concepts as on their incarnation in mystics. And fortunately, we are amply endowed to illustrate these early ruminations.

For example, our third and final text is from the Spanish golden age mystic, St. Teresa of Avila (d. 1582). And Teresa is a peerless exemplar and prolific mother of mystics. Like so many women of genius, even if a happily ordinary genius, she was a relatively late bloomer and went through a long "desert experience" of some fourteen years in which she could scarcely meditate at all. But she became one of the most experiential of mystics and greatest masters of prayer. The following text is that of her "transverberation," translated into marble by the famous sculpture of Bernini:

It pleased the Lord that I should see . . . an angel in bodily form. . . . He was very beautiful, his face so aflame that he seemed to be one of the highest types of angel who seem to be all afire. . . . In his hands I saw a long spear and at the end of the iron tip I seemed to see a point of fire. With this he seemed to pierce my heart several times so that it penetrated my entrails. . . . He left me completely afire with a great love of God. The pain was so sharp