



THE MYSTICAL TEXT: BLACK CLOUDS COURSE THROUGH ME UNENDING
Glossator: Practice and Theory of the Commentary (Spring 2013)
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Now it is called mystical, that is to say, closed or hidden, because whatever is said in it is left as it were without explanation, completely closed and hidden.

—Thomas Gallus, *Exposition on the Mystical Theology*

[A]ll our so-called consciousness is a more or less fantastic commentary on an unknown, perhaps unknowable, but felt text.

—Nietzsche, *Daybreak*

In this book are first set down all the stanzas which are to be expounded [*declararar*]; afterwards, each of the stanzas is expounded separately, being set down before its exposition [*declaración*]; and then each line is expounded separately and in turn, the line itself also being set down before the exposition.

—St. John of the Cross, *The Dark Night*

For this themed issue of *Glossator*, the editors invite commentaries on mystical texts, mystical commentaries, and anything in-between. (Proposals for articles or essays on the relation between mysticism and commentary will also be considered as a secondary option). The term ‘mystical text’ is thus meant to encompass not only the text which exists within a mystical tradition or is considered to have mystical content, but also the actual relation to text that makes it mystical, a relation for which commentary provides a crucial space. Rather than pursuing commentaries on mystical texts in a routine way, as a self-evident critical and/or exegetical practice, this volume is intended as a practical exploration and bringing into question of the living and dead margins between commentary and mysticism. To encourage enthusiasm for this project, we provide the following rubrics as spurs for thought:

Authority.

Clouds, Deserts. Motifs borrowed from the natural world are common in mystical texts. *The Cloud of Unknowing*, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, and *The Fire of Love* are just a few examples in which earthly, atmospheric, and elemental motifs are set within the context of mystical experience. Many mystical texts make use of these sorts of “elemental” aspects to describe mystical experience. Of particular interest are those elemental motifs that express an ambiguity concerning the mystical itinerary. Clouds, for instance, may denote a state of ignorance (before the mystical encounter), a state of confusion (during the mystical event), or a state of bewilderment (after the experience). John of the Cross uses the motif of night in a variety of ways, from the occlusion of the spirit by the senses, to a paradoxical form of divine illumination. Richard Rolle’s use of fire ranges from divine passion to mystical purgation. And many mystics employ the motif of the desert to describe the enigmatic emptying of the self that is part of mystical training. On one level, clouds, deserts, and other such motifs function in an analogical manner, in which an ineffable inner state is described via the analogy of the outer, elemental world. But the specificity of such motifs is noteworthy for their vagueness. Clouds, for instance, are neither a concrete part of the natural world (as are trees or mountains), nor are they exactly a part of the heavens (if anything, they occlude the heavens). Deserts are, certainly, part of creation, but they are barren of any life, completely un-peopled and un-inhabited (except by those seeking the emptying of the self). These elemental aspects of mysticism appear to refer to some type of liminal climatology that corresponds to an equally liminal consciousness. Perhaps clouds, deserts, and the like are the preferred analogies for mystical texts because they appeal to the impossibility of the mystical experience: “The possible and the impossible are both in the world. We are troubled by the sky, the starry space in which we discover laws of harmony, general viability. In this domain, we can only have a presentiment of suspended horror, ungraspable to us.”¹

Darkness. The motif of darkness is pervasive in mystical texts, especially those in the Christian tradition. Despite this, there are a range of uses of the term, from vague intimations of unenlightened psychological states or the quasi-bestial status of the flesh, to ambiguous evocations of absolute divinity. There is, for instance, the darkness of theology, in which the dichotomy of light and dark exist within a moral economy of knowledge and ignorance – here “knowledge” is used in an orthodox sense, as the ground of faith that is arrived at through scripture, exegesis, and religious law. In this sense, to be in darkness means that one has read scripture but has not understood it. But Christian mysticism tends to think of darkness in a way that is different from the moral economy of theology. With mysticism one often sees instead an affective economy, in which it is not faith but revelation that is central. Here divine revelation is the light beyond all lights, in contrast to the murky, confused darkness of sensory and temporal existence. Mystical revelation is at once distinct from the kind of knowledge gained through either the senses or the intellect, but it also relies on them – the senses and intellect fail, and one is left in darkness, lost and abandoned in the search for the divine, what John of the Cross calls the “dark night of the senses.” Both of these uses – the theological and its moral economy, and mystical and its affective economy – maintain the basic dichotomy of light and dark as analogies for either states of consciousness vis-à-vis the mystical experience. But there is also a mystical tradition that attempts to articulate a darkness that is beyond either the moral or affective economies, both of which rely on the light/dark dichotomy. In some cases, the intellect and senses are so overwhelmed by the divine that they give way to a state that Dionysius the Areopagite paradoxically termed “Divine Darkness.” This

¹ Georges Bataille, “Nietzsche’s Laughter,” in *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, ed. Stuart Kendall (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p. 18.

points to yet a third use of the term darkness, in which darkness operates beyond the dichotomy between light and dark, a darkness mysticism that works through an economy of negation. This Divine Darkness can take on different forms, however. In Dionysius the divine is dark by virtue of its superlativity, being beyond all understanding, beyond all thought, beyond all experience; its very inaccessibility renders it “dark” to us as human beings, and it is to us as human beings to give testimony to this inaccessibility (what John Tauler called “night work”). With other mystics the divine is dark because it is, in itself, nothing, void of all content or being, a gulf at the heart of being – the “Godhead” vs. “God” in Eckhart, the “wayless Abyss” in Ruysbroeck. And there are still other cases where the divine is dark because, in the moment of mystical experience, the moment of rapture or ecstasy, all boundaries are dissolved, the self is the world and the world is God, resulting in the negation of both self, world, and God – a motif frequently found in modern mystical writings, such as those by Simone Weil or Maurice Blanchot. Here is E.M. Cioran: “How can we help attributing an absolute character to light and darkness when they are all that is left of the world’s ecstasy?”² When everything is all things, then all that is left is left is darkness. Despite this, even the most rigorous form of darkness mysticism cannot totally escape either the moral economy of theology or the affective economy of mysticism; at the very least it seems that this third, negative form of darkness remains tethered to a some thing that it is not.

Deixis.

Dereliction. In textual accounts of mystical experience, dereliction generally refers to the sense of being abandoned in the course of one’s devotion to the divine. The most well-known Biblical reference to dereliction are Christ’s appeals on the cross: “my God, why have you abandoned me?” For many mystics, the only response to dereliction is to document it; the only panacea for abandonment is its documentation. Being abandoned in this way is not simply the sense of being alone in one’s search for the divine; it is being abandoned by the search itself, lost, wandering, and adrift. In this wandering state, one encounters distress, despondency, and illness. Both body and soul are affected; temptation, possession, and suffering ensue. This sense of abandonment has given rise to the great crises in faith that constitute many mystical texts, from the demons that possess Angela of Foligno’s limbs, to John of the Cross’s comments on the “passive night of the senses,” to the “spiritual sickness” of the 19th century mystic Thérèse of Lisieux. Accounts of mystical dereliction do not always have happy endings. More often than not they end in tragedy. In spite of their sufferings, mystical derelicts do, however, have one revelation – the facticity of their suffering. Whether interpreted as a test, or simply as part of the journey towards the divine, the awareness of being abandoned is an important part of the mystical experience. The mystical derelict is one who is abandoned by the divine – and as such, the derelict is paradoxically in the midst of the divine. Dereliction is, in this sense, akin to processes of abjection and dejection, the self “thrown down” by the self, a willing endurance of the facticity of dereliction itself. One is abjected from the self, having abandoned oneself to a devotion to God; one is rejected by the world, from which one withdraws or from which one abandons; and one is dejected by God, thrown down into a world of bewilderment, confusion, and dread.

Emptiness, Nothingness. In mystical traditions East and West, the divine in itself is often described through an enigmatic language of emptiness and nothingness. These terms, which at first glance appear to simply put forth negations, are often transformed into non-terms, terminological place-holders for something like “that-which-is-beyond-all-comprehension.” In the tradition of Christian mysticism, terms denoting nothingness (*nihil*) are often used to describe the divine nature, as it exists in itself, and apart

² *On the Heights of Despair*, trans. Ilinca Zarifopol-Johnston (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 79.

from its creation and all relation to the world. The divine is literally “nothing,” not being part of the temporal and earthly world, but the divine in itself is also nothingness because nothing can be said about its existence beyond the temporal and the earthly – except nothing. Receding into an abyss of absolute inaccessibility, a dilemma presents itself: one either reaches absolute silence, or one proceeds to subdivide the divine. Dionysius, Eriugena, and Eckhart are examples of this dilemma – Eckhart, for instance, divides the nothingness of the Godhead (as absolute and indeterminate) from the more relative nothingness of the world as created, passive, and temporal. In the East, the concept of *śūnyata* (conventionally translated as “emptiness” or “void”) has long been one of the most fascinating and frustrating concepts in the Mahayana Buddhist tradition. Nagarjuna, the 2nd century philosopher and mystic, employed a rigorous system of negation to arrive at the Middle Way, wherein the self is emptied of all relations and attachments to the world. Nagarjuna describes *śūnyata* as “the intangible, the incomparable, non-appearing, not comprehensible, without any position . . . the vision of the Real in its true form.”³ In both traditions, nothingness and emptiness can describe the absolute inaccessibility of the divine, but it can also describe the inner state of the mystical subject as it prepares itself to encounter the divine. Finding a point of mediation between these two types of emptiness/nothingness is one of the central tasks of the mystical text. Scholar Bernard McGinn’s comments on Eckhart can be applied broadly to the mystical uses of emptiness/nothingness: “Poised between two forms of nothingness, the *nihil* by way of eminence that is God, and the *nihil* that masks the defect of creatures, Eckhart’s mystical way will be an invitation to the soul to give up the nothingness of its created self in order to become the divine Nothing that is also all things.”⁴

Experience. The crucial relation between mysticism and commentary is explicable as a problem of experience, a problem that is vexed by the question of commentary’s own status as experience. On the one hand, if mysticism is grounded in the concrete immanence of transcendent, inexpressible experience, of which Paul’s rapture serves as a Western exemplar,⁵ then commentary on a mystical text (in the sense of a text that represents, discusses, and/or instructs towards such experience) resolves to the degraded rank of a double secondariness, of being a representation of a representation of something beyond representation. On the other hand, the mimetic tertiariness of commentary vis-à-vis its extra-textual object exposes and holds open commentary’s potentiality for *participation* in mystical experience. Standing safely outside the realm of dangerous confusion between word and thing, mimesis and event, commentary, as the humble supplement of their mystical union, may more freely tend toward or touch mystical experience. On the one side may be placed mysticism’s suspicion of commentary, as merely scholastic or intellectual, or as a mode of interpretive egoistic deceit and compromise. Cf. Francis’s (profoundly commentarial) prohibition of commentary on his Rule in the “Testament” he drafted towards death: “And let the general minster and all the other ministers and custodians be bound through obedience no to add to or take away from these words. And let them always have this writing with them together with the Rule. And in all the chapters which they hold, when they read the Rule, let them also read these words. And I strictly command all my cleric and lay brothers, through obedience, not to place any gloss upon the Rule or upon these words saying: ‘They should be understood in this way.’ but as the Lord has given me to speak and write the Rule and these words simply and purely, may you understand them simply and without gloss and observe them with

³ *Kāśyapa-parivāra*, in *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism*, ed. T.R.V. Murti (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 210.

⁴ *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart* (New York: Herder & Herder, 2001), p. 103.

⁵ “I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. And I know that this man was caught up into Paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows—and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter” (2 Corinthians 12: 2-3).

a holy activity until the end.”⁶ On the other side may be placed the practice and valorization of commentary, either subjectively as mystical contemplation (e.g. anagogy), or objectively as exegetical renewal of revelation (e.g. Talmud). Cf. Bernard of Clairvaux’s recommendation to the reader of the Song of Songs: “Every person . . . is free to pursue the thought and experiences, however sublime and exquisite, that are his by special insight, on the meaning of the Bridegroom’s ointments.”⁷ In short, commentary is implicated in mysticism as an intimate other, a shadow that is both enemy and friend. As experience, mysticism at once demands and precludes commentary, all the more insofar as commentary provides an essential means for the composition of mystical texts (e.g. Julian of Norwich’s *Shewings*), a way of speaking about the unspeakable. Cf. “I could not nor did I scream out any other words than these: ‘Love still unknown, why? why? why?’ Furthermore, these screams were so choked up in my throat that the words were unintelligible. Nonetheless what remained with me was a certitude that God, without any doubt, had been speaking to me” (Angela of Foligno, *Memorial*). Experience is the rubric under which commentary attests to and upholds mysticism’s meta-intellectual essence, its being phenomenally analogous to a headache.⁸

Gnosis.

Oneness. Mysticism is often characterized as an experience of oneness, unity, and the non-distinction between the self and God. However, one of the challenges that mystical texts face is how to reconcile the oneness of the divine in and of itself, with the oneness of mystical experience, in which the boundaries between self and God dissolve into a flux of beatitude. One solution is, ironically, to propose that there are actually two types of Divine Oneness. Eckhart suggests such a theory. He distinguishes between the more Neoplatonic oneness of God as presence, productivity, and determination (akin to Augustine’s description of God in terms of *unitas*), and the oneness of God as non-existent – “the absolute and totally indeterminate term One.” To which type of Divine Oneness is the mystical text a testimony? Does this second type of oneness push the appeals of the mystical text back further into a shadowy nether region of a divinity that remains forever inaccessible?

⁶ *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, 3.386.

⁷ Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Song of Songs*, trans. Kilian Walsh, 4 vols (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1983), 22.2.4, vol.2, p.16.

⁸ “Spiritual experience has a hold on the deeper truths which are inaccessible to mere intellect; it cannot be born of unaided intellect. Spiritual truth can often be stated and expressed through the intellect, and the intellect surely is of some help for the communication of spiritual experience. But by itself, the intellect is insufficient to enable man to have spiritual experience or to communicate it to others. If two persons have had headaches they can co-operatively examine their experience of headache and make it explicit to themselves through the work of the intellect. If a person has never experienced a headache, no amount of intellectual explanation will suffice for making him understand what a headache is. Intellectual explanation can never be a substitute for spiritual experience; it can at best prepare the ground for it. Spiritual experience involves more than can be grasped by mere intellect. This is often emphasised by calling it a mystical experience. Mysticism is often regarded as something anti-intellectual, obscure and confused, or impractical and unconnected with experience. In fact, true mysticism is none of these. *There is nothing irrational in true mysticism when it is, as it should be, a vision of Reality. It is a form of perception which is absolutely unclouded, and so practical that it can be lived every moment of life and expressed in every-day duties. Its connection with experience is so deep that, in one sense, it is the final understanding of all experience.* When spiritual experience is described as mystical one should not assume that it is something supernatural or entirely beyond the grasp of human consciousness. All that is meant is that it is not accessible to limited human intellect until it transcends its limits and is illumined by direct realisation of the Infinite. Christ pointed out the way to spiritual experience when he said, ‘Leave all and follow me.’ This means that man must leave limitations and establish himself in the infinite life of God” (Meher Baba, *Discourses*, 1.20-1).

Outside.

Negation. While nearly all mystical texts assert the positivity and presence of the divine in mystical experience, the texts themselves do this in different ways. Much of the modern scholarship on mysticism has distinguished between those texts that refer to the divine in positive terms (the *via affirmativa*) and those that refer to the divine in negative terms (the *via negativa*). If Augustine represents the former path – via a technique of abstraction whereby one raises up human qualities to their utmost perfection, as in “God is the most good” – then Dionysius the Areopagite represents the latter. As he notes, “the more we take flight upward, the more our words are confined to the ideas we are capable of forming . . . as we plunge into that darkness which is beyond intellect, we shall find ourselves not simply running short of words but actually speechless and unknowing.”⁹ In the negative way, one posits that the absolute transcendence of God cannot be known or named directly. But this negation can take many forms, from privative negations (“God is X,” where X is a creaturely attribute minus its imperfections) to oppositional negations (“God is not-Y,” where Y is some attribute of the created world). There is also a third type of negation, one that negates negation itself. Dionysius hints at this when he notes that “we should not conclude that the negations are simply the opposites of the affirmations,” but instead that a negative negation – or a divine negation – is “beyond privation, beyond every denial, beyond every assertion.”¹⁰ In his Latin works Eckhart echoes this theme, while also indicating the difficulties in thinking divine negation. For him the mystery of the divine Godhead can only be described as a *negatio negationis*, “the negation of negation,” which paradoxically is the “repetition of the affirmation of existence.”¹¹

Silence.

For this issue of *Glossator* we welcome a range of methodologies and approaches. We invite cross-cultural comparisons across different religious and mystical trajectories; analyses of mystical texts in the East and the West; considerations of the relation of historical forms of mysticism to contemporary mystical texts; connections between mysticism and the arts (architecture, sculpture music); as well as reflections on mystical experience from the exceptional to the everyday.

Schedule

1 June 2012: Submission deadline

September 2012: Submissions returned to authors with comments

15 January 2013: Final Submission

1 March 2013: Publication

Abstracts of 300-500 words may be sent to the editors at glossatori@gmail.com

⁹ Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Mystical Theology*, trans. Colm Luibheid, in *The Complete Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 3.1033B.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.1000B.

¹¹ Meister Eckhart, *Commentary on Wisdom*, in *Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher*, trans. Bernard McGinn et al. (New York: Paulist Press), p. 185.