Mysticism and Negative Presence

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Language is a constant source of defeat for the mystic, a temptation to despair, a sign that what he has experienced is beyond communication, which is at the very least frustrating, or worse, an indication that he may not have achieved the hoped-for illumination at all. The weakness of language in general or his grasp of it in particular imparts to the mystic's writing a sometimes becoming, occasionally maddening tentativeness. He speaks apologetically; he warns us against accepting anything he says literally; and when he speaks *figuraliter* he takes refuge in an obliqueness that can only be penetrated by an elevation of spirit equal to his own.

For our time, the *locus classicus* of these difficulties is T. S. Eliot in the *Four Quartets*, or more precisely in the concluding sections, the fifth, of each of the first three *Quartets*. The end of "Burnt Norton" bursts with the terror of a poet seeking utterance for what at least approximates mystical experience and finding no suitable language.

> Words strain,
> Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,
> Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
> Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
> Will not stay still. Shrieking voices
> Scolding, mocking, or merely chattering,
> Always assail them.[1]

At the end of his second attempt, "East Coker," the most personal of the *Quartets*, he confesses a further emptiness, the result of two decades of disappointment and defeat, the "middle" of his "way," the shabbiest of parallels to that midpoint in the journey of his life at which Dante begins the *Commedia*, leaving Eliot still

> Trying to learn to use words, and every attempt
> Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure
> Because one has only learnt to get the better of words
> For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which
> One is no longer disposed to say it.[2]

He calls his equipment "shabby," sees it "always deteriorating," and in the service of an under-

1 T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (New York, 1966), 180.
2 Ibid., 188-89.

standing and an articulation that other men, "whom one cannot hope to emulate," have managed far better. One is left only with "the trying," for the terrible fact is, as he says at the end of "The Dry Salvages," that

> to apprehend
> The point of intersection of the timeless
> With time, is an occupation for the saint—
> No occupation either, but something given
> And taken, in a lifetime's death in love,
> Ardour and selflessness and self surrender.[3]

The virtues, then, are negative and the insights inverted. If there is something to be said of these events, these experiences, these terrors, it is something that is self-deprecating, self-denying, self-emptying. To make the point as clear as a fitful, untrustworthy language will permit, Eliot seizes upon a passage at the end of Chapter Thirteen of Book One of St. John of the Cross's *Ascent of Mount Carmel.* There, John elaborates the advice he had inscribed in his diagram of the mystical way, the ascent of the mountain of perfection which ends at "the summit of union." It is a dialectic of the *via negativa*: in order to arrive at having pleasure in everything, at possessing everything, at being everything, at knowing everything, one must desire to have pleasure in nothing, to possess nothing, to be nothing, to know nothing. And equally, in order to arrive at these supreme points of dispossession one must go by the ways of dispossession: "In order to arrive at that which you are, you must go through that which you are not." And finally, says John, "in order to pass from the all to the All, you must deny yourself all in all [totally]. And when you come to possess it totally, you must possess it without desiring anything."[4]

Is this a kind of self-denial that a poet can practice? Can anyone practice it and still seek to explain anything, even the way of perfection, the ascent of Mount Carmel, which is the way of self-denial? Obviously, John thought something could be said about the nature of self-denial without giving up the practice of self-denial, for he lived the life of the Carmelites of the reform under the tutelage of the reformer herself, Teresa of Avila. He found in the newly ordained austerities a sufficient sweetness to produce his extraordinary poetry, and not only the poetry but that elaborate commentary upon it which makes up his mystical theology. His negations are in the form of counsels and exercises of denial and withdrawal, of purification and denudation, at first active and then passive, moving from the senses to the spirit, but never, even at the highest pitch of his preaching of detachment, altogether separated from a rhetoric of the body. There is, in fact, a sensuality in John, as in all the great mystics who have found their figurative language in the Song of Songs, that only a person as cauterized (to use a central

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3 Ibid., 198.

4 See St. John of the Cross, *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Book I, chapter 13, 10-13, in *The Complete Works of Saint John of the Cross*, trans. E. Allison Peers (Westminster, Maryland, 1953), 59-60.

figure of John's) in the service of the spirit could lift beyond the world of the flesh.[5] But then John never goes beyond anything without going through that thing itself. It is his flesh that is cauterized with a branding iron—however obliquely one understands the burning—to permit him to go with the flesh, through the flesh, beyond it.[6] This much Eliot understands very well, from his own experience, from John's experience: "Only through time time is conquered," he concludes at the finish of the long meditation which is part two of "Burnt Norton." "Not fare well," he says in his extraordinary appropriation of the exhortation of Krishna to Arjuna in the *Bhagavad-Gita*, which is part three of "The Dry Savages," "Not fare well," he says, "But fare forward, voyagers."[7]

As one goes through the flesh to get beyond the flesh, and through time to overcome time, so must one use language to transcend language. The procedure is almost exactly that which Wittgenstein sums up in the penultimate proposition of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*:

> 6.54
>
> My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up on it.)
>
> He must surmount these propositions; then he sees the world rightly.

Any mystic who has written about what purports to be mystical experience must accept the good sense of this dark saying: one climbs up on the language, through it, with it, and then throws it away. One may even accept some of the underlying propositions of Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*:

> 6.432
>
> *How* the world is, is completely indifferent for what is higher. God does not reveal himself *in* the world.

Or:

> 6.45
>
> The contemplation of the world *sub specie aeterni* is its contemplation as a limited whole.
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> The feeling of the world as a limited whole is the mystical feeling.

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5 The examples are innumerable; two of the best are the figure of the nursing mother in Book I, chapter 1, of *Dark Night of the Soul* and the elaboration of his allegorization of Song of Songs 1:1 in the Vulgate, *Osculetur me osculo oris sui*, in Book II, chapter 23, 12. See *Complete Works*, 452-53.

6 See poem III (in the Sanlucar Codex numbering), preferably in the Spanish, which makes the strength and thoroughness of the branding clear in a way none of the translations into English quite reproduces. Most of the translations are available in bilingual editions, e.g., those by Willis Barnstone, Roy Campbell, and John Frederick Nims; the Peers, in the *Complete Works*, is without the original text.

7 See Eliot, *Collected Poems*, 178, 195-97.

Or, most important for an understanding of the *via negativa* functions of language:

> 6.522
> There is indeed the inexpressible. This *shows* itself; it is the mystical.

and thus the final negation, with which the *Tractatus* exhausts the logic of language:

> 7
> Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.[8]

To achieve that silence, however, one must not merely talk; one must be garrulous. The inexpressible—Wittgenstein's *Unaussprechliches*—requires, to begin with, a speaking out. One never discovers the ineffable until one has exhausted the effable; the point of the limitless is limitation. Thus Dante stops at the end of the *Purgatorio* because the space—the actual pieces of paper—ordained for the second part of the *Commedia* is full and the limitations of art will not allow him to go further:

> ma perchè piene son tutte le carte
> ordite a questa cantica seconda,
> non mi lascia più ir lo fren dell'arte.
> *Purg.* XXXIII, 139-41

Having achieved the powers of this asceticism, knowing the limits of art, he can transcend them; he can notate his silences and make his soundless litany of light entirely audible to the ear that can hear. When he says, at the end of that litany, in the last lines of the *Paradiso* and of the *Commedia* itself, that at this point, the still point in a turning universe, power failed the great vision, we believe him. We have approached the limits with him, we have seen the limits, we have all but crossed them. We have no difficulty believing, in exactly the way one believes in a religious doctrine, that his desire and will, turning round and round like a wheel going at a fixed speed, were set in perfect motion by the love that moves the sun and the other stars:

> All'alta fantasia qui mancò possa;
> ma gia volgeva il mio disio e 'l velle,
> sì come rota ch' igualmente è mossa,
> l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle.
> *Par.* XXXIII, 142-45.

Dante's *Paradiso* is a voyage to the limits, the limits of art, the limits of human experience, the limits of language as a means of expressing the experience. Like Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* and John of the Cross in the counsels of perfection of the *Ascent*, Dante has dis-

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8 See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus-Logico-Philosophicus* (London, 1955), 186-87, 188-89, with the German and English on facing pages.

covered mystical feeling in his apprehension of the world as a limited whole (*als begrenztes Ganzes*). What he discovers at that point is not a void, not the absurd in the modern sense, but a presence—a negative presence. The appropriate conclusion for the *Commedia* is an open—but not an empty—space, a blank page as the printer might see it, but not an unfilled page as the mystic would understand it or as a reader who has gone beyond the letter, the allegory, and the tropological direction of the Paradiso should understand it. For this is *anagoge*, this is the elevation of the spirit promised by Dante in his dedication of the third cantica to Can Grande della Scala.[9]

We can see the elevation as the result of grace, if we want to make merely doctrinal discriminations about the *Commedia*, and thus reduce the number of those who achieve it to the ranks of those in a state of grace. We can gather some sense of the presence that closes off speech and gathers Dante, and presumably those who follow him, into the motions of eternity and the stillness of the *Unaussprechliches*, with the aid of the systematizers of the mystical, such as John of the Cross, and the grammarians of epistemology, such as Wittgenstein. In either case, our understanding would be truncated if we made the leap, or more precisely, attempted the leap into the universe, or the universal, without a very long pause at the level of the concrete. We must find ourselves in that concrete negative presence, which is the only certain presence, at the end of the *Paradiso*; or at the top of Mount Carmel; or at point seven in the *Tractatus*; or even in the language-game speculations of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, though they may seem to be diametrically opposed in concept and performance to the method and content of the *Tractatus*. Certainly it is the concrete with which the mystics leave us at the end of their bouts with language and negative presence. The concrete presence that we know—and that we know we know—in the works of the mystics is always the negative, and that seems to be true whether the mystic is a self-proclaiming kind of person who pushes and pushes at himself to the very bounds of self-assertion, or a self-demeaning type whose struggles take him to the outside limits of abnegation.

The extreme point of negation is the point of transformation. At that point the concrete is exhausted. One has reached the apogee of contemplation of oneself-in-the-world or of an object-in-the-world. Surely that is what "presentness" means in Plotinus, where the *nous* becomes accessible to us and all sense of spatial and temporal dimension falls away. Plotinus brings us, as human beings, into full contemplation of the immutable Intelligence (*nous*) by means of our ecstatic exploration of the world of our senses. We see, hear, touch, taste, smell everything in order to pass beyond things, to leave them behind, even as the *nous* must eventually in its own ecstasy get beyond itself, leave itself, negate itself (in a manner of speaking), if it is to get hold of the One, from which it emanates.

The same point is reached in the paradoxical language of Pascal in his *Mémorial*. There he specifies as exactly as he can the time of the remarkable experience the document commemorates, complete as to clock time, calendar day, and place in the Roman Martyrology, both the feast day just ending and the one being anticipated:

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9 See *Le Opere di Dante Alighieri*, ed. Paget Toynbee (Oxford, 1924), *Epistola* X, 414-20.

> In the year of grace 1654
> Monday 23 November, feast of St. Clement, Pope and Martyr,
> and others in the Martyrology.
> Vigil of St. Chrysogonus, Martyr, and others.
> From about half past ten in the evening until about half
> past twelve.
> Fire
> God of Abraham, God of Issac, God of Jacob,
> not of the philosophers and scholars.
> Certitude, certitude; feeling, joy, peace.
> God of Jesus Christ.
> *My God and Thy God.*
> Thy God shall be my God.
> Forgetfulness of the world and of all save God.
> He is to be found only by the means taught in the Gospel.
> Greatness of the human soul.[10]

In the great "Fire," which must stand by itself as the mark of the experience, all is consumed. The concrete moment when Pascal attained "Forgetfulness of the world and all save God" and perceived the "Greatness of the human soul" is memorialized. That occurrence of negative presence meant so much to Pascal as concrete evidence of what had happened that he sewed into the lining of his doublet both his first quick notation of the *Mémorial* and a fine copy of it on parchment.

We may not always examine our knowledge of mystical experience, or of the way in which mystical experience is presented as a kind of knowledge, in terms of the negative. We may reserve for the categories of the negative those mystics, or putative mystics, who deliberately affect the rhetoric and the logic of the *via negativa*. But sooner or later we must come to formulate our understanding of what we call the mystical, or our understanding of someone else's understanding, in this way. To some extent, all the problems that turn upon the language of mysticism turn upon the negative. All that we can say—all that can be said—is what we cannot say—what cannot be said. What we seek is the unutterable and if we find it, what we say we have found is—unutterable. What is more, we can only approach the positive, the affirmative, can only achieve some sense of an ultimate reality, through the negative, whether we start by affirming and wind down to negation or move from the lowest level of the negative—of denial—up to some adumbration, at least, of the meaning of—and here again we must use negative terms to say anything worth saying—the opposite of meaninglessness. The language (slightly modernized) of the fourteenth-century English paraphrase of the Pseudo-Dionysius, *Denis Hid Divinity*, is incomparable here:

> And eftsoons by the means, from the highest to the last, and from the last to the highest again, we fold all together and do them away, that we may clearly know that unknowing the which is walled about from all knowable powers in all these

10 This is about half the text of the *Mémorial*. For the complete text, see *Oeuvres de Blaise Pascal*, ed. Leon Brunschvicg et al (Paris, 1904-14), xii, 5.

> being things; and that we may see that sovereign-substantial darkness, privily hid from all light in these being things.[11]

Eventually, in this contest with language in which light can only be found in darkness and knowledge in a cloud of unknowing, one must come to the compendious summation of the Pseudo-Dionysius in his *Mystical Theology*, that marvelously brief and quick-witted but not unsolemn assertion of what Divinity is not. The central points are made in the concluding litany of the concluding chapter, the fifth, which is no more than a medium-length paragraph *in toto* and comes to its breathtaking last words as quickly as possible in order to make clear that what is most clear is that nothing can be altogether clear in this area, including these words:

> It is not knowledge or truth; nor is It kingship or wisdom; nor is It One, nor is It unity, nor is It Godhead or Goodness; nor is It a Spirit, as we understand the term, since It is not Sonship or Fatherhood; nor is It any other thing such as we or any other being can have knowledge of; nor does It belong to the category of non-existence or to that of existence; nor do existent beings know It as It actually is, nor does It know them as they actually are; nor can the reason attain to It to name It or to know It; nor is It darkness, nor is It light, or error, or truth; nor can any affirmation or negation apply to It; for while applying affirmations or negations to those orders of being that come next to It, we apply not unto It either affirmation or negation, inasmuch as It transcends all affirmation by being the perfect and unique Cause of all things, and transcends all negation by the pre-eminence of Its simple and absolute nature—free from every limitation and beyond them all.[12]

The fourteenth-century language of *Denis Hid Divinity* says it best of all, perhaps, in its simple, blunt, colloquial way:

> For the perfect and singular Cause of all must needs be without comparison of the most high height above all, both setting and doing away. And his not-understandable overpassing is understandably above all affirming and denying.[13]

Of course, the precision of the sixth-century Dionysius's understanding and recension of the grounds of imprecision in the language and thought of mystical theology did not keep him from attempting some statement of what cannot really be stated. Nor did it preclude an attempt at an angelology, with which the world has been enlarging and diminishing its imagination ever since. For it is the Pseudo-Dionysius whose ghostly wit fixed the medieval ununderstanding with the fleshly images of the Seraphim and the Cherubim, the Angels and the Arch-

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11 See *Denis Hid Divinity*, in *The Cloud of Unknowing and Other Treatises by an English Mystic of the Fourteenth Century*, ed. Dom Justin McCann (London, 1936), 268.

12 See Dionysius the Areopagite, *On the Divine Names and the Mystical Theology*, trans. C. E. Rolt (London, 1951), 200-1.

13 See McCann, *Denis Hid Divinity*, 282.

angels, the Thrones and the Dominations, the Principalities and the Powers.

If one accepts the Dionysian imagination at face value, one sees only the most sentimental values in things, attractive values, entertaining values, but inevitably superficial ones—literally on the surface—and therefore without concreteness. For the great strength of the Pseudo-Areopagite's use of figurative language, as in his angelic hierarchy, is to lead his reader by excess and defect, by inversion and subversion, away from surfaces, away from universals, away from abstractions, to concrete particulars. His mystical language is a language that comes from experience and reaches out to experience. One takes what one has—an image, a conception, a name, a counter for an experience—and goes beyond it, transcends it, which is to say, negates it, turns it into something quite different from itself, something quite *other*.

Otherness will not long tolerate abstractions, however much it may demand a vocabulary that is generalized into categories and classes of being. We do not know otherness until it has passed from categorical essence into existing being, until its name has been fleshed out and its image been brought to earth. Thus Dionysius proceeds and so does John. Thus Dante invents and Jacob Boehme formulates his doctrine of counterstroke and efflux.[14] Thus are produced the extravagances, to the point of a gland-tickling voluptuousness, of the mystics in the Song of Songs tradition. These mystics, in their spectacular concretions, are the original masters of sublimation. But theirs is a sublimation with a reach and an intensity, an awareness of the process of sublimation and an acceptance of it that Sigmund Freud's use of the term does not contemplate.

Sublimation in the language and in the experience of the mystics is a matter of negative presence, not of mere negation or transformation from a lower to a higher plane. It is not the conversion of, say, sexual energy from the flesh to the spirit that is accomplished, but rather that spiritualization of the flesh which for the first time permits the flesh—as the mystic understands it—to be itself wholly and truly. Now the flesh, in this category, is no longer merely in a category; it is particularized, concretized; it has been fully infused, wholly informed with being. And so it is, the mystics seem to be saying, with each of their experiences of concretization: what has been merely one of a multifarious kind, an example, just one more thing in a class of things, now exists for the particularizing, concretizing mystic as something entirely in and of itself; its class ties have been cut, its categorical essence has been forgotten or destroyed in the ritual of inspiriting which is mystical experience; it is entirely present; it has presence. One would not be out of order, perhaps, if one inflected Wittgenstein's words in the *Tractatus* in a special way here: it is not simply the feeling of the world as a *limited* whole that is the mystical feeling, but more importantly the feeling of the world as a limited *whole*. Concreteness that comes as a result of mystical inquiry is exhaustive, a decisive totality. It consumes everything by accounting for everything. Such concreteness is a kind of burnt offering, and in the figurative language of the mystics it is perhaps allowable to say that the burning occurs because a fire that descends from the heavens consumes everything by its total identification of a thing, by its radical particularity, by its presenting the mystic with nothing less than the

14 See Jacob Boehme, *On the Divine Intuition*, chapter 3, in *Six Theosophic Points and Other Writings*, trans. J. R. Earle (Ann Arbor, 1970), with an excellent introduction by Nicholas Berdyaev.

Ding an sich. And like all burnt offerings of this sort, it gives glory to God.[15] That is the point of St. Thérèse of Lisieux's late nineteenth-century "Act of Oblation as Victim of Holocaust to God's Merciful Love." Thérèse goes far beyond the conventional language of self-mortification to identify herself with all victims, past and present, to particularize suffering with love and somehow make it acceptable, to God and man, in its most extravagant particularizations.[16]

The Buddhist configuration of reality offers the same concentration on the particular, on the concrete, though it asserts more openly the distrust of abstractions, of universals, of names as anything more than counters for perceptions that names can never, in themselves, evoke. Thus, in the dialogue between a Buddhist and a Realist, both so called by the ninth-century Nepalese Buddhist Vācaspatimišra, the point is made tersely enough by the Buddhist:

> . . . a (Universal) has never been (really) perceived (by the senses). On the contrary, the thing (really) perceived is the particular, the (extreme concrete and) particular which is alone the ultimate reality (it is the thing in itself shorn of all its extensions). Therefore it (alone) is the efficient cause of sensation, but not the Universal. The (Universal) is bare of any kind of efficiency, it is a spurious (reality).[17]

Names, we are told, do not stand for reality but only for logical constructions; sensations are "unutterable," for if we could really communicate a sensation "we would know what heat is from its name, just as we know it by actual experience, and if we could feel it from its name, cold would disappear (as soon as the word 'heat' would be pronounced)."

What keeps the mystic from being caught up in the Kantian search for the thing-in-itself is his apprehension of negative presence. His achievement of the concrete is ultimately a triumph, with and through the concrete, over the concrete. He comes now to his blank page. Words are finished. Things have receded. There is nothing left to say, for everything has been said. Nonetheless, he will say something; he will say that he has no more to say. Sometimes he will say it by explaining how defeated he is by the inadequacies of language and how close to despair these inadequacies leave him. Sometimes he will say it by narrating the great journey into silence, by inscribing, at whatever length, in whatever degree of obliqueness, his *Commedia*. Sometimes, depending upon the depth of his experience of the concrete, of particularity, of negative presence, he will systematize his own approach to that point of exhaustion where energy really begins by offering a methodology of language, or logic, or the ascent of the ascetical mountain. In every case, he will come at last to that passivity in which it is no longer necessary to complain, to confess, to systematize, to allegorize, or to make sure by the appropriate noises that everyone realizes that he has become silent. He has attained the highest

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15 For some of the special meanings "burnt offering" can have for a writer with mystical inclinations, see R. Abraham b. Isaac ha-Levi TaMaKH, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, ed. and trans. Leon A. Feldman (Assen, 1970), 102-3, original text and translation. The passage deals with Song of Songs 3:10.

16 See Barry Ulanov, *The Making of a Modern Saint: A Biographical Study of Thérèse of Lisieux* (New York, 1966), 227-37.

17 See *Vācaspatimišra on the Buddhist Theory of Perception*, in Theodore Stcherbatsky, *Buddhist Logic* (The Hague, 1958), 2:263-64. See also vol. 1, part 2, chapter 4, "Ultimate Reality" (*paramārtha-sat*).

point of passivity, that degree of submission at which even hope is a meaningless term, for what one has attained one no longer needs to hope for, and love and faith are terms as useless as knowledge and truth and wisdom and all the others in the Pseudo-Dionysius's negative litany. For one who has really experienced the immanence of the transcendent, language must be a constant source of defeat, only now it is no temptation to despair, but the very opposite: everything in it that defeats this mystic is a badge of his triumph.