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TOWARDS A POETICS OF JUSTICE:
Mystical Theology, Kenosis, and Aporia

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A thesis submitted for the degree of Master of Theology

University of Glasgow

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September 2003

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Abstract:

This thesis examines the interaction between mystical theology and social justice, particularly through the tropes of kenosis and aporia. I argue for a poetics of justice modelled on a practice of reading that incorporates both the kenotic and the aporetic. Contemporary literary theory provides a point of intersection for the disparate selection of texts analysed over the course of the essay: through the works of Jacques Derrida, I develop a notion of justice that requires an exegetical openness and interdisciplinarity that focuses on the textuality of mystics, philosophers, and novelists.

The first two sections provide a broad overview of the theoretical foundations of the thesis: Derrida's analysis of justice as a fundamentally aporetic concept is used as a point of departure. Section Three offers an analysis of critical terms used in the course of my investigation. Section Four uses the work of Michel de Certeau, Maurice Blanchot, Dorothee Soelle, and S.T. Coleridge in order to investigate the unique linguistic characteristics of mysticism and their relationship to justice. Section Five outlines the ontological characteristics assumed in this investigation and draws primarily on the thought of Jean-Luc Marion. Section Six uses Elaine Scarry's work to analyse the relationship between aesthetics, mysticism, and justice. Section Seven investigates the works of three major figures of Neoplatonic and apophatic mysticism: Pseudo-Dionysius, the Cloud-author, and Meister Eckhart. Section Eight develops the theme of reading justice as evidenced in the work of Simone Weil and J.M. Coetzee.

Mysticism vanished at its point of origin. Its birth pledges it to the impossible, as if, stricken by the absolute from the very beginning, it finally died of the question from which it was formed – Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992): 77.

I. Introduction

Mystical theology encompasses a vast corpus of texts and writers spanning both centuries and religions; through poetic and often paradoxical use of language, mystics attempt to make God manifest through – and in – the written text itself. Resultantly, language is pressed to its very limits in this drive to express what is fundamentally unsayable. In this essay, I will investigate the ways in which mystic writings contribute to contemporary notions of justice, particularly through a textual approach to kenosis and aporia.

Through the exegetical lens of postmodern theorists and critics (figures such as Jacques Derrida, Maurice Blanchot, Elaine Scarry, and Jean-Luc Marion) whose works discuss topics as divergent as linguistics, theology, literary theory, aesthetics, and legal theory, I will explore topics surrounding theories of justice in contemporary thought. From this theoretical foundation the essay will move into a detailed analysis of three seminal thinkers of the Neoplatonic and apophatic tradition in mystical theology: Pseudo-Dionysius, the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and Meister Eckhart. Following this section I will consider the themes developed earlier in the essay in relation to two twentieth-century figures not normally seen as part of the ‘mystic tradition’: French philosopher and social theorist Simone Weil and South African novelist J.M. Coetzee. Both of these writers, however, are linked in their attention to the cruelties perpetrated in the name of various ideologies over the course of the twentieth century and the concomitant need to develop a sense of justice modelled on reading. That is to say, the idea of ‘reading justice’ is deployed variously in their works as a programme that prevents the totalising impulse of ideology from taking root; totalitarianism is avoided through constantly and continuously refining the readings of justice we produce.

Consequently, it is this theory of *reading* justice that will run throughout this essay. My focus will be on the textuality of the writers discussed; I will concentrate on the ways in which reading itself functions in mysticism. Through this, I aim to establish a poetics of justice that centres on the necessary gaps in and incompleteness of our knowledge. The notion of the aporetic moment that is crucial in Derrida’s work

on justice provides a bridge between theories of language and mystical texts that constantly falter on the edges of discourse and understanding. Another crucial term that will be present throughout my argument is the concept of kenosis that stems from Philippians¹: God's self-emptying gesture in the Incarnation and Crucifixion. This kenotic movement is echoed throughout the Christian mystic tradition; it is connected to the argument here by providing an unattainable model of both justice and selfhood. The texts I use in the course of my argument aim to school their audience in a kenotic form of reading; we are taught, in a sense, of our own limitations: what we do not and cannot know. The kenotic reading instantiated in the reader by the mystic text encourages, through this awareness of incompleteness, an openness to change and a constant desire to restore, renew, and readjust one's readings.

The need for the particular interdisciplinarity of my project thus becomes clear. These themes and strategies are not deployed simply within clear-cut disciplinary – or even chronological – categories. Rather, the thread I wish to trace involves thematic components scattered across both centuries and genres. 'Justice' is a notoriously complex and polyvalent term; in the attempt to unfold a definition of justice and create a space for it to flourish, the many varying resources of our intellectual tradition must be employed. Any lesser effort would run the inevitable risk of having tremendous blind spots in its argument. If, as I intend to demonstrate, the truest way of speaking about justice is through a poetic framework, then I feel it necessary to have an openness towards texts that will allow the different voices of literature, philosophy, mysticism, and critical theory each to speak differently towards a poetics of justice.

The concept of justice as developed in Jacques Derrida's essay 'Force of Law: The "Mystical Foundation of Authority"' provides a starting point for a project that aims to examine the mystical underpinnings of justice and to illuminate the works of medieval mystics in light of contemporary theoretical notions of justice and identity. In a similar movement, in the course of examining contemporary works of philosophy, theology, and literary theory, reference will be made to mystic texts of earlier periods. The interaction of mysticism and justice takes place on many levels; here my goal will be to provide an introductory account of the theoretical issues at

¹ Christ, 'existing in the form of God, counted not the being on equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men' (Phil. 2:6-7, *ASV*)

stake in this project while developing the foundations of a 'poetics of justice' formed through the lens of mystical theology.

A *poetics* of justice – rather than a *theory* of justice – in that my approach will be literary rather than analytic, constructive rather than historical.² In particular, I aim to recover the specifically *creative* properties embedded within the concept of poetics. Seeing *poesis* as an act of creation or conception leads to the essential attribute of creativity that serves to link the varying strands of discourse integrated within this essay. Insofar as God is creator, a theology of eisegesis that itself aims to *create* through poetics (specifically through the acts of reading and writing *per se*) seems a truer approach than an exegesis that goes no further than description and analysis. At the same time, however, instead of proposing any set doctrine or protocol – or solely outlining the meaning of these terms over the course of their historical development – my aim will be instead to develop ways of thinking and writing about justice and creating a literary space in which justice might flourish. In a sense, this approach is closest to the method or outlook of mystical theology itself: mystics often seem to belong more appropriately in the company of poets than of theologians ('theologians' narrowly defined, that is). I aim to establish a framework within which justice might be allowed to appear, not to propose any rigid formulation or fixed definition of justice itself. To a certain degree, this restriction inheres within the very concept of justice as I will be using it: whereas laws must *of necessity* be codified and implemented (in the best of circumstances with reference to a higher cause), justice must remain in a certain sense transcendent, fluid, and unrealised in this world (although only through the failings of the world, not through any incompleteness on behalf of justice as such) in order to be truly worthy of its name.

My approach will be both conceptual and rhetorical. While looking at the content of mystic texts and the themes that they develop in relation to justice, I will also be interested in how their rhetorical structures, the tropes and forms of language

² Raimond Gaita, in his fine study *A Common Humanity: Thinking about Love and Truth and Justice*, draws attention to the importance of this perspective and points the way to a need for a poetics of justice. Although he attempts to formulate a predominantly secular approach to justice, his prime example of 'justice beyond virtue' is the selfless love of a nun he witnessed caring for the mentally ill in his native Australia. 'Philosophers and theologians are, for reasons that go deep into their disciplines, inclined to say that the language of prayer and worship, anthropocentric and often poetic, merely makes moving and therefore psychologically accessible to less than perfectly rational beings, things whose intellectual content is more clearly revealed in the abstract deliverance of theological and philosophical theories. I suspect that the contrary is closer to the truth – that the unashamedly untheoretical, anthropocentric language of worship has greater power to reveal the structure of the concepts which make the nun's behaviour and what it revealed intelligible to us' (23).

they use (particularly their use of metaphor), may also contribute to a poetics of justice. The use of language and rhetoric in mystical texts that I will discuss here, while certainly broadly divergent, nevertheless bears certain similarities that may be analysed just as surely as their descriptions of the divine and their reflections on their own experiences may be discussed within a common interpretive framework. I will treat the mystical texts discussed herein as works with both significant theological content and noteworthy literary and rhetorical tropes.

II. Justice and Mysticism: Introductory Themes

Jacques Derrida writes in 'Force of Law: The "Mystical Foundation of Authority,"' an essay in the collection *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*: 'I think there is no justice without this experience, however impossible it may be, of aporia. Justice is an experience of the impossible. A will, a desire, a demand for justice whose structure wouldn't be an experience of aporia would have no chance to be what it is, namely, a call for justice' (Carlson, Cornell, and Rosenfeld, 16). He here establishes that – past the law's originary establishment of authority before and beyond justice in a moment of violent foundation that must cloak itself in mystical terminology – justice bears within itself, within its call for or towards justice, a structure that bears remarkable similarities to the God of mystical theology, the experience of whom gives rise to the writings by which we know the mystics. The experience of or encounter with aporia is an essential – and, initially, paradoxical – prerequisite for the appreciation and recognition of a structure of justice and the consequent development and implementation of justly authorized laws.

We see the establishment of law's authority as being the first fundamental aporia in the road towards justice. How does a law become authorized? By what process can a law be said to have 'authority'? Who authorizes law, and where does that authority come from? Derrida addresses this moment by asserting that the 'very moment of foundation or institution . . . the operation that amounts to founding, inaugurating, justifying law (*droit*), making law, would consist of a *coup de force*, of a performative and therefore interpretative violence that in itself is neither just nor unjust and that no justice and no previous law with its founding anterior moment could guarantee or contradict or invalidate' (op. cit., 13). Through an aporetic moment of undecideability, without prior constraints or precedents, the law is founded. In a moment anterior to law, justice is as yet amorphous, unformed, undefined. The

violence of its coming into being arises from its need to be authorized in a theoretical landscape from which no authorization can legitimately come. The law must invent its own authority through a call towards justice; 'justice' must provide the authority that the law could never hope to achieve on its own. It is a hesitant, murky moment; Derrida emphasizes its moral ambiguity and indeterminate relationship to justice, properly understood.

This moment of the foundation and authorization of the law, Derrida writes, 'is what I here propose to call the mystical. Here a silence is walled up in the violent structure of the founding act. Walled up, walled in because silence is not exterior to language. It is in this sense that I would be tempted to interpret . . . the mystical foundation of authority' (op. cit., 14). In a silence defined by its lack of language (and thus inevitably caught up in language from the very beginning) the law is founded through an authority that can only be described as mystical. The law's creation seemingly *ex nihilo* brings with it a crisis of justification that can only be resolved through recourse to a mystical silence, a mystical authority that connects the fledgling law to justice. The law must be silent about its own foundation and its tenuous link to justice; this silence of which Derrida is rightly suspicious bears on it the marks of a concealment, an erasure. Its authority has been secured through an originary violence; although its search for authority has come to an end, its relationship with justice is only beginning.

The movement between law and justice becomes clearer when Derrida brings deconstruction into the discussion, writing that although law is deconstructible – because 'its ultimate foundation is by definition unfounded' (op. cit., 14) – 'Justice in itself, if such a thing exists, outside or beyond law, is not deconstructible. No more than deconstruction itself, if such a thing exists. Deconstruction is justice' (ibid.). Here Derrida identifies a crucial distinction: law depends on deconstruction to be just – that is, it must undergo a stringent examination of its own unfoundedness and its own interior self-contradictions and inconstancies in order to have proper authority. Justice, far from being subject to the same scrutiny as law, is instead identified with that process – deconstruction – itself.

He continues, 'deconstruction takes place in the interval that separates the undeconstructability of justice from the deconstructability of *droit* (authority, legitimacy, and so on). It is possible as an experience of the impossible, there where, even if it does not exist (or does not yet exist, or never does exist), *there* is justice'

(op. cit., 15). From an undeconstructable (and hence transcendent, *tout autre*) justice must spring the legitimacy and authority that law depends upon. Through the experience of the impossible – the fundamental aporia of the foundational passage towards justice – law is established. In essence, the law cannot *perform* be utopic, justice always is. ‘True’ justice, in this respect, can never fully ‘exist’ in the same way that law *must* exist. Justice can nevertheless function as a regulatory ideal, a check on the development of law, and a focus for the aspirations of a society; but despite all these derivative manifestations it can never exist fully and truly in the world. The fundamentally aporetic nature of justice must be acknowledged *prior* to the foundation of the law in order to ensure that law is founded on, so to speak, solid ground (although a sturdy foundation for the law, in Derrida’s eyes, would be a foundation that is constantly examining and criticizing its flaws – or even its own unfoundedness). Through the strain of the experience of the impossible and through this consequent aporia the authority of the law is situated and focused. Law must be present and active of necessity – in a word, it must be *enforced*; it can only justify its deeds, however, with a promise that is working towards a justice that will never be achieved – but upon which it depends – and that is, by definition, always beyond the reach of law.

The tenuous and ever-shifting – yet absolutely necessary – relationship between the law and justice is remarked upon by the unnamed magistrate who narrates South African novelist J.M. Coetzee’s work *Waiting for the Barbarians*,³ an account of an unnamed empire’s brutal and unnecessary campaign against ‘barbarians’ outside an unnamed frontier post. The use of a novel in the midst of this analysis of Derrida’s thought provides a substantial point of comparison between theory and practice; the concepts developed in Derrida’s essay are both instantiated and interrogated by Coetzee’s text. This movement between and within genres is a significant component of my project of ‘poetics’: through this conceptual interpenetration of texts, I expect overall to find (and produce) a generative, creative understanding of justice. Questioning the atrocities he sees committed by the military of the Empire, he recalls his sentencing of a young man that deserted in order to flee to his family. “You think you know what is just and what is not. I understand. We all

³ For another perspective on the confrontation of ethical issues through a Derridean lens in South African fiction, see Jeremy Hall’s doctoral dissertation, *Towards a Postmodern Ethics: Representation, Memory, Responsibility* (University of Glasgow, 1999), which includes a detailed and astute analysis of André Brink’s exceptional novel *A Dry White Season*.

think we know.” I had no doubt, myself, then, that at each moment each one of us, man, woman, child, perhaps even the poor old horse turning the mill-wheel, knew what was just: all creatures come into the world bringing with them the memory of justice’ (152). Basic concepts of justice inhere in all humans, the magistrate believes; the clash between this inborn knowledge of justice and the unyielding presence of law is the root both of individual conflict and political upheaval.

The magistrate continues, “[b]ut we live in a world of laws,” I said to my poor prisoner, “a world of the second-best. There is nothing we can do about that. We are fallen creatures. All we can do is uphold the laws, all of us, without allowing the memory of justice to fade.” . . . I remember the uneasy shame I felt on days like that’ (ibid.). Linking the need for law to *replace* justice in this world with the fall from Eden (metaphorical or theological), the magistrate asserts that only the *memory* of justice has a place in deciding upon lawful (rather than just) behaviour. All we can manage in a fallen world is a crude imitation of an originary divine justice. This argument, however, after he witnesses the blatant injustice – but lawfulness – of the Empire, resurrects the uneasiness and shame that that argument left him with.

Derrida claims that justice must be soaked in and immersed in the sense of the impossible – the encounter with and experience of aporia – in order to have legitimate claim to its title and to provide a properly authoritative foundation of the law. Any claim to authority, any foundation of law as a basis for the imposition of force must run up against a gap, a block, an internal and inescapable paradox in order to be able to call authoritatively for a connection to justice. The law must undermine its own authority; it must question the very nature of its own foundation through an experience of internal paradox in order to have any claim to validity. Through this crucible of aporia we might see a justice that is enlightened about its own claims, aware of its own shortcomings and uncertainties, one that is constantly refining itself and readjusting, open to input from all sides. It is through an encounter with this justice that law must be founded. The alternative would be law authorised by a justice without aporia – a justice that has not encountered and experienced the impossible – and which might self-assuredly attempt to be made manifest and complete throughout the world, rather than being hinted and grasped at, rather than serving as an unachievable goal towards which we might always strive. What exactly could be meant by this ‘experience of the impossible’ that is crucial to true justice will be a central focus of the pages to come.

The difficulties of this understanding of justice are made evident in another passage from *Waiting for the Barbarians*. The magistrate, though desiring justice, is at the same time aware of the inevitable impossibilities it involves. After seeing a group of nomads savagely beaten in the town square, he plunges himself between the soldiers and the prisoners and is severely beaten. Afterwards, however, he questions his actions: 'Would I have dared to face the crowd and demand justice for these ridiculous barbarian prisoners with their backsides in the air? *Justice*: once that word is uttered, where will it all end?' (118). What would justice call for, if allowed free reign? What would justice demand, if lived and experienced daily as a guiding principle, a viaticum for properly functioning human societies? He continues: 'Easier to shout *No!* Easier to be beaten and made a martyr. Easier to lay my head on a block than to defend the cause of justice for the barbarians: for where can that argument lead but to laying down our arms and opening the gates of the town to the people whose land we have raped?' (ibid.). The sort of radical transformation that a genuine commitment to justice would entail is beyond the magistrate; he recognizes his protest - although leading to debilitating injury - as being only a partial measure. Justice itself would be an impossibly complex endeavour, immeasurably injurious to the ruling authorities of the Empire. It would be, in a word, impossible.

The experience of the impossible - and the experience of undecideability that comes with an encounter of aporia - is at the very centre of Derrida's conception of justice; mysticism, we will see, must cope with (and depend upon) a similar structural core of impossibility (an analogy might be drawn with the 'necessary contraries' the romantic poets saw in the heart of the deepest truths - as opposed to more straightforwardly contradictory or self-cancelling movements). In that the incommunicable truths of a transcendent deity must be recorded, and that an irreducible understanding of God must be communicated through writing and human language, mysticism has a similar set of problems. In this vein, Derrida writes in the same essay that '[j]ustice remains, is yet, to come, *a venir*, it has an, it is *a-venir*, the very dimension of events irreducibly to come. It will always have it, this *a-venir*, and always has' (Carlson, Cornell, and Rosenfeld, 27). Just as the God of mysticism is always sheathed in unknowing even in His very exposition (and as in the Christian tradition the eschaton is ever awaited with hope, ever yet to come), so too is justice always in a process of becoming - never fully presented, never fully realized or

achieved. Justice is always yet to come; justice is never completely fulfilled in us or in the world. The kingdom of Justice, like the Kingdom of God, is always ever *at hand*.⁴

This, I will argue, is a central component of both mysticism and justice. It is this, the element of the mystical within justice, which keeps it from being subsumed completely into mundane law or stripped bare of its relationship to the *tout autre* and sheathed only in the exercise and control of worldly power. Justice, being always yet to come, always incomplete in this world, and ever still being built, prevents the authority of the law from establishing itself as absolute. It is the recognition that justice is complete and whole in its transcendence, but unfulfilled in us, that facilitates the authorisation of just laws. This *a-venir* (just like the negative, inherent impossibility in the concept of *utopia* - indeed, in the very word itself) at the heart of justice keeps those that would proclaim to be building a new and perfect city of law - the fulfilment of justice - from ever claiming that their work is done. Part of the strength of justice is that it can never be fully accomplished, never wholly realized; it is always a project eternally under construction. Justice must always remain *a-venir*.

The incompleteness of justice described above prevents the totality of one concept or one dominant ideology; it must be recognized that the attempt to make justice fully manifest in the world is at the root of some of the greatest atrocities of contemporary times. A notion of justice grounded in and centred around its ultimate transcendence - as in the Platonic notion of 'forms' only partially realised in this world - can thus be only incompletely imitated in human communities. This system leads to the recognition that we can only ever be moving *towards* an ungraspable perfection. A formulation of justice that would mimic an Aristotelian metaphysics - in which the ideal form is patently *not* transcendent, and instead can be achieved and grasped in this world - might lead, as many horrific moments in the history of totalitarianism have demonstrated, to an unwavering, unreflecting commitment to an ideology of 'justice' at any cost.⁵ A belief that the goals of a perfect society can be completely fulfilled leads inevitably to the attempt to accomplish those goals irrespective of the individual human tragedies that may arise in the process. The movement towards justice should instead be an ever fervent and passionate attempt to

⁴ The Greek term in Mark 1:15 to which I allude allows the description of a state of both presence *and* coming into presence; being and becoming are semantically intertwined.

⁵ See Arendt, Hannah. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1973). This work, in its attempt to see totalitarianism as a novel form of twentieth-century government beyond those anticipated by classical philosophy, sees a branch of the roots of totalitarianism in an acceptance of an Aristotelian metaphysics.

manifest justice more fully – but with the recognition that there is ever more to come, that self-examination and openness to change is vital.

Even more tellingly, Derrida writes: ‘the law is transcendent and theological, and so always to come, always promised, because it is immanent, finite and so already past. Every “subject” is caught up in this aporetic structure in advance’ (op. cit., 36). The law here is portrayed as embodying an aporia: because it is essentially *present* – ‘immanent, finite’ – it is always already passing away. In order to maintain itself, Derrida writes, it is always in need of ‘transcendental’ or ‘theological’ justification – contact with the eternal *a-venir* of justice. If it were to be simply present, immanent without transcendence, it could have no claim to authority; only through seeking constant renewal in the transcendence of justice can it assert itself in the present. This paradox – that the materiality of the law forces it to seek validation in the transcendent – brings us directly to the intersection of mysticism and justice.

In this discussion of the transcendence of the law, Derrida makes extended reference to Kafka’s brief, cryptic parable ‘Before the Law.’ Derrida claims that the ‘being “before the law” that Kafka talks about resembles this situation, both ordinary and terrible, of the man who cannot manage to see or above all to touch, to catch up to the law’ (ibid.). This position, ‘before’ the law in the sense of both time and location, is the originary, foundational moment that must be investigated – here through Kafka’s parable. Although the law is stable, present, and pre-eminently established in the story, the man who is both held fast by the law and ever outside of it, struggles in vain to reach the law and enter into it. The law’s fixity, in this sense, cripples it through inaccessibility as much as justice’s transcendence renders it problematic. One is too high, we might say, the other too low.

Derrida continues, ‘we “touch” without touching this extraordinary paradox: the inaccessible transcendence of the law before which and prior to which “man” stands fast only appears infinitely transcendent and theological to the extent that, so near him, it depends only on him’ (ibid.). In this turn law, as opposed to justice, is ‘theological’ only insofar as it cloaks its own, human foundation in a violence that has the appearance of transcendence. Law’s dependence on man, paradoxically, is the very thing that prevents our unfettered access to it. Its difficulty stems not from its distance or ‘transcendence’ but from its proximity. Derrida concludes this assessment by asserting that ‘the law is transcendent, violent and non-violent, because it depends only on who is before it’ (ibid.). Whereas a system of ethics would ordinarily posit

justice as existing independently from human society – a transcendent goal – Derrida here points out that the law's dependence on human interlocutors gives it a wholly immanent quality.

Significantly, Michel de Certeau also uses Kafka's parable in his introduction to *The Mystic Fable* as an analogy for his writing. Until the final moment of radiant transcendence that appears at the moment of the death of the aspirant to the law – 'until that final hour, the task of writing remains' (1992, 3), de Certeau writes. Struggling with the revelation that his text will contain 'the secret that a book, like Kafka's doorkeeper, keeps without possessing' (op. cit., 13), he questions the possible purpose of writing a history of mysticism: 'Why, indeed, does one write, near the threshold, sitting on the stool mentioned in Kafka's story, unless it is to struggle against the inevitable?' (op. cit., 3). These references to the secrets of mysticism and the secrets of writing itself serve to emphasize de Certeau's struggle with language in an attempt to elucidate not only the historical conditions of mysticism, but also more general claims on the linguistic, cultural, and theological status of the mystic.

Frank Kermode ends his work *The Genesis of Secrecy* with a similar allusion. 'World and book, it may be, are hopelessly plural, endlessly disappointing; we stand alone before them, aware of their arbitrariness and impenetrability . . . Hot for secrets, our only conversation may be with guardians who know less and see less than we can; and our sole hope and pleasure is in the perception of a momentary radiance, before the door of disappointment is finally shut on us' (145). A significant common strand between this passage and the quotations of de Certeau given above is the consideration given to the doorkeeper, the incarnate entryway to the hermeneutics of the law or the secret. The victory of interpretation here Kermode claims is 'a momentary radiance': arbitrary and ultimately irrelevant, occurring at the moment of death or expiration – the end of a life or of a text. The goal of hermeneutics, of interpretation, can only ever be an attempt to tease apart strands of meaning in the 'hopelessly plural' text. We are prevented from ever reaching the 'centre' and are kept merely at the outskirts by thuggish, chimerical doorkeepers. The reward is nothing more than a gleam, a momentary glimpse, before the door slams shut permanently.

A significant implication present in each mention of Kafka's tale is that the doorkeeper or guardian is himself not privy to the contents of the secret kept – that entry is given or denied without complete understanding of the situation at hand. And, of course, in the original case entry is only denied and denied repeatedly and

meaninglessly. The only explanation given is that from ‘hall to hall there is one doorkeeper after another, each more powerful than the last. The third doorkeeper is already so terrible that even I cannot bear to look at him’ (174). From this senseless and unthinking deprivation, however, comes the final, ambiguous redemption: that he is able to glimpse towards the end of his life ‘a radiance that streams inextinguishably from the gateway of the Law’ (ibid.). This radiance offers whatever hope there is in the story; it is to this Kermode turns as the only possible reward in the interpretive generation of meaning in texts.

Particularly crucial – and possibly redemptive – here, however, is the ‘hopeless plurality’ of the text that Kermode claims to see as ‘endlessly disappointing.’ I would venture that this claim is somewhat specious or misleading – this dour statement seems at odds with the general thrust of his inquiry. He must, it would seem, see it instead as endlessly provocative or inspiring – or he would likely not go through such pains to undergo the search himself. For our part, we might instead recognize that this hopelessly plural ‘world and book’ spur on our participation in them by reminding us that they are never completely closed. Texts and communities are never completely and unquestionably analysed or understood; they are always willing to go through – indeed, often times require and cry out for – one more round of exegetical inquiry. Although the radiance they offer may be momentary, it is iterable and potentially open to all.⁶

Also significant to this discussion is the specific contribution of mystics to a just involvement of the individual with the community or social context – undoubtedly a crucial concern for any possible analysis of mysticism’s relationship to justice. Although this will be explored in further detail over the course of the analysis of the mystic texts involved in this project, a passage from Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* seems particularly apropos to serve as a theoretical foundation: he writes in §786 of ‘the return of consciousness into the depths of night in which ‘I’ = ‘I’, a night which no longer distinguishes or knows anything outside of it’ which results from ‘the

⁶ Huston Smith’s preface to one of the two Paulist Press editions of Meister Eckhart’s writings (*Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*) closes with an evocative message distantly reminiscent of this parable as well, highlighting the mystic aspect of the tale. After delineating the various tendencies in contemporary spirituality and the growing appeal of the mysticism offered in Zen, Vedanta, and Sufism, he concludes: ‘[n]o task is more important for the Church than to let such persons know that behind its outer doors that are always open stands another that is closed – closed though accessible to those who knock. When it opens, only to close again immediately for this inner door never remains ajar, Meister Eckhart will be among those waiting to welcome those who enter’ (xvi).

painful feeling of the Unhappy Consciousness that *God Himself is dead*' (476). In this dark night of mere self-identification, God is dead; I would hazard that the mystic, filled to overflowing with the presence of God would never be content to lie sedentary in a solipsistic state of self-absorption. The decent into self-identification and the belief that the ego is the end of one's understanding is pictured here in despairing terms. The need for the *tout autre* transcendence of God pushes the ego by necessity beyond this stark and dismal equation. Mysticism invariably, by the very nature of its textuality, must always move beyond itself.

III. Definitions: Mysticism and History

Some preliminary definitions may be appropriate at this stage, particularly regarding how I intend to use the term *mysticism* over the course of this essay. Richard King provides a useful genealogy of the term in *Orientalism and Religion*, asserting that 'the modern academic study of mysticism began in earnest towards the end of the nineteenth century. The term "mysticism" derives from the same time period' (7). Although the idea of the mystical certainly boasts a longer lineage than this,⁷ the idea of 'Christian mysticism' is a relatively recent one; any attempt to create a 'mystic canon' or the like is necessarily a retrospective and fairly contemporary project. Thus in using this term we must be certain to acknowledge its historicity, even as we attempt to make it relevant to texts spanning many centuries.

In general when talking about mysticism I will be referring to a set of theological writings that draw on a direct revelation of divine truth or a consciousness of divine presence for their authority and inspiration. My argument will focus on the apophatic and Neoplatonic tradition: writers such as Pseudo-Dionysius, the Cloud-author, and Meister Eckhart. Figures not traditionally considered mystics, but who use

⁷ The concept of the 'mystic' can trace its origin in the terminology of Greek mystery cults in vogue at roughly the same time as the emergence of Christianity. In this context it refers to the mysteries or secret practices of each particular cult (the Greek root meaning 'to shut' – presumably one's eyes or mouth); the 'mystes' were those initiated into the group and were vowed to silence or secrecy regarding the central rites of the cult. See Amy Hollywood's *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 146-8. Richard King in *Orientalism and Religion* also draws attention to the tripartite role of mysticism in the early Christian church: a biblical sense relating to 'the idea of a mystical hermeneutic of scripture – that is, an understanding of the biblical message rooted in allegorical interpretation,' a liturgical sense that focuses on 'the liturgical mystery of the Eucharist – the timeless communion with the divine,' and finally mysticism as a spiritual or contemplative phenomenon centred around 'a contemplative or experiential knowledge of God' (15). These three interpenetrating uses of the term will find resonance throughout the mystical tradition, particularly in late antiquity and the medieval period, and it is important to take notice of their myriad points of contact.

language and tropes reminiscent of and related to some mystical texts, such as novelist J.M. Coetzee, philosopher Simone Weil, and poet Edmond Jabès, will also have a place in this project. Both the cataphatic and apophatic paths, however, are typified by an intense questioning of their own authority: they contain a constant search for legitimacy coupled with an understanding that language can never adequately describe a transcendent God.

In the attempt to remedy this inevitable flaw, mystics turn to extraordinary rhetorical and poetic variations in language - in particular a rich and allusive use of metaphor. It is these instances of language that I will be analysing in the course of this study of 'mysticism'. Metaphor provides, in essence, an openness in language: it is language that is corrective and language that can be corrected, endlessly variable and endlessly being adjusted. To put it another way, it is a form of language that strives to make manifest an intangible referent, yet is ever aware that it can function 'only' as metaphor. Nothing is absolute in metaphor, but the goal is always to bring into being a -- non-realizable -- absolute. It is a language which is constantly under negotiation, constantly being interpreted and reinterpreted. In metaphor, the referent is both already present and always just arriving.

In this framework, the logic of a project involving both postmodern theory and medieval mysticism becomes clear. If postmodernism can be considered, to a degree, an attack on the Enlightenment privileging of the individual subject, then mystical theology offers a glimpse at a pre-Enlightenment way of viewing theology before the privatisation of the mystic. We are given access not to an irrational or non-rational worldview, to be certain, but undoubtedly one which rejects many of the totalities of Enlightenment thought. Medieval mysticism allows an understanding of theology not centred on statements of individual belief, but rather proposes a participatory and community-oriented theology centred on interpretation and exegesis of the complexities of mystic language. Postmodernism and mysticism are allies, then, in seeking cracks and discontinuities in the once-stable façade of language and metaphysics and in the Enlightenment privileging of the rational and independent subject -- this attention to fractures is, ironically, the continuity and link between these discourses that I will bring to bear in the course of this essay.⁸

⁸ Amy Hollywood, for instance, in her study *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History*, traces the influence of female affective mystics on twentieth-century intellectual figures such as Georges Bataille, Jacques Lacan, and Luce Irigaray. This recent work demonstrates, in

I will also follow the premise developed in Don Cupitt's *Mysticism After Modernity* that mystical works are principally bodies of *texts* rather than simply a report of experiences.⁹ To put it another way, the central thrust of this analysis will assume that mysticism is a *textual* rather than *experiential* phenomenon. If a mystic is going to have legitimacy or influence on a religious or exegetical community – as all mystics whose texts remain to us inevitably must, at least to some degree – their *writings* and not their experiences are the critical component of their influence (and the inevitable basis for scholarship on mysticism). A 'mystical experience' – although certainly meaningful, and just as certainly the driving force behind many mystical texts – is in and of itself unverifiable and of no practical use to the theologian or the historian. It is the texts left behind by mystics that then enter into a discourse, theological or historical, and allow us to enter into discussion with their thoughts.

Mark McIntosh provides a succinct summary of this relationship between text and experience: 'whether mystical texts are abstract in tone or more experiential in imagery, their intentionality as *mystical* texts is towards the hidden reality of God's encounter with humanity. The movement of interpretation, therefore, is not backwards towards a putative experience behind the text, but forwards into reflection on the structure of that new world of divine-human encounter that is being opened up between the text and the reader' (142). McIntosh argues here against an attempt to decipher whatever 'experience' of the divine the mystic might lay claim to; rather, he asserts that it is the hermeneutical relationship of the text to a community of readers, exegetes, and believers that gives a significance to a study of mysticism. This notion that the interpretive thrust must be towards the reworking of the world on the basis of the text's report of divine-human interaction is central to my analysis; it is the movement of interpretation that I will employ in the pages to come.

Particularly useful in Richard King's analysis of the genealogy of *mysticism* is his account of the privatisation and marginalisation of religion after the

part, the significant amount of work to be done on this connection between the medieval (and, in particular, mystical) and the postmodern.

⁹ Although I by no means support what I see as a theorisation of mysticism opposed to the ultimate transcendence of God, I nevertheless have sympathy for Cupitt's attempt to emphasise the specifically *linguistic* aspects of mysticism, particularly as a springboard for academic study (if not for worship or belief). Cupitt articulates what he considers a 'third view' of mysticism beyond materialism and idealism: 'why not start from the movement of language, picturing it as moving along the frontier between the mind and the world? Then we can treat the material world as a construct on the outer surface of language, and the world of mind as a construct on the inner surface of language. Surely that will lead to a better and more complete picture than is given by either idealism or materialism?' (7).

Enlightenment: he claims that ‘the “religious” and the “political” are not separate realms in reality. The separation of the two is an Enlightenment assumption that I do not accept’ (14). Especially relevant here is his assertion that ‘the privatization of mysticism – that is, the increasing tendency to locate the mystical in the psychological realm of personal experiences -- serves to exclude it from political issues such as social justice’ (21). Clearly, this privatisation of mysticism will not have a place within the context of this essay; instead, I will seek to demonstrate the ways in which mystic texts, through various interpretive channels, encourage an even greater participation in the world and an even stronger dedication towards social justice. In the myriad texts in the mystic tradition, both apophatic and cataphatic, one finds that the predominant desire of the mystic is to communicate the central themes and concepts of his or her work to as wide an audience as possible; the text is written to be transmitted, to provide counsel or solace to as many as can read or hear it be read. Not only the content of the text, but its own textuality encourages this: a continuous textual tradition requires scribes or, later, printers, willing to further the text’s transmission, a hermeneutic community to receive and analyse or apply the concepts of the text, and a participatory involvement of a faith community in the text. Furthermore, many mystics chose to write in their vernacular during periods when Latin was the dominant and established language of theological discourse; this act itself shows a desire for a communal participation in the mystic text.

Mark McIntosh points to mysticism as a contemporary intersection between spirituality and theology.¹⁰ The essential dilemma for religious belief in postmodern times, he asserts, is that ‘theology without spirituality becomes ever more methodologically refined but unable to know or speak of the very mysteries at the heart of Christianity, and spirituality without theology becomes rootless, easily hijacked by individualistic consumerism’ (10). Theology in its most reified form, McIntosh argues, loses touch with the essential mysteries upon which Christianity is based; its attempt to categorise and analyse leads to an over-secure self-satisfaction that is odds with the ultimate mystery and unknowability of God. Spirituality, on the

¹⁰ In using the term *spirituality* here, I defer to Philip Sheldrake’s comprehensive and well-researched account of the word’s meaning in the history of Christian thought, found in *Spirituality and History: Questions of Interpretation and Method* (New York: Crossroad, 1992): 32-56. Suffice it to say here that although there is a significant breach between the term’s earlier uses and those of the past three decades, the unifying thread is a focus on the importance of the individual experience or awareness of the transcendent (originally in the Christian context, in the form of the Spirit) and on the relationship of theology to the practice of everyday life.

other hand, notoriously offers quick solutions to postmodern problems without commitment, stability, or continuity. The implication is clear: that contemporary society has divorced theology from spirituality (most often in favour of the latter); McIntosh sees in the Christian mystical tradition a corpus of texts that could rehabilitate this present-day gap. Mystical theology adds a depth and a history to what could otherwise become groundless, uncommitted spirituality. By the same token, mysticism calls theology to task and prevents it from becoming disconnected from the mystery inherent at the centre of a belief in an unknowable and transcendent God.

Usefully in this context, he reports that 'spirituality calls theology to an honesty about the difficulty of understanding what is unfathomable . . . an openness to what is never a puzzle to be solved but always a mystery to be lived' (15). In this dichotomy, spirituality prevents reified theology's claim to knowledge from being absolute, keeping it from overlooking the unknowable *tout autre* that is God. This resonates strongly with the discussion of Derrida above: mystical theology does not seek to iron out all the kinks in knowledge, but instead allows those flaws to resonate within a self-referential language that is always aware of how it must falter and fail the nearer it comes to reaching God. McIntosh's description of mystical theology is acutely aware of the necessity of this 'openness to . . . a mystery to be lived'.

In his work *Love, Power and Justice*, Paul Tillich explores a justice beyond 'tributive'¹¹ justice' or 'proportional justice' (which is concerned with an equitable distribution of goods and resources). He terms this elevated concept 'transforming' or 'creative' justice. Of this he writes, 'it is based on the fact to which I have already referred that the intrinsic justice is dynamic. As such it cannot be defined in definite terms, and therefore the tributive justice is never adequate to it because it calculates in fixed proportions' (64). That is, justice concerned solely with doling out appropriate quantities of tribute can only ever remain a static force. Justice calls for something more active and dynamic, because 'one never knows *a priori* what the outcome of an encounter of power with power will be. If one judges such an encounter and its outcome according to previous power proportions, one is necessarily unjust, even if one is legally right' (64-5). The necessary indeterminacy of power relations in every moment prior to their actualisation requires a justice dynamic and creative enough to conform to ever-changing situations. The meaning and implementation of justice is

¹¹ Tillich coins this neologism to describe the amalgam of distributive and retributive justice.

always relational and fluid, always being negotiated in response to the varying particulars of the world. Along these lines Derrida adroitly points out that ‘there is an *avenir* for justice and there is no justice except to the degree that some event is possible which, as an event, exceeds calculation, rules, programs, anticipations, and so forth’ (Carlson, Cornell, and Rosenfeld, 27). Justice is *necessarily* that which does not, cannot take everything into account or assume to understand precisely, in advance, the outcome of variegated power relations. Instead, justice demands an *avenir*: a sense that history has not yet been worked out and that there are events, outcomes, and power relations that are unpredictably still to come.

IV. Language and Mysticism: Metaphor and Paradox

The language of mysticism is perhaps its most intriguing feature: mystics are constantly using variations in language to press their observations towards a linguistic breaking point. Mystic language is always aware of its own inadequacies; it constantly struggles with paradoxical and unstable ways to express the inexpressible. One particular astute work on this topic is Michel de Certeau’s *The Mystic Fable*, which places significant emphasis on the rhetorical changes heralded in sixteenth and seventeenth century mysticism; his work evokes the structural and linguistic shifts that take place in works of mystical theology. For all the earlier discussion in this essay of words *about* mysticism, about the definition *of* mysticism, it is now important to look at broad theoretical issues surrounding the language of mysticism *per se*. We must examine the various facets of its particular linguistic quirks and idiosyncrasies in order to see how these might eventually contribute to our understanding of mysticism and justice.

In a discussion of Saint John of the Cross, de Certeau remarks of the use of oxymoron – by bringing together opposites, this trope ‘is a deictic: it shows what it does not say. The combination of the two terms is substituted for the existence of a third, which is posited as absent. It makes a hole in language’ (1992, 143). This particular brand of mystic speech punctures language; it makes us aware that a paradoxical combination of two terms meant to bring about the presence of a third allows for a speech riddled with contradictions, filled with difficulties to be pieced together and repaired. He continues, ‘It roughs out a space for the unsayable. It is language directed toward non-language . . . In a world taken to be entirely written and spoken, therefore “lexicalizable,” it opens up an absence of correspondence between

things and words' (ibid.). A world that once made sense, a world in which words and things once neatly slotted together, is torn apart by the mystic utterance; mystic speech presses forward and allows concepts to be developed for which corresponding words do not yet exist. The link to the description of metaphor in the pages above is clear: this use of oxymoron in the work of Saint John of the Cross that de Certeau analyses points towards 'the unsayable,' towards that which cannot be fully articulated yet exists – and is striven towards – all the same. It is perhaps through the aporetic articulation of this unsayable locution that a sense of being can be developed in a space unconstricted by verbal or cultural definitions; 'Being' in a Heideggerian sense could then unfold without qualification.

De Certeau sees 'the wounded word as the standard unit of mystic speech' in that 'an original split makes the "ontological" statement, which would be the "said" of the intended thing, impossible' (op. cit., 144). The essential element of mystic speech described here is 'the wounded word,' the word that bears within itself the fatal wound of its own impossibility. It is the Saussurean signifier without ontological rooting in a signified – or rather, it *is* ontologically rooted, but only ever in the transcendent, indescribable, unreachable divinity. Mystic speech produces an inner referentiality that gives it a textual self-rootedness. There is a dual motion of the mystic word: inward and outward. Outward towards an unreachable divinity, as mentioned above, but inward towards the referent that it produces within itself, the referent which inheres within the language of the text as such. The mystic makes possible and realised that to which access ought to be impossible – God made manifest within the very text that sought merely to describe Him. This is the tear, the splice, and the self-inflicted wound of mystic speech. It is as impossible as speaking about justice.

Language is stretched to its breaking point in an attempt to reach beyond itself, beyond self-referentiality. 'The mystic phrase escapes that logic [of the ontological statement] and replaces it with the necessity of producing nothing more in language than effects relative to what is not in language. What must be said cannot be said except by a shattering of the word. An internal split makes words admit or confess to the mourning that separates them from what they show' (ibid.). Mystic speech here, rather than pointing within itself, can only point outside of language and outside of discourse; all this understandably, de Certeau explains, cannot take place without 'a shattering of the word.' This wounding and shattering of language within mysticism,

this endless yearning for a referent that can only transcend language's attempt to encapsulate it, results in the language's mourning its own failure to signify.

De Certeau's closing remarks on mystical language come after a discussion of a twentieth-century writer, Catherine Pozzi, in 'Overture to a Poetics of the Body,' the closing chapter of *The Mystic Fable*. 'Echoes of Christine Pozzi's poems can be heard in the most varied historical settings. A thousand-year-old tradition, that mystic poetics passes from place to place and age to age' (op. cit., 298). He writes that this voice is 'a game of surprises, driftings, fugues in all directions, but also the meeting place where "I" returns to lose itself in that crowd that is, with neither name nor face, the presence of "you"' (ibid.). This movement of the self into otherness is a critical component of his understanding of the mystical; the dissolution of selfhood is a crucial facet of many mystical texts. This movement will be explored later in greater depth, particularly regarding its possible contribution to the poetics of justice outlined above.

De Certeau closes with a deployment of the mystic as pilgrim; he writes on the sense of geographic displacement heralded by the mystic text. 'He or she is mystic who cannot stop walking and, with the certainty of what is lacking, knows of every place and object that it is *not that*; one cannot stay *there* nor be content with *that*. Desire creates an excess. Places are exceeded, passed, lost behind it. It makes one go further, elsewhere. It lives nowhere' (op. cit., 299). Mystics are here described as eternal vagabonds: desirous of truth, ever unsatisfied and discontented by present conditions, always moving towards the Good without ever reaching it. Mysticism is an exercise in necessary impossibility. De Certeau's claim here resonates with the earlier introductory discussion of mysticism: the mystic must continually be moving, readjusting, improving, and negotiating. Mysticism as formulated here teaches us to be discontent with 'every place and object' and to recognise the present world as insufficient, as transitory. We must learn to see in the given world and text a lack in order that we might be constantly yearning and striving 'for a further union, a deeper communion,' as T.S. Eliot writes in 'East Coker.' *Always* a dissatisfaction for the present deployment of justice, *always* a yearning towards and a dedication to a more just future.

Maurice Blanchot's text *The Work of Fire* offers a similar attention to the role of language in poetry: 'we feel and sometimes regret that poetry, far from reconciling the elements of language, puts infinity between them, to the point where we have to

believe that the words it uses have no meaning whatsoever, and the meaning it aims for remains beyond all words' (53). This type of writing, Blanchot implies, engenders in us a reaction that points not only beyond the words used, but also beyond any potential system of signification. Poetic language here is that which, by putting infinity between the signifier and signified, opens up a realm of endless interpretation and negotiation. 'Poetry, by the tearing apart it produces, by the unbearable tension it engenders, can only want the ruin of language; but this ruin is the only chance it has to be fulfilled, to become whole in broad daylight' (ibid.). Again we see the language of wounding and tearing used earlier in de Certeau's discussion of mystic speech; similarly, just as in de Certeau, this self-destruction of language is paradoxically its only possible salvation or fulfilment.

In another essay in the same volume, Blanchot writes: '[t]hat which is [language's] power of representation and signification creates a distance, an emptiness, between things and their name, and prepares the absence in which the creation takes shape. Naturally, the single word is nothing but the beginning of a shift, since, by its meaning, it makes present anew the signified object whose material reality it had removed' (64). Here we see a further development in his formulation of the emptiness of language: this very self-emptying or kenosis is a linguistic prerequisite for the creation of meaning. Similarly, he writes that words, regarding their referents, 'show it to us and yet they have disappeared; they no longer exist, but they always exist behind the thing that they make us see, and that is not the thing in itself but only the thing arising from words' (49). This evocative account of the process of linguistic description lends itself neatly to the discussion of metaphor begun in the previous section. Words work to evoke images of their referents even as they are subsumed by those very images; at the same time, Blanchot acknowledges the contingency of what language produces. We are not given the 'thing itself' in any pure state; rather, we are presented only with a linguistic creation, a simulacrum.

In his *The Statesman's Manual*, Samuel Taylor Coleridge provides a provocative account of the use of symbolic language in the scripture, writing that language's products 'are the living *educts* of the Imagination' which give birth 'to a system of symbols, harmonious in themselves, and consubstantial with the truths, of which they are the *conductors*' (29). That is to say, through the creative process language itself is able to draw out a semiotic system which becomes of one substance with the truth that they both produce and contain. The result, he writes, is that 'the

truths and the symbols that represent them move in conjunction and form the living chariot that bears up (for *us*) the throne of the Divine Humanity' (ibid.). Language, Coleridge here conveys, is the medium through which a sense of Neoplatonic ascent towards the divinity can be realised. The structures of language which mankind inhabits yield a system that is consubstantial with the truths of a society.¹² A symbol, he asserts, is 'the translucence of the Eternal through and in the Temporal. It always partakes of the Reality which it renders intelligible; and while it enunciates the whole, abides itself as a living part in that Unity, of which it is the representative' (30). In other words, the symbolic language of theology *per se* must, to be considered fully consummated, participate in and partake of the divine in order to communicate properly its concepts. In this sense, then, is the language of the mystics both consubstantial with and procreative of its referent.

This paradoxical movement of language, both kenotic and procreative, is further developed through Hegel's concept of 'picture-thought' – A.V. Miller's translation of the German *Vorstellung*, a term that can have meanings as various as *imagination, vision, idea, or perception*. In this 'picture-thinking' comes 'the self-abasement of the divine Being who renounces his abstract and non-actual nature' (470) or, as the J.N. Findlay's analysis succinctly puts it, 'God as a picture must die so that God as a thought may live' (589). This transformation in thought about God in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* heralds a reconsideration of the language of theology as *necessarily* both kenotic (and perhaps even self-deprecating or self-cancelling) and procreative or generative; to follow this through to its end, the language of theology and mysticism can claim to be generative precisely *because* it is kenotic.

Dorothee Soelle's *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance* also contains a useful account of the nature of mystic speech. She refers to 'frequent repetition, use of the comparison, hyperbole, negation, antithesis, and paradox' (64) as being key features of the language of mystical theology. She quotes a passage of Mechtild von Magdeburg's *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* as an example, then provides this astute analysis. 'This cataract of words breaks loose without ifs or buts, without whys or wherefores, a cascade of metaphors that accelerates in speed and in the passion of

¹² It is in this sense, for instance, that Shelley's famous assertion in the 'Defense of Poetry' rings true. Through their writings, poets serve as the unacknowledged legislators of the language a society uses. Their creative processes define and adapt the uses and limits of the language in which a society thinks, moves, and manifests itself. Through the mediation of this linguistically procreative act, poets in turn legislate, albeit obliquely, a society's horizons of understanding – in effect, its world.

speech. The repetitious constructions . . . rush onward with their paradoxical accentuations . . . It is a language of daring passion that has left behind the terms of time and space, reason and purpose, power and impotence' (65). Mechthild's language is described as pushing language to its very limits; this linguistic experimentation reveals the constant attempt, ever impossible yet ever attempted, to make God present *in* the text itself. This self-abandoning language exceeds its constraints; its use of metaphor, Soelle remarks, leaves behind or exceeds standard metaphysical categories.

Finally, commenting on the apophatic mysticism of Pseudo-Dionysius, Soelle points out the use of negation in mystical speech. His language 'leads into an abstract negation that denies the possibility of conceptual knowledge. This unknowing does not arise from ignorance; it comes to be after knowledge. It creates an unusual dynamic that forever seeks new concepts, words, and images and then discards them as inadequate' (67). Just as metaphor points us towards the inadequacy of language and forces us to re-evaluate and renegotiate terminology and concepts, so too does negation push aside language's claims to certitude, forcing us to realize the contingency – and, ultimately, inadequacy – of concepts, words, and images. More importantly, it also forces us to seek continuously for better or more accurate terminology and reminds us that our theological work is never finished. Tillich succinctly points to this necessary impossibility when he writes that 'to say anything about God in the literal sense of the words used means to say something false about Him' (109).

V. Ontology and Mysticism: God Without Being

In this section I briefly outline the ontological background that will be assumed in the course of this essay. In particular, I follow Jean-Luc Marion's analysis of ontology and theology as explicated in his work *God Without Being*. His description of a non- or supra- metaphysical deity freed from human boundaries and the categories of ontology resonates particularly strongly with the apophatic mystic tradition and will occupy a principal theoretical role in the foundation of this work. In this regard, this section's title is perhaps a bit misleading – although I wish to outline roughly the ontological and theological framework within which I operate, at the same time Marion's work calls for a God which ultimately transcends all categories of metaphysics. For lack of a better alternative to 'ontology,' however, I will let it stand and proceed into an analysis of Marion's thought and its relevance to this project. It is

helpful in this regard to repeat the words of Pseudo-Dionysius in dealing with this problem in *The Divine Names*: '[God] is not a facet of being. Rather, being is a facet of him' (101). Failing to recognize this properly and fully is a constant and particularly insidious danger, particularly in works of philosophical theology. Marion discusses the practical implications of this metaphysical stance in *Prolegomena to Charity*; through the Ascension and its redefinition of 'presence' he makes a claim for the ontological status of the Eucharist and the body of the Church.

Marion's first step in *God Without Being* is to distinguish between manmade concepts of God – which he terms 'idols' – and the genuine irruption of God into the world – the icon. The idol, according to Marion, is caused by mankind's attempt to seek out and define God. As a result, he writes, the idol 'acts as a mirror, not as a portrait: a mirror that reflects the gaze's image, or more exactly, the image of its aim and of the scope of that aim. The idol, as a function of the gaze, reflects that gaze's scope' (1995, 12). The human gaze, directed heavenward, can only ever receive in return a reflection of its own intention, its own predisposition. As the human gaze attempts to see God, it encounters only an invisible mirror that reflects back not God, but an idol.

In a similar vein, Marion criticises what he terms the 'God of the philosophers.' 'When a philosophical thought expresses a concept of what it then names "God," this concept functions exactly as an idol' (op. cit., 16). He is wary of attempts to develop God through the lenses of moral philosophy or ethical theology; he sees in 'conceptual idolatry' an even more pressing – because more subtle – threat to the concept of a God that would transcend all human categories, including that of 'being.' He responds to – and condemns – theological 'proofs' of God's existence. 'Proof uses positively what conceptual atheism uses negatively: in both cases, equivalence to a concept transforms God into "God," into one of the infinitely repeatable "so-called gods." In both cases, human discourse determines God' (op. cit., 33). Even attempts to prove the existence of God, in this light, fall into the category of conceptual idolatry.

Marion develops the concept of the icon in opposition to the idol: the icon 'does not result from a vision but provokes one' (op. cit., 17), he writes. 'Far from the visible advancing in search of the invisible' – the movement of the icon, in which humans ('the visible') direct their gaze in search of God ('the invisible') – 'one would say rather that the invisible proceeds up into the visible, precisely because the visible

would proceed from the invisible' (ibid.). The movement is a reversal of the direction of the idol – in the icon the invisible moves towards the visible. The action is of God's self-revelation rather than of His 'discovery' – or worse, his invention. Marion's description of the role of the gaze in this process is also significant. 'The gaze can never rest or settle if it looks at an icon; it always must rebound upon the visible, in order to go back in it up the infinite stream of the invisible. In this sense, the icon makes visible only by giving rise to an infinite gaze' (op. cit., 18). Earlier in the text Marion mentions that one of the characteristics of the gaze's relation to the idol is that the gaze is only held momentarily – the idol interests us for a short while, after which restlessness or boredom sets in. In reaction to the icon, however, the gaze is provoked; it becomes both restless and captivated by the presence of the infinity of the invisible.

Marion ultimately forces us to consider God in relation to the unthinkable – that which must inevitably always escape our powers of cognition through its transcendence. 'The unthinkable forces us to substitute the idolatrous quotation marks around "God" with the very God that no mark of knowledge can demarcate; and, in order to say it, let us cross out ~~God~~, with a cross, provisionally of St. Andrew, which demonstrates the limit of the temptation, conscious or naïve, to blaspheme the unthinkable in an idol' (op. cit., 46). By 'crossing out' God orthographically, Marion seeks to demonstrate the ways in which the unthinkable might manifest itself in our discourse about God. Human discourse, as mentioned earlier, should not define God; the crossing out of God is an attempt to *limit* our conceptual knowledge of God, to make manifest and tangible the lacunæ in our knowledge of God.¹³

Marion clarifies, explaining that this cross 'does not indicate that ~~God~~ would have to disappear as a concept . . . but that the unthinkable enters into the field of our thought only by rendering itself unthinkable there by excess, that is, by criticizing our thought. To cross out ~~God~~, in fact, indicates and recalls that ~~God~~ crosses out our thought because he saturates it; better, he enters into our thought only in obligating it to criticize itself' (ibid.). Crucial in this passage is that God's presence in our thought and discourse presses us to be constantly self-critical and aware of our limitations. Marion's desire to cross out God in his writing stems from an understanding and

¹³ Compare this to Edmond Jabès's slightly different take on the absence of God: 'what is death without the life it conditions, and vice versa? What is God without man, who limits Him by unlimiting himself? Man's excess is an exemplary measuring of God. Hence God's being beyond conditions depends on this first and ultimate evidence, the very condition of His freedom from them: *not to be*' (191). Or, later on, the aphorism 'God dies into God' (193).

appreciation of that which is unknowable at the heart of the divine. The crossing out of the name of God indicates to us that our thought and our language is flawed, that the best we can hope for in the naming of God is a mistake to be emended. It spurs us on to search for better names, new concepts that do not make the crucial mistake of idolatry. 'We cross out the name of ~~God~~ only in order to show ourselves that his unthinkableness saturates our thought – right from the beginning, and forever' (op. cit., 46).

Responding to the likely question 'beyond being or without being, how might we still be able to talk accurately about God? What words are left that *don't* bear the mark of conceptual idolatry? What's left to think about God now?' Marion writes that the only name left unscathed by this critique is 'a single one, no doubt, love, or as we would like to say, as Saint John proposes – "God [is] *agape*" (1 John 4:8). Why love? Because this term . . . still remains, paradoxically, unthought enough to free, some day at least, the thought of ~~God~~ from the second idolatry' (op. cit., 47). Love, then, becomes the name by which God can be known and thought of in Marion's writings. Love, he maintains, is the term that allows God to remain in our field of cognition as a concept without being chained to human notions of being.

The practical application of this non-metaphysical ontology of divine love reaches its fullest expression in Marion's collection of essays *Prolegomena to Charity*.¹⁴ He writes in an incisive essay on Christian apologetics: 'God is approached only by he who jettisons all that does not befit love; God, who gives himself as Love only through love, can be reached **only** so long as one receives him by love, and to receive him by love becomes possible only for he who gives himself to him. Surrendering oneself to love, not surrendering oneself to evidence' (2002, 61). Here writing against the need to use metaphysical or ontological arguments to 'prove' God, he instead aims towards an apologetics that bears witness to God's love. Rather than an 'argumentative machine' that would 'force an intimate conviction by force of reasons' (op. cit., 55), Christian communication to non-Christians and discourse surrounding inter-religious dialogue should ever only point towards God's love – a communication that can take place only through love.

¹⁴ This remarkable collection of essays written over decades contains some of Marion's finest and most accessible thought; his focus on the various practical and ethical implications of his work is particularly significant.

In an engaging essay on the Ascension in the same collection, Marion points to the puzzling absence wrought by this moment in the gospels. The seeming absence of Christ becomes interpreted variously throughout Christian history: as the moment where the Church's work begins, for example, or the moment of a non-empirical and hence 'rational, moral, or even speculative relation between men and God' (op. cit., 126). 'What is paradoxically offered for meditation' through the Ascension, he writes, 'consists not in a reduction of presence to the spirit, but in a reinforcement of the presence of the body and the spirit such that, in absence, both are incomprehensibly maintained, conserved, saved – in a word, resurrected' (op. cit., 127). This presence through and above absence, he argues persuasively, is a crucial component of the mystery of Christ. Presence is redefined through the Ascension, reworked through Christ's literal absence but metaphysical and real presence (through the Eucharist, for instance). The practical outcome, Marion asserts, is that 'if the Ascension offers a mystery, it does so by a radical modification of presence – by an effect of the Resurrection on presence in general. By a resurrection of presence' (ibid.). In other words, presence is resurrected from a dependence on the literal presence of Christ, and through the Ascension and the Eucharist is catapulted into something that is miraculously, uniquely *enriched* by absence.

Marion writes further that the removal of Christ from this world allows Him to give himself to the world more fully and profoundly; the Ascension thus ensures that Christ's gifts can be both heavenly and eternal. Marion analyses the commonplace that 'if Christ had remained physically among us, according to the worldly economy of presence, he would have fixed himself in a place and time' (op. cit., 146) – that is, a new form of presence is needed so that Christ can be universally accessible and relevant. This presence comes through the encounter with absence, so that 'this empirical impossibility encountering him would then have merely reflected a still more radical impossibility of recognizing him . . . We therefore owe our seeing him to the gift, through the Spirit and in the Trinitarian distance of the presence of Christ – in Spirit and in Truth, in all places and in all ages' (ibid.). Marion redefines our understanding of Christ – our seeing him despite his absence – through the lens of the gift. Through a literal removal of Christ comes a still more meaningful presence (besides that of the third person of the Trinity): the distance paradoxically increases His closeness, the absence impossibly enriches His presence.

Marion draws a startling conclusion in this analysis, *pace* Adventists: ‘the Ascension does not mark the disappearance of Christ in the expectation of a new (empirical) presence at the end of an all too long absence. It marks the Paschal conversion of all presence into gift’ (op. cit., 151). Rather than planning for a returned Christ in the empirical flesh, we should instead extend our notions of presence to include the Eucharist and the Word. Ultimately, Marion concludes, ‘if the Word became flesh, it is necessary, ever since the Ascension, that, in us, “flesh become word – and the word fall” (Octavio Paz). Our flesh becomes word in order to bless the Trinitarian gift of the presence of the Word, and to accomplish our incorporation in Him’ (op. cit., 152). To move God beyond an ontology that demands presence means to offer instead a participatory ontology that, through the Word and the Eucharist, allows a motion beyond the ‘imitation of Christ’ towards incorporation in Him.

Marion writes in ‘Evil in Person’ of the claim for justification of evil through revenge as being the chief stumbling block in a search for justice. Evil’s insidiousness consists in its offering itself as its own solution, that is, the thought that one can rectify evil or injustice against oneself by committing evil or injustice to another. ‘The severity of evil consists, precisely, in the way in which it imposes its logic on us as though it were the only logic feasible: our first effort at deliverance retains evil as its sole horizon’ (op. cit., 5). If the response to evil is a counter-evil, retribution in kind, evil continues – indeed, it flourishes. To relieve or suppress suffering by causing suffering on another, or to eliminate the cause of one’s own suffering outright, only perpetuates the logic and grammar of evil: ‘the height of evil consists in perpetuating evil with the intention of suppressing suffering, in rendering others guilty in order to guarantee one’s own innocence’ (op. cit., 8). Marion describes the attempt to use evil means to bring about good ends as the most pervasive and thus dangerous evil of all.¹⁵

The solution to this desperate cycle, Marion proposes, is ‘to keep one’s suffering for oneself, rather than making a hypothetical culprit suffer it: to endure it, or as ordinary language puts it so well, to absorb the cost – as one can absorb a counterfeit bill’ (op. cit., 9). The metaphor of counterfeiting crystallises this moral situation perfectly: if one receives a counterfeit bill and, deciding that the only way to prevent one from paying for the ruse is to pass it on to an unwitting shopkeeper, it

¹⁵ Although I would think this would provide a springboard to a rather devastating and effective critique of traditional Christian just war theory (stretching back to Augustine), Marion does not develop this theme in this essay or elsewhere in his corpus.

remains in circulation, it remains an active force. If, instead, one cuts one's losses and keeps or destroys the bill, the harm is not passed on and the cycle is ended immediately. Marion sees Christ as ultimately absorbing all the counterfeit bills (evil, sins) of the world: 'the ultimate service that God can render a humanity preyed upon by the spirit of revenge would thus be to furnish it with an even better culprit' (op. cit., 10). Thus God can absorb the evil of the world, taking it out of circulation and preventing it from spurring on more counter-evil.

This is, Marion asserts, only possible through sacrifice and death: God must be 'absolutely guilty, and thus, absolutely punished, and thus, absolutely dead . . . For the world, the only good God is a dead God . . . The world recognizes God in order to be able to kill him – and God renders the world even this ultimate service' (op. cit., 10-11). The death of God here takes on its traditional sacrificial tones: Christ's death allows the absorption of the evils of the world. Thus for Marion the crucifixion of Christ, and his subsequent Ascension, mark not merely miracles concordant with the irruption of the divine, but rather the fulfilment of Christ's kenosis. Through this utter abandonment of 'being' in order to close off the cycle of evil and counter-evil, injustice and retribution, the crucified and ascended God both assumes and rejects all categories of being. Emptied of being, emptied of divinity, emptied of life itself, Christ is able to absorb the evil of the world perfectly – without the need for retribution – and thus point the way towards a more perfect justice.

It is perhaps fitting that this section on ontology would close with a rejection of human categories of ontology and a recognition of God's abandonment of being in order to preserve the possibility of justice. As stated previously, this kenotic gesture is crucial both to mystical understandings of God and to the language of mysticism itself; I have shown its important relationship to justice and the rejection of evil above. Accordingly, I will use the ending of Pseudo-Dionysius's *The Mystical Theology* to bring this section to a close. He states that God 'falls neither within the predicate of nonbeing nor being . . . There is no speaking of it, nor name nor knowledge of it . . . We make assertions and denials of what is next to it, but never of it, for it is both beyond every assertion . . . [and] free of every limitation, beyond every limitation; it is also beyond every denial' (141).

VI. Aesthetics and Mysticism: Beauty and Justice

It can be remarked that of the Platonic triumvirate the True, the Good, and the Beautiful, the final term receives relatively short shrift in contemporary discourse. And yet, as de Certeau points out, an understanding of beauty is absolutely central to an analysis of mystic discourse, for in mysticism it can commonly be found that ‘the criterion of the beautiful replaces that of the true . . . It is by this metamorphosis that a chart of knowledge is transformed into a garden of delights’ (1992, 58).¹⁶ These categories ought to be mutually interdependent, not to say interchangeable. Why, then, is so much of contemporary criticism and theory hesitant to engage with the category of the Beautiful on equal terms, dismissing it more often than not as an apolitical stumbling block on the path to Truth?

Elaine Scarry seeks to rectify this misguided view in her elegant work *On Beauty and Being Just*. Beauty, she argues, far from being a flippant distraction from social ills, instead urges us on towards an even more rigorous appreciation of justice. After a broad analysis that defines beauty as sacred, unprecedented, and life-saving (23-5), Scarry goes on to describe beauty as inciting deliberation. ‘Something beautiful immediately catches attention yet prompts one to judgments that one then continues to scrutinize, and that one not infrequently discovers to be in error’ (29). Beauty is not a distraction, keeping our attention away from the truly important issues, rather, beauty serves to focus our attention, hone our judgments, and refine our thought processes.¹⁷ ‘Something beautiful fills the mind yet incites the search for something beyond itself’ (ibid.). This passage in particular resonates with the beauty to be found in mystical texts: it is a beauty that draws the reader in, perhaps confounding him initially, yet ultimately pointing the way towards divine truth. The beauty found in mystical texts always reaches beyond itself; they incite in their readers a movement beyond the individual and towards the – both exegetical and liturgical – community.¹⁸

¹⁶ Pseudo-Dionysius is quick to point out in *The Divine Names*, for instance, that ‘The Beautiful is therefore the same as the Good’ and, earlier, ‘Beauty unites all things and is the source of all things’ (77).

¹⁷ Simone Weil writes about the way in which beauty is a specifically *grounding* force. ‘The beautiful takes our desire captive and empties it of its object, giving it an object which is present and thus forbidding it to fly off towards the future’ (65). Thus beauty is far from a distraction, it is rather an attraction towards the present moment. It focuses our concern in the present, rather than feeding a desire for an imagined future.

¹⁸ This movement as manifested in Neoplatonic mysticism will be investigated in greater detail in the following section.

With particular relevance for beauty's relationship to justice Scarry, in the course of explicating a passage from Augustine's *De Musica*, draws the conclusion 'that equality is the heart of beauty, that equality is pleasure-bearing, and that (most important in the shift we are seeking to undertake from beauty to justice) equality is the morally highest and best feature of the world' (98). The strength of beauty, then, is that it causes us to admire and enjoy equality *per se*. Rather than feeling compelled to forge a society in which equal opportunities are afforded to all, what might be called the 'equality principle' of beauty that Scarry puts forward means that we might actually find the society that most values equality also the most pleasurable and enjoyable. That is to say, the most *beautiful* society we might imagine, and thus the one that would give us the most pleasure and enjoyment, would be an equal one. Scarry is quick to respond to potential criticisms of this hypothesis, however – the process, she explains, is of necessity a gradual one. 'All that is claimed is that the aspiration to political, social, and economic equality has already entered the world in the beauty-loving treatises of the classical and Christian periods, as has the readiness to recognize it as beautiful if and when it should arrive in the world' (99). In other words, through the love of beauty inherent in classical and Christian thought (particularly as influenced by Platonism and Neoplatonism), an intrinsic appreciation of – and concomitant tendency towards – equality is established.

Another crucial aspect of Scarry's thesis is the impact of beauty on selfhood. The experience of beauty, she claims, is able to both demolish and maintain the ego in a paradoxically simultaneous gesture. 'Radical decentering,' she writes, 'might also be called an opinionated adjacency. A beautiful thing is not the only thing in the world that can make us feel adjacent; nor is it the only thing in the world that brings a state of acute pleasure. But it appears to be one of the few phenomena in the world that brings about both simultaneously: it permits us to be adjacent while also permitting us to experience extreme pleasure' (114). In this movement, beauty's impact on the individual causes both a movement outside or beyond selfhood – Scarry's 'adjacency' – and an elevation of the self through the extraordinary pleasure that beauty can grant. The self is momentarily both superseded and exalted; the implications of this dual movement on themes of justice will be examined more fully in the following section. Suffice it to say at present that this re-evaluation of selfhood ushers in a vision of the ego in which selflessness prevents the sort of territorial squabble over identity found in so much of contemporary society. Instead, through an

experience of beauty, the self is superseded by the recognition of something far greater than itself. At the same time, this impression of the Beautiful affords the self an extraordinary pleasure that maintains the ego and protects this gesture from any sort of annihilatory motion.

Simone Weil writes in similar terms of the relationship between the individual and the Beautiful in *Gravity and Grace*. 'The beautiful is a carnal attraction which keeps us at a distance and implies a renunciation. This includes the renunciation of that which is most deep-seated, the imagination. We want to eat all the other objects of desire. The beautiful is that which we desire without wishing to eat it. We desire that it should be' (149). Weil points to an essential aspect of the Beautiful, also discussed in Scarry's work: the inspiration beauty gives is not of a totalising nature, as in some instances of desire. Instead, beauty pushes us towards action of a different nature: the guarded distance between the self and the object of beauty implies a lack of possession that presses the individual to an ever more refined attempt at reaching the transcendent (understood here as the interpenetration of the True, the Good, and the Beautiful). In other words, as Weil writes, beauty is 'a fruit which we look at without trying to seize it' (150). Fundamentally transcendent, beauty forces us to acknowledge the shortcomings in our own world and realise effective solutions to those shortcomings without the totalising theoretical framework predominant in twentieth-century attempts to build a perfect society.

The relationship between mysticism and *resistance* to tyranny or totalitarianism is explored in depth in Dorothee Soelle's engaging work *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance*. At the end of the text, however, Soelle appends a commentary on her thoughts provided by a conversation with her husband in the course of his initial reaction to her manuscript; it is he who makes a fascinating link between a specifically *aesthetic* aspect of mysticism and resistance (one rather overlooked in the main body of the book itself). 'Mysticism is the experience of the oneness and wholeness of life. Therefore, mysticism's perception of life, its vision, is also the unrelenting perception of how fragmented life is. Suffering on account of that fragmentation and finding it unbearable is part of mysticism' (302). Through a human, fragmented view of the wholeness and oneness of the divine, mysticism allows us a perception of the potential for 'unity in a multiplicity' that participation in God can alone offer. Edmond Jabès writes on the theme of the fragmentation of mystic speech and its unique efficacy. 'Only in fragments can we read the

immeasurable totality' (42).¹⁹ Through the fragmentation of mysticism and mystic speech an approach to the infinite can be located: the purest path, because the path of negation allows the attributes of the icon of the divine to be made manifest.

Beyond this, however, are the specific meanings of the *beauty* of mystic texts and their connection to justice. As was mentioned earlier, all too frequently contemporary discourse discounts beauty as a frivolous distraction; its significance or importance is displaced in favor of analyses of power relations or sociocultural difference. A focus on beauty, however, yields a decidedly more optimistic – yet not irrelevant or unfocused – viewpoint than much of contemporary critical theory. Soelle's husband comments more directly on the relationship between beauty and justice in mysticism, explaining that finding God 'fragmented into rich and poor, top and bottom, sick and well, weak and mighty: that's the mystic's suffering. The resistance of Saint Francis or Elisabeth of Thuringia or of Martin Luther King grew out of the perception of beauty. And the long lasting and most dangerous resistance is the one that was born from beauty' (302). Beauty, as it turns out in this broad description that closes Soelle's book, both informs and encourages resistance to injustice; the beauty of mystic texts is specifically singled out as the chief element of their efficacy in promoting justice.

Through this hermeneutical lens of the uniquely *aesthetic* components of mysticism, we come to an understanding of the strengths particular to the mystic corpus. The beautiful and poetic qualities of their writings lead us to a greater concern for the world *in itself*: rather than trying to grasp the world and alter it according to our desires, beauty encourages a relationship to the world analogous to the relationship between the God of mystical theology and humanity. Just as the goal of mysticism is ever necessarily deferred, so too does beauty allow us to participate more avidly in the world without attempting to control or distort it through ideology. It allows the ego to be simultaneously elevated and reduced, and thus prevents identity

¹⁹ This passage is followed in his *The Book of Margins* by a passage with uncanny relevance to the project at hand that deserves further mention: an investigation of the relationship between fragmentation, deconstruction, and the law. "The eye is guide and beacon for this fertile "deconstruction" which works in two directions: from totality toward the ultimate fragment, and from the tiniest fragment, through its own rescinding, its own gradual fading into the void of preponderant fragmentation, toward restoration of this very totality. The eye lays down – and is – the law. The invisible claims us behind all that is seen, as if its absence were only what hides at the heart of the manifest – or else hides from us what is nevertheless manifest – and silence, what is unsaid within the uttered word' (42). In this dense and allusive passage, Jabès blends the images of a kenotic movement in fragmentation with the apophaticism of the invisible. Through these confrontations, he seems to lay claim, the unsaid is, paradoxically, sayable.

formation to take place in an atmosphere free from the competition over limited resources that governs so much of contemporary identity politics. Beauty encourages justice through these varying means; mystical texts, in their allusive and rich use of language, are very frequently of a profound beauty. With the various theoretical formulations developed in these preceding sections in mind, it now seems appropriate to turn to some seminal figures in the history of mysticism to see how these concepts are born out in their writings.

VII. Neoplatonic Mysticism: Hierarchy, Selfhood, and Kenosis

In this section I investigate the works of three major figures of Neoplatonic mysticism – Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, Meister Eckhart, and the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* – in order to demonstrate the ways in which their writings encourage social justice through participation in divine hierarchy and readerly kenosis. It is this movement that offers a textual link to Derrida's theories on justice and deconstruction discussed above: both deconstruction and the mystical texts discussed below demand the reader's understanding of his own limitations and the impossibility of absolute knowledge of a text. Although Neoplatonic and apophatic mysticism may, on the surface, appear to be a hermetic discipline unconcerned with the world around it and focussed solely on a transcendent deity above, I am to investigate the ways in which the texts from this tradition speak otherwise. Even as abstract and philosophical a text as that presumably written by a reclusive individual (likely an anchorite or Carthusian monk) – *The Cloud of Unknowing* – still maintains a remarkable concern for its own transmission and exegesis. It is the textuality of these works *per se* that will be investigated: the particular manner in which the exercise of reading itself instantiates in the reader a space for justice to emerge.

First, however, I wish to put forward a connection between this section and my earlier discussion of Jacques Derrida; the link between them is primarily one of linguistic use and the deployment of rhetoric. Derrida's work often skirts around topics of faith and belief, instead focusing on the language of faith and belief themselves.²⁰ Does Derrida's formulation of justice have anything to do with the

²⁰ This tendency has certainly declined, however, in his more recent works. See in particular his autobiographical reinterpretation of Augustine's *Confessions*, *Circumfession* in the volume *Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993). Jeremy Hall points out in his doctoral dissertation (*Towards a Postmodern Ethics: Representation, Memory, Responsibility*, University of Glasgow: 1999) that although before 1972 Derrida's work was primarily concerned with epistemology, the years since have seen an 'ethical turn' in his writings (20). I would go further and argue that the

mystic tradition? Is Derrida himself a ‘mystic’ in any meaningful way? One of Derrida’s most forthright encounters with the mystical tradition can be found in his essay ‘How to Avoid Speaking: Denials’ in *Languages of the Unsayable*. The beginning of the essay contains an outright denial. ‘No, what I write is not “negative theology”’ (Budwick and Iser, 7). He accuses negative theologians of ultimately inevitably being forced to preserve some sort of ‘hyperessentiality,’ be it a God without being or a God beyond being – some sort of ontological certitude is maintained. A turn occurs, however, in his analysis of Meister Eckhart – he finds that the ‘simultaneously negative and hyperaffirmative meaning of *without*’ (op. cit., 8) in his works draws us to redefine the qualities of ‘negative theology’ as found in the works of Eckhart and Pseudo-Dionysius (and perhaps might lead us to reconsider his earlier denial of ‘negative theology’ itself).

Although he writes: ‘I would hesitate to inscribe what I put forward under the familiar heading of negative theology, precisely because of that ontological wager of hyperessentiality that one finds at work both in Dionysius and in Meister Eckhart’ (ibid.), his analysis draws him ever closer to a reappraisal of that very hyperessentiality, particularly through Jean-Luc Marion’s aforementioned *God Without Being*.²¹ The greatest difference between negative theology and deconstruction is that ‘the apophatic movement cannot contain within itself the principle of its interruption. It can only indefinitely defer the encounter with its own limit’ (op. cit., 11). That is to say, whereas Derrida’s critical work focuses on the necessity of language and discourse to bear within itself its own undoing, apophysis can only ever push back an ontological horizon that it can never hope to eliminate.

Ultimately, however, these ontological considerations and divergences are superseded by a discussion of the rhetorical elements of negative theology that are the truly significant points of convergence with Derrida’s work. Analysing a passage of

past decade or so has seen a ‘religious turn’ in the Derridean corpus, not only with the aforementioned *Circumfession*, but also the collection of religiously-themed essays, *Acts of Religion* (London: Routledge, 2001), his penetrating work *The Gift of Death* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996) and his yearly appearances at the Villanova conference on religion and postmodernism. His highly illuminating lectures from these events, as well as the responses of other speakers and transcripts from roundtable discussions, can be found in two volumes edited by John Caputo: *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999) and *Questioning God* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).

²¹ Derrida describes Marion’s work in a footnote as being ‘both very close and extremely distant’ (65). For an intelligent analysis of the similarities and differences between these two figures from a phenomenological perspective, see Robyn Horner’s *Rethinking God as Gift: Marion, Derrida, and the Limits of Phenomenology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001).

Pseudo-Dionysius's *Mystical Theology*, Derrida writes '[w]ithout the divine promise which is also an injunction, the power of these *synthemata* would be merely conventional rhetoric, poetry, fine arts, perhaps literature. It would suffice to doubt this promise or transgress this injunction in order to see an opening – and also a closing upon itself – of the field of rhetoricity or even of literariness, the lawless law of fiction' (op. cit., 23). Here, in essence, Derrida gives us the opportunity to bridge the gap between deconstruction and negative theology: whereas they have different ontological motivations, their use of language and their forms of negation enable their alliance. Both have a central aporia at their heart: how to avoid speaking.

Derrida explores this inescapably necessary tension between the impossibility of speech and the necessity of through the *Divine Names*. 'Between the theological movement that speaks and is inspired by the Good beyond Being or by light and the apophatic path that exceeds the Good, there is necessarily a passage, a transfer, a translation. An experience must yet guide the apophasis toward excellence, not allow it to say just anything, and prevent it from manipulating its negations like empty and purely mechanical phrases. This experience is that of prayer' (op. cit., 41). In other words, Derrida triumphs the *rhetorical* trope of prayer in order to prevent the language of Dionysian metaphysics from straying into useless patter or simple, reflexive negation. Instead, the formal characteristics of prayer itself allow Derrida to develop the rhetorical strand that links his work to negative or mystical theology; the prayers and hymns offered in the Pseudo-Dionysian corpus allow a solution to the necessary impossibility of speaking about God.

A. Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite

The seminal works of Pseudo-Dionysius, whose works were given authority throughout most of the medieval period second only to the scriptures, are rich in the concern for a *distribution* of divine blessing. Although contemporary commentators often focus on the very apophatic message of his *Mystical Theology* and *The Divine Names*, his other two surviving works – *The Celestial Hierarchy* and *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* – focus primarily on the manner in which the goodness of God is distributed throughout creation. This elusive and enigmatic writer – in actuality a sixth-century Syrian monk rather than the Greek philosopher converted in Acts 17:34 – exerted an unparalleled influence on medieval mysticism; it is with his writings that I will begin my investigation.

The Divine Names, Pseudo-Dionysius's longest surviving work, is dedicated to an analysis and critique of the names given to God. It begins by acknowledging the difficulty of the task at hand: 'the inscrutable One is out of the reach of every rational process. Nor can any words come up to the inexpressible Good, this One, this Source of all unity, this supra-existent Being . . . It is and it is as no other being is. Cause of all existence, and therefore itself transcending existence, it alone could give an authoritative account of what it really is' (50). A rather self-defeating choice of words with which to open a work of theology, the transcendence of God is emphasized here – in line with my earlier discussion of Jean-Luc Marion's work, divinity surpasses even the category of Being – and the ability of human language and reason to describe or explain Him denigrated. Later on he concisely states the problem at hand: 'if all knowledge is of that which is and is limited to the realm of the existent, then whatever transcends being must also transcend knowledge' (53). This self-abasement or self-emptying is, I believe, a crucial acknowledgement of the necessary impossibility of theology before a transcendent God; it is also an important aspect of a poetics of justice that would seek to assert that no answer to society's ills can claim to be conclusive, no theology an absolute or totalising picture of God. Both are united in a common appreciation of the imitation of Christ's kenosis: whether reading apophatic theology or reading justice, a necessary self-emptying must take place as reader or believer. A passage through a cloud of unknowing is an indispensable prerequisite to the access of a space of knowledge about the transcendent, be it God or justice. It is a replication of God's kenosis in the reader that allows a proper reading of justice to be possible. It is in this vein Pseudo-Dionysius asserts that we must 'leave behind us all of our own notions of the divine' (ibid.).

Pseudo-Dionysius concedes shortly thereafter, however, that 'on the other hand, the Good is not absolutely incommunicable to everything. By itself it generously reveals a firm, transcendent beam, granting enlightenments [sic] proportionate to each being, and thereby draws sacred minds upward to its permitted contemplation, to participation and to the state of becoming like it' (50). Crucial here is the motion of revelation and exegesis: similar to Marion's discussion of the icon, the Good presents itself to the world. Also important is the givenness of this gesture: Pseudo-Dionysius emphasizes the way in which theology is *granted* the ability to perceive God, not entitled to it. Most significant, however, is the participatory and transformative nature of divine contemplation highlighted in this passage: meditating

on divine goodness here involves participating in and *becoming like it*. The contemplation of God is figured not as an abstract philosophical activity – even in this massively influential work of philosophical mysticism – but rather as a process that brings its adherents closer to co-existence with the Good, that actively transforms those who seek the Good ‘into a state of becoming like it.’ The consequences of this understanding of mysticism for justice are clear: rather than removing the mystic from the world, mysticism instead allows the mystic to be transformed into divine Goodness (and to operate accordingly in the world). This aporetic moment transforms the standard Neoplatonic framework of procession and return into a movement of necessary impossibility that allows access to divine inaccessibility. That is to say, through this (impossible) divinisation of the mystic the impossibility of justice is paradoxically made manifest.

In a similar vein, particularly noteworthy for its syncretism, he writes that ‘we, in the diversity of what we are, are drawn together by it and are led into a godlike oneness, into a unity reflecting God’ (51). This trope is perhaps the most important contribution of the Dionysian corpus towards a poetics of justice. Pseudo-Dionysius recognizes both human multiplicity and divine unity and stresses that the latter comes to overwhelm the former. In this language, human differences are not erased but rendered inconsequential when raised towards divine unity. The belief in ‘unity in a multitude’²² permeates *The Divine Names* and lends a significant component to this discussion of justice. Pseudo-Dionysius uses a particularly clarifying metaphor in order to elucidate this concept of unity in a multitude: ‘in a house the light from all the lamps is completely interpenetrating, yet each is clearly distinct. There is distinction in unity and there is unity in distinction’ (61). That is to say, our variegated participation in the unity of the divine allows both commonality and distinction with God; the human multiplicity is transformed into a divine unity that nevertheless allows the former to retain its individual distinctions.

²² This concept is indeed one of the fundamental problems of classical thought; the particular phrasing here I draw from Book XXII of Augustine’s *De Civitate Dei*. Felipe Fernández-Armesto comments on this in broad strokes in his excellent synthesis *Truth: A History and a Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997). ‘The oneness of everything and the equation, Infinity equals one, are borne out by possible constructions of elementary logic, everyday observations and modern science. Infinity is the sum total of everything . . . When we identify a single object, we can think of it as an infinite number of fractions of itself’ (43). Earlier he points to the influence of mysticism on this deep-rooted and ancient method of making sense of the world. ‘Logic and science are only supporting or ancillary sources of argument in favour of cohesive world-pictures. The earliest formulations are more likely to have been inspired and sustained by mystical experience’ (41).

At the same time that God is One, however, Pseudo-Dionysius also draws attention to the Triune God. Besides demonstrating what he terms a 'transcendent fecundity' (51), the Trinity also demonstrates God's concern for creation. The Trinity, he reports, is especially called 'loving toward humanity, because in one of its persons it accepted a true share of what it is we are, and thereby issued a call to man's lowly state to rise up to it' (52). This co-association of Christ and humanity, loosely developed here, will reach a stunning clarity in the work of Julian of Norwich nine centuries later. The kenotic trope that God lowered himself in order to understand and save humanity is mirrored by the assertion that the Incarnation offers us the challenge of ourselves becoming Godlike. In a world governed by these principles, one would imagine, justice could not but flourish.

Pseudo-Dionysius continues his discussion of the paradoxical co-existence of both unity *and* multiplicity in the Godhead, writing: 'he is indivisible multiplicity, the unfilled overfullness which produces, perfects, and preserves all unity and all multiplicity' (67). This language, replete with the contraries that often typify mystic writing, furthers the notion that the divine unity is able to reconcile and preserve difference among beings even as it draws us towards its own unity. Indeed, the plenitude of God mentioned here is exactly what allows this perfection and preservation to occur. Even more radically, however, he goes on to say that 'since there are many who are by his gift raised, so far as they can be, to divinization, it would seem that here there is not only differentiation but actual replication of the one God' (*ibid.*). Here, in a reference to the Eucharist, God is indeed replicated through his believers; divinisation and divine replication are the surprising fruits of contemplation and worship.

This theme of God's replication is taken up earlier on in the text in the context of both creation and incarnation. He writes that God 'is multiplied and yet remains singular' and 'is dispensed to all without ceasing to be a unity' (66). Although this initially seems problematic, even paradoxical, Pseudo-Dionysius clarifies and offers a resolution. 'Since God is a "being" in a way beyond being, he bestows existence upon everything and brings the whole world into being, so that his single existence is said to be manifold by virtue of the fact that it brings so many things to being from itself' (*ibid.*). In this, creation proceeds from God and thus shares its being with his transcendence. Once again we find that kenosis brings about generation: he reports that through the process of creation God remains 'full amid the emptying act of

differentiation' (ibid.). This tendency in Pseudo-Dionysius's work is the key to a reconciliation of Neoplatonic mysticism with social justice – or rather, the enrichment of our concepts of justice through the mystic's ascent towards the Good.

In this motion too can be seen a nod towards the textual transmission of mysticism; the process of reading and reflecting itself is paralleled here. Just as the Oneness of God provokes and inspires a multiplicity of texts, all partaking in Goodness, so too does the unity of each text spawn a multiplicity of interpretation, an exegetical community in which meaning is constantly being negotiated. Pseudo-Dionysius gives us a hint of the possible outcome of such an interaction when he discusses the name 'Peace.' 'The first thing to say is this. God is the subsistence of absolute peace, of peace in general, and of instances of peace. He brings everything together into a unity without confusion, into an undivided communion where each thing continues to exhibit its own specific form and is in no way adulterated through association with its opposite' (122). Particularly noteworthy here is the claim that in the communion granted by God's peace the union of opposites is possible. This movement in which unity is capable of internally resolving – and just as importantly, simultaneously preserving – contraries is anticipatory of the basic tenets of the deconstruction which Derrida claims is at the heart of justice.

The Celestial Hierarchy and *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* are both concerned with how divine gifts are given to humanity. For Pseudo-Dionysius, it is important to recognize, 'hierarchy' did not have the oppressive connotations it has developed in recent years. Although I do not wish to discount the suffering of many at the hands of various 'hierarchies,' by the same token I do not believe the word is being used correctly in such instances. Pseudo-Dionysius is the originator of the term, and I feel it is to his writings that we should turn for our definition. The Greek literally means 'holy source;' in the context of his work the term is applied to the organized and ranked system by which the Good proceeds from God. Although it is certainly true that rank in human contexts often denotes oppression or mistreatment, it is important to recognize that the movement of a Dionysian hierarchy is always continually upward: its sole purpose is to raise those who participate in it towards God, not to apply power or control from higher to lower.

This is made clear in the opening to *The Celestial Hierarchy*, in which Pseudo-Dionysius considers the meaning of the word he coins. 'In my opinion a hierarchy is a sacred order, a state of understanding and an activity approximating as

closely as possible to the divine' (153). Order, understanding, and activity are the central aspects of the Dionysian hierarchy: all are invariably oriented towards the end of becoming 'as like as possible to God' (154). He continues to define hierarchy, writing that a hierarchy 'bears in itself the mark of God. Hierarchy causes its members to be images of God in all respects, to be clear and spotless mirrors reflecting the glow of primordial light and indeed of God himself' (ibid.). Here, the participants in hierarchy are figured as mirrors of God's light – an interesting reversal of the Marionic geography of the idol discussed above. Again, the overwhelming message of this passage is that hierarchy causes its members to mimic or replicate God in themselves.

It is a crucial theme, and one echoed throughout the Dionysian corpus; it reaches perhaps its fullest expression in his discussion of the Eucharist in *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*. 'Every sacredly initiating operation draws our fragmented lives together into a one-like divinization' (209), he writes. Here his language reaches some of its greatest social relevance: the fragmentation of humanity that leads to 'impassioned hostility between equals' (218) becomes impossible when participation in the sacraments pulls us towards the divine unity even as we ourselves are divinised. This discourse reaches a markedly impassioned climax: 'it is not possible,' he writes, 'to be gathered together toward the One and to partake of peaceful union with the One while we are divided among ourselves' (ibid.). Here is the practical application of the dialectic between unity and multiplicity: the rituals of the church hierarchy are figured as uniting those who participate in them, uniting that which would otherwise be divided. This divinisation also offers a useful Dionysian parallel to Derrida's notion of the aporetic; becoming Godlike through participation in a hierarchy must be an ever untenable, impossible goal.

This argument regarding unity and multiplicity can be applied quite pointedly to contemporary debates concerning identity formation, thereby enriching our conception of justice. Regina Schwartz's *The Curse of Cain* 'locates the origins of violence in identity formation, arguing that imagining identity as an act of distinguishing and separating from others, of boundary making and line drawing, is the most frequent and fundamental act of violence we commit' (5). The violence Schwartz sees in identity formation is quite understandable; her book goes on to analyse the connexion between identity formation, violence, and monotheism in the Old Testament. On the other hand, however, it would be difficult to imagine a

beneficent world entirely devoid of distinction or delineation. And yet, in the preceding descriptions of unity and multiplicity, I believe the resolution to this opposition can be found. Pseudo-Dionysius describes participation in divine hierarchies as both preserving individual characteristics while ensuring a tranquil unity – neither homogeneity nor endless conflict. Only in this context can such jarringly discordant concepts be reconciled conclusively.

Describing the development of the Ecclesia, he writes that the early hierarchs ‘passed on something united in a variegation and plurality’ (199). Again, the fusing of disparate, seemingly incompatible contraries is realised through hierarchy. Of their transmission of liturgical rites and scripture, Pseudo-Dionysius writes that ‘using images derived from the senses they spoke of the transcendent . . . [and] of necessity they made human what was divine. They put material on what was immaterial’ (ibid.). This crossing of divine and human, made willingly by God in order to draw up creation towards Him, is another important facet of this discourse’s contribution to justice: the divinisation of man and the kenotic emptying of God are fused.

Divine intentionality is explicitly cited as not only the grounding but also the source of hierarchy (and it is here that I find Dionysian mysticism at its greatest point of divergence from Derridean deconstruction). Pseudo-Dionysius writes that God allows us to apprehend Him symbolically, that is, to allow humankind a linguistic understanding of the divine, ‘out of concern for us and because he wanted us to be made godlike. He made the heavenly hierarchies known to us. He made our own hierarchy a ministerial colleague of the divine hierarchies by an assimilation, to the extent that it is humanly feasible, to their godlike priesthood’ (147). The language in this passage is especially noteworthy: humanity is placed as the passive recipient of divinisation. The human hierarchy is described as a ‘ministerial colleague’ of the celestial hierarchy: *ministerial* here can have both the sense of an ancillary or instrumental component of a greater process, as well as its more legalistic meaning pertaining to the execution of laws given by higher powers. In any event, here the conflation of being made godlike and executing authority properly on earth reaches its peak; it is to Pseudo-Dionysius’s consideration of law that we will now turn.

In *The Celestial Hierarchy* Pseudo-Dionysius focuses his attention on the foundation of the Law. Although some claim, he reports, that divine law is founded through an unmediated revelation or apparition of God, he asserts that ‘the Word of God teaches us that the Law was given to us by angels’ (157). In other words, any

attempt to ground the Law in an unmediated experience of God is foolhardy; the Law's foundation is mediated. 'Before the days of the Law and after it had come,' he writes, 'it was the angels who uplifted our illustrious ancestors toward the divine and they did so by prescribing roles of conduct' (ibid.). Parallel to Derrida's aforementioned consideration of the foundation of Law, here too we find that the attempt is made to find recourse in a transcendental moment of divine authorization. It requires mediation and distribution just as surely as it must claim to have unimpeded access to the transcendent (be it justice or God).

At the same time, however, Pseudo-Dionysius seems to acknowledge the mediatedness of even divine law. 'Someone might claim that God has appeared himself and without intermediaries to some of the saints. But in fact it should be realized that scripture has clearly shown that "no one has seen" or ever will see the being of God in all its hiddenness' (ibid.). So for all the early mention of the self-revelation and self-lowering of God in tandem with the ascent and divinisation of humanity, God's transcendence and hiddenness is still intact. He acknowledges the occasional theophany, to be certain, yet nevertheless maintains that although 'it could be argued that in the scriptural tradition the sacred ordinances of the Law were given directly by God himself to Moses . . . theology quite clearly teaches that these ordinances were mediated to us by angels so that God's order might show us how it is that secondary beings are uplifted through the primary beings' (157-8). Here Pseudo-Dionysius grapples with what seems to be the direct transmission of Law from God to Moses; he stretches the definition of 'angel' by virtue of its original meaning – 'messenger' – to apply to prophets. In a sense, this is perfectly valid – although the Law may have been given directly from God to Moses in Exodus, it had to enter into written language in order to be applicable; with writing comes interpretation, exegesis, translation – in a word, mediation. Law, the attempt to embody God's justice on earth, must perforce be subject to human contexts; participation in hierarchy allows it to move ever closer to its infinitely just source – the only such possible source an opening onto impossibility.

It is only after we have come to such an understanding of the role of Law and hierarchy – and their mutual relationship to the Good – that we can appreciate Pseudo-Dionysius's comments on justice in his letters. It is in a letter to the monk Demophilus that he writes straightforwardly that the 'Word of God commands us "to pursue just things justly," and justice is pursued when each wishes to give every one

his due. And this must always be pursued justly by all' (275). That is to say, the commitment to uphold hierarchy, to continue to participate in it as fully as possible, is an essential facet of Dionysian justice. One must bear in mind, however, the full implications of the term 'hierarchy' mentioned above in order to understand the significance of this – and to avoid seeing this interdependent and graduated system as a *necessarily* oppressive system (indeed, in *Paradise Lost*, that is precisely Satan's mistake). Hierarchy in and of itself does not bear the marks of oppression; only when cut off from its sacred source does it possess this potentiality (and, incidentally, does it also lose any of its etymological significance). Although hierarchy does seem to indicate in his works a progressive, stepped relationship between God and creation, a noteworthy outcome of this worldview is the *communal* element of worship that is thus stressed. In the final analysis, divine mediation through hierarchy does not represent a necessary oppression of the individual, but can instead point towards a subsuming divinisation of the individual.

It is in this vein that Pseudo-Dionysius declares in the same letter that through 'the mediation of the primary beings, those of secondary rank receive whatever has been assigned to them by that Providence which is harmonious and thoroughly just' (*ibid.*). Resonating with the earlier discussion of the divinisation wrought through hierarchy, this passage emphasises instead the mediation by which earthly creatures receive heavenly gifts. The twofold progression of mediation and divinisation – both through hierarchy – governs the movement of justice in the Dionysian corpus. Both also involve a degree of *aporia*: through mediation, an endless process of negotiation and revaluation is invoked; through divinisation, a journey is begun towards the ever-elusive goal of likeness to God. This process of mediation and divinisation through hierarchy represents the *aporetic* nature of justice in Pseudo-Dionysius and the necessity of differentiation in the application of justice. The sacredness of a divine source is meted out through a system which inevitably, invariably draws its participants upwards towards the Godhead and toward a state of becoming like to God; through such a process the subjects within it are in a constant state of mutability.

In other words, justice requires an openness to the possibility and inevitability of change; just as Derrida's justice springs from an unbridgeable *aporia*, so too does justice in Pseudo-Dionysius rely on the intrinsically *aporetic* notion of divinisation through hierarchy. Taken at the root, the force of Pseudo-Dionysian mysticism in relation to justice is the necessarily impossible drive towards an instantiation of God

within the community and individual: this unachievable target keeps a society from lapsing into a moral stasis (stemming from complacency) or reverting to a moral authoritarianism (stemming from over-certainty). In this sense, both Derridean and Pseudo-Dionysian models require an essential break or rupture within the very structure of justice itself: we must constantly be taught what we do not know and be reminded of the limits of both our understanding and fulfilment of justice in order to be true to justice *per se*. Dedication to justice requires a degree of unknowing, a recognition of the capacity and limits of human understanding, and a belief that justice can never be fully deployed or entirely achieved in this world. Reading Pseudo-Dionysius's consistently self-questioning work of apophatic mysticism aids us in recognising these limitations – while also spurring us towards a greater participation in the divine. Only through the constant attempt to reach what we cannot but fail to reach can justice be realised.

B. *The Cloud of Unknowing*

Pseudo-Dionysius's influence is clearly manifest in a fourteenth-century English mystical text by an anonymous author, widely supposed to be a Carthusian monk: *The Cloud of Unknowing*. The author of this work also translated the *Mystical Theology* of Pseudo-Dionysius into Middle English as *Deonise Hid Divinité*; the influence of Dionysian mysticism and Neoplatonic thought on this elusive author is evident throughout *The Cloud of Unknowing*. Near the end of the text he makes his affinities clear: “[a]nd herfore it was that Scynthe Denis seyde: “The most goodly knowyng of God is that, the whiche is knowyn bi unknowyng”” (2370-1). The text itself reads more as an instruction manual for a would-be mystic attempting a Neoplatonic ascent to the One than the metaphysical hymns and nomenclatural analyses that permeate the Pseudo-Dionysian corpus. Nevertheless its analysis of selfhood and the dissolution of the self that takes place in the journey into the mystical ‘cloud of unknowing’ bears significant import for the discussion of justice at hand.

The text advises the potential practitioner to leave behind him all the knowledge of the world, to place those things in a cloud of forgetting in order to ascend to the cloud of unknowing in which God might be found. In this tenuous and aporetic position, poised between two apophatic ‘clouds,’ the ascetic is encouraged to strike ‘apon that thicke cloude of unknowyng with a scharp darte of longyng love’

(463-4). Through this act of love, the Cloud-author maintains, the ascetic can achieve a union with God. This love entirely transcends any attempt at reaching God through disputation of learning. 'For whi He may wel be loved, bot not thought. By love may He be getyn and holden; bot bi thought neither' (457-8). Only through a path of both renunciation of worldly knowledge and expression of love can the aspiring mystic hope to have an appreciation or understanding of God.

This leads, however, to a significant dissolution of selfhood as well. Although the medieval sense of the self differed considerably from modern and postmodern conceptions (that is to say, the predominant trope of medieval selfhood focusing on the relationship between the individual and the transcendent, a focus largely lost in modern and postmodern theories of selfhood), the Cloud-author's emphasis on the importance of the abandonment of self show that the dissolution of selfhood is not solely a modern or postmodern concern. Rather, many writers in the medieval period were astutely aware of the difficulties of selfhood and the problems that society placed on an individual's subjectivities.²³ The Cloud-author, at any rate, is keen to provide solutions for individuals wishing closer union with God. After practicing a particular form of meditation, the Cloud-author reports that 'schortly withoutyn thiself wil I not that thou be, ne yit aboven, ne behynde, ne on o side, ne on other. "Wher than," seist thou, "schal I be? Nogwhere, by thi tale!" Now trewly thou seist wel; for there wolde I have thee. For whi nogwhere bodily is everywhere goostly' (2293-7). The dissolution of the bodily self is here seen as a necessary prerequisite to the expansion of one's spiritual vision or understanding. The author's literalness in describing the incredulity of the aspiring mystic is indicative, perhaps, of the difficulty of the concepts involved; the strong conceptual reversals seen in Pseudo-Dionysius are here transmuted into more physical, practical terms.

The breaking down of the bodily self here exhorted leads us towards the wholly other divinity through a spiritual ascent and a sublimation of the self. Dorothee Soelle writes on the drive towards egolessness more broadly, commenting that across the centuries of the Christian mystical tradition a sublimation of the self is crucial

²³ This tendency can also be seen in the patristic period: Augustine's *Confessions*, for instance, is riddled with questions of selfhood. He opens the chapter on his adolescence by explaining: "I will try now to give a coherent account of my disintegrated self" (II, 1, 1); he writes later, "I was at odds with myself, and fragmenting myself" (VIII, 10, 22). He writes that a "human being is an immense abyss" (IV, 14, 22) even as he exclaims to God "[h]ow unfathomable the abyss of your judgments!" (IV, 4, 8). Augustine, of course, wielded immense influence throughout the medieval period; his authority as one of the chief fathers of the Church was unrivalled in the context of medieval intellectual life.

aspect of movement towards or greater understanding of God. She writes, 'it is necessary to forget the ego, and that is exactly what the mystical tradition has in mind when it connects remembering God and forgetting the ego. The process wherein the ego ceases to forget God is the same as the one wherein it begins to forget itself' (211). The forgetting of the self is an essential component of the move towards the wholly other divinity. In this investigation, mysticism's recurring drive towards selflessness allows a refashioning of subject formation that allows a greater openness to and acceptance of the Other.

This movement towards the wholly other, however, is coupled in *The Cloud of Unknowing* with a concurrent movement towards the Other more broadly defined: the societal 'Other,' which often is figured as the culturally different, marginalized, and thus excluded aspect of any society. Much postmodern thought has focused on modernity's exclusion and marginalization of the Other and has attempted to rehabilitate our awareness of this more sinister side of modernity's totalising discourse; here a pre-modern thinker offers us a unique insight into a re-evaluation of identity formation that might similarly revalue the importance of the Other. In this reappraising vein, the Cloud-author offers an exposition of charity through the standard dual commandment to love God and to love one's neighbour. He explains that love of God (which is necessary in the overall scheme of the text for ascent through the cloud of unknowing which separates mankind from God) must lead to love of one's neighbour *because* of the very dissolution of selfhood that inheres in love of God.

He writes that in the course of mystical practice, 'in this werke a parfite worcher hath no special beholdyng unto any man by himself, whether that he be sib or fremmyd [kin or stranger], freende or fo. For alle men think hym iliche sib [seem to him alike kin] unto hym, and no man fremmid. Alle men him think ben his freendes, and none his foen' (1073-1076). Through this understanding of charity, the Cloud-author reformulates his conception of selfhood: the follower of his treatise here, through his abandonment of self, is able to recognize verisimilitude and kinship in the Other. It is in direct relationship to his abandonment of self that he is able to see the commonality between himself and others around him; the kinship forged through this re-examination of selfhood precludes the violence traditionally associated with interpersonal competition. The interconnection and interdependence of humanity is stressed in this passage, highlighting the need to recognise a common ground for a

humanity rooted in compassion. The sort of kinship proposed – unity in multiplicity – does not serve to divide kinship groups or exert power, but rather to establish a brotherhood firmly entrenched in recognition of the love of God for mankind. Through an understanding of the sublation or *Aufhebung*²⁴ of the limited self into the infinite divinity, selfhood can be redefined in a manner more conducive to participation in the poetics of justice outlined in this project.

These concepts developed in *The Cloud of Unknowing* bear relevance not only to the history of Christian mysticism, I believe they have a substantially broader import in the overall development of a poetics of justice. In order to illustrate some of these points of convergence, it is helpful to turn momentarily to a work of contemporary theory that deals with similar problems of selfhood. Regina Schwartz writes astutely on the theme of identity and violence in her work *The Curse of Cain*; her primary concern in the text is the oscillation between models of divine scarcity and divine plenitude in the Hebrew Bible and the consequent violence that follows when scarcity is predicated as a divine attribute. She also comments on the importance of a selfhood created with an openness towards the Other that bears important weight to the present discussion of *The Cloud of Unknowing*. Identity formation forged in the light of principles of divine scarcity, she argues, is the root cause of the monotheistic tradition's violent heritage. 'Violence is not only what we do to the Other. It is prior to that. Violence is the very construction of the Other' (5): a rigid division between self and other, particularly when coupled with a vision of God's Oneness as a form of scarcity, leads to violence and injustice.

On the other hand, however, she writes that when 'identity is mobile and multiple, the Other is difficult to name – and to hurt' (20). Identity formation, figured here in terms of openness and mutability, can be achieved without the rigidity of selfhood that leads to the construction of an Other (and the consequent violence of that process). That is to say, the very difficulty of naming that Schwartz sees in the mobility and multiplicity of ideal identity formation – analogous to mysticism's recurrent preoccupation with the necessary impossibility of naming God – prevents a sense of selfhood predicated upon the existence of an Other. If the self is always changing and always progressing, the lines between self and Other blur, fade, or cease

²⁴ 'Sublation' is the most common English translation for this Hegelian term which indicates both the simultaneous destruction and preservation of both elements being fused through dialectic. It also captures a certain degree of the 'raising up' or 'elevation' that occurs through Hegelian synthesis through its assonance with 'sublimation.'

to matter. Within a model of scarcity, such lines must be guarded, patrolled, and policed in order to protect resources or defend identity; in a paradigm centred on plenitude, the picture becomes far more open, unresolved, and mutable.

Instead of a vision of scarcity, Schwartz is keen to emphasize the role of divine plenitude and multiplicity in identity formation free from the stain of conflict. She sees non-identical repetition as a crucial component of the resolution of these difficulties; the possibility of figuring God as predicated upon principles of abundance allows a respite from the disputes of selfhood and identity often found in societies contemporary and ancient, religious and secular. 'An understanding of mimetic desire suggests that once you start loving, either you lose your identity or else the loved one does: someone loses. But if repetition is never identical, new creations, new possibilities, signal new identities, rather than rivalry for the Same. Plenitude proliferates identities without violence. And when such plenitude is figured as a God, it is as a God who gives and goes on giving endlessly without being used up' (117-8). In other words, by envisioning a God whose Oneness gives rise to plenitude rather than scarcity, boundaries can be made between self and Other that accord with divine love. The sublation of the self in God's plenitude allows for an infinite differentiation without competition for the finite; identity is instead grounded in God's infinite love.

In this movement, a Marionian gesture can be found – rather than allowing the inevitable *human* material conditions of scarcity that arise to be reflected onto our notions of God (as in the case of the idol), Schwartz instead proposes a vision of God in line with Marion's icon. God is not a reflection of our concerns and limitations; our representations of and discourse about God must not bear the marks of these conspicuously human conditions. Rather, God's love must be allowed to define Him and direct our discourse about Him; the particularly troublesome notions of Self and Other must be dealt with in a similar fashion, remaining open to the infinite divinity. The consequent opening onto divine plenitude allows a theory of identity formation to emerge that is markedly distinct from secular models; the love of God allows the significant emergence of identity through a unity in multiplicity that finds resonance across the Christian mystic tradition. Through this lens a distinct understanding of justice might be moved towards: a poetics of justice that escapes formulation and definitive theorising and instead prefers the flourishing of an openness and a commonality of identity. This is uniquely possible through the Johannine formulation

of God's connaturality with love. It is in the light that we return to the Cloud-author in order to analyse his deployment of love and its role in identity formation.

It is through love, the Cloud-author writes, that commonality of kinship is possible. The dissolution of self discussed above allows for a significant re-evaluation of selfhood and otherness; love here is used to rehabilitate the relationship of self to other in a framework of commonality. He writes that '[l]ove is soche a might that it makith alle thing comoun' (367). The simple statement disguises a significant ontological reformation: love's power is capable of making differences dissolve into commonness. This claim has significant bearing on subjectivity: the ability to dissolve one's own personal boundaries and see kinship in all one's fellow humans is arrived at through this divine love in which all things are common.²⁵

He continues, '[k]nyt thee therefore to Him bi love and by beleve; and than by vertewe of that knot thou schalt be comoun parcener with Him and with alle that by love so be knittyd unto Him' (371-3). Through love and faith, the Cloud-author maintains, a knitting or tying to the divine is possible so intimate that one can be a 'common partner' with Him; here the practice of love that has already been shown to break down barriers between Self and Other is also of such magnitude that unites the practitioner to a common partnership with God. The divinisation through hierarchy to be found in Pseudo-Dionysius's corpus reaches a more individuated status (as to be expected from an author very likely a hermit) in *The Cloud of Unknowing*. It should be noted that this is perhaps the greatest divergence from Dionysian orthodoxy in the Cloud-author's work: Denys Turner writes cogently that the Cloud-author replaces the 'sophisticated, nuanced, *dialectical* hierarchy of self-negating dissimilar and similar similarities' that characterises Pseudo-Dionysius's worldview with 'a simple, uniform, non-dialectical progression towards simplification which is broken off by love's denial of all knowledge *tout court*, to be replaced by the alternative and rival knowing of love' (199). In both Pseudo-Dionysius and *The Cloud of Unknowing*, however, what is especially pertinent to the argument at hand is their common concern for the dissolution, emptying, and crossing over of identities in the process of ascent towards God.

These crossed and interpenetrating identities of Self and Other, human and divine, are indeed elemental aspects of the language of mysticism as such. Besides

²⁵ The Middle English has the sense, as today, both of common ownership and of common occurrence – an important interpenetration of meanings that reverberates throughout the text.

being thematically emphasised in mystic texts, one may also find rhetorical instantiations of these crossings embedded within the language of the texts themselves. Michel de Certeau writes persuasively that mystic speech ‘was fundamentally “translational.” It crossed the lines. It created a whole by unceasing operations upon foreign words’ (1992, 118). Mystic speech operates in part, de Certeau maintains, by allowing a constant rupture of the boundaries between Self and Other; its effectiveness resides in its constant manoeuvrings between and across disciplines, genres, and, perhaps most fundamentally, ways of speaking. It also necessitates a similar rupture and metamorphosis in the divisions between humanity and God.

De Certeau makes a distinction between, on the one hand, a theology that would see divine language as divorced from its historical or cultural background, and consequently to be evaluated solely on internal cohesiveness and truth claims²⁶ and, on the other hand, a *mystics*²⁷ that sees divine language as historically situated and inextricably connected to its speaker. To put it another way, de Certeau salvages theology from being an ahistorical system for the generation of ‘truth’ and instead wishes to see the mystical component of theology synchronically, as a continuing process of individual voices. Through this exegetical framework, *mystics* emerges both as a historically-rooted cultural phenomenon (hence his synchronic analyses of mysticism of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries) and a diachronic exchange of voices, themes, and concepts that can be traced across the Christian tradition (hence his more overarching claims about tendencies in mystic speech).

Along these lines, de Certeau develops the distinctive qualities of mystic speech, in particular its divine authorisation in the mystic text. He claims the mystic realises that since ‘the Speaking Word *must* exist even though it may become inaudible, he temporarily substitutes his speaking *I* for the inaccessible divine *I* . . .

²⁶ He elaborates on this: ‘[t]o the extent that the world is no longer perceived as *spoken* by God, that it has become opacified, objectified, and detached from its supposed speaker, two orientations organize the ways of treating this new linguistic situation. One takes up the statements disorbed from the system that gave them the value of “spoken words” [*paroles*], isolated from their Enunciator by history, to consider them as statements to be appraised and ordered according to internal truth criteria’ (188). This, it can be seen, is theology conceived of ‘philosophically’ – when ‘philosophy’ is taken to mean the analytic tradition. De Certeau is opposed to this method of analysis, preferring instead a system that ‘focuses on the speech act itself, which made itself heard by faith . . . The mystic is oriented to this second perspective’ (ibid.).

²⁷ This is the translator’s neologism for de Certeau’s use of *la mystique*, a term more specific and historically grounded than would be translated via ‘mysticism.’ See pages ix – x for a fuller explanation of de Certeau’s French terminology and the translator’s attempt to capture the sense and subtlety of it.

Like the position (also contradictory) of “author,” the mystic sustains the question that cannot be forgotten but cannot be resolved either: that of the speaking subject. He “holds” this void in suspense’ (op. cit., 188). Here, the dissolution of the self is coupled with the assumption of the divine self in order to authorise the mystic’s message; the lack of divine speech *now* necessitates the deployment of the mystic as productive of divine speech *per se*. The identity of the subject or speaking voice in mysticism is constantly held open, in suspense, and unresolved. By necessity the mystic text is characterised by an opposition to closure: just as mystic speech itself must be an irresolvable movement from speaking *I* to inaccessible divine *I*, so too must the text remain ever fluid and ever indeterminate.

The next requirement in de Certeau’s framework is the space for this mystic and ‘divine’ speech to take place: ‘[t]his *I* who speaks in the place of (and instead of) the Other also requires a *space* of expression corresponding to what the world was in relation to the speech of God’ (ibid.). In other words, the mystic’s impossible – yet necessary – assumption of the divine *I* requires in turn a place in which its voice can be heard, can be projected. The space created for mystic speech to take place in is, de Certeau asserts, the soul. He writes that the ‘soul becomes the place in which that *separation of self from itself* prompts a *hospitality*, now “ascetic,” now “mystic,” that *makes room* for the other. And because that “other” is infinite, the soul is an infinite space’ (op. cit., 195, italics his). Particularly crucial here is his link between dissolution of self with *hospitality*: the vanquishing of the all-important ego leads not to apathy towards or detachment from the world, but rather a more vigorous involvement in it. The infinite other requires an infinite hospitality; the mystic’s soul, in replacing what the world is for the speech of God, is able to fulfil this need. The need to sublimate the ego into the divine (as the intended authorization of mystic speech) and the soul into the world (as the requisite audience of mystic speech) leads not to a destruction of the Other or the Self but to an infinite *accommodation* towards the Other by the Self.

In respect to this infinite accommodation heralded by the transformations of mystic speech, de Certeau’s analysis of the dual motion of particular to universal (that is, of both speaker and soul) ensures that the violent tendency implicit in monotheistic scarcity is avoided. That is to say, this tendency that inheres in mystic speech to sublimate the self into God and the soul into the world opens up a space in which otherness is absorbed yet remains distinct. In mystic speech otherness is

paradoxically, dialectically both destroyed and preserved. As Schwartz points out, the ‘One suggests both single and All, exclusive and complete’ (33); the Oneness of God potentially contains both possibilities. This is both the promise and the threat of the universalism implied in the discussion of de Certeau above. Mysticism, in this regard, allows a space to emerge in which the Oneness of God might be imagined as both preserving and destroying selfhood in God and language: the *Aufhebung* of the mystic into both the divine and the written.

Schwartz’s analysis goes on to propose an alternative to the risks of an all-encompassing universalism, maintaining the need for differentiation. She continues, the ‘danger of universalism is that totalization will incorporate all difference. What needs to be imagined is neither a circle that includes everyone – a whole that submerges and subjects all individuality to itself, a totality that closes possibility – nor a part that reviles all other parts’ (ibid.). This vision of inclusion finds a middle ground between conflict-ridden atomism and the sedate homogenisation of absolute universality. I see the language of mysticism as being particularly conducive to this vision of a just environment for identity formation. The fragmentation or woundedness of mystic speech mentioned earlier prevents totality from being realised; its groundedness in the transcendent predisposes it away from the sort of troublesome atomism Schwartz also alludes to in this passage. The crossing of divine and human realms through kenosis emphasised in mystic texts precludes any sort of ideological totality from being assumed: mysticism is constantly reminding us of the gaps in our knowledge and the limits or breaking points of the words we use in pursuit of knowledge. Mysticism creates a middle ground between the particularity of self (and stringent boundaries between Self and Other that lead to violence and injustice) and the totalisation and equally troublesome subsuming of difference possible in the totality of universalism.

C. Meister Eckhart

The writings of the Dominican theologian Meister Eckhart rank among some of the most incandescent and controversial in the western Christian mystic tradition. Although little is known definitively about his life, it seems that he spent most of his career in Cologne (where he likely received some instruction from Albertus Magnus) – although he occupied the Dominican chair of theology at the University of Paris for some years. It is important to note the heresy trial against Eckhart, instigated by the

Archbishop of Cologne. He insisted to his death of his innocence, producing defences both written and oral of the orthodoxy of his thought.

Nevertheless, in 1329 John XXII promulgated the Bull ‘In agro dominico,’ posthumously condemning twenty-six articles of Eckhart’s teaching as ‘thorns and obstacles contrary to the very clear truth of faith’ (McGinn, ed., 77). Scholars debate the veracity of the claims of the Bull, finding patristic and biblical support for many of the condemned articles. At any rate, Eckhart’s work – his preaching in particular – was filled with *in quantum* or ‘insofar as’ statements designed to provide rhetorical force to his arguments; the Bull, to its great credit, recognises this, telling us that Meister Eckhart ‘professed the Catholic faith at the end of his life and revoked and also deplored the twenty-six articles . . . *insofar as* they could generate in the minds of the faithful a heretical opinion’ (italics mine, op. cit., 81). Many of his more volatile remarks must be understood in the framework of this *in quantum* principle – for example, his discussion of the just man *insofar as* he is just assumes a formal or abstract consideration of the just man solely as just, *per se*.

Although many contemporary writers focus on the Meister’s vernacular works, praising its unique and often explosive use of Middle High German, a thorough consideration of his thought must take into account his extensive Latin works as well. Eckhart’s commentary on the Gospel of John provides a useful example of the radicality and astuteness that his Latin thought can achieve and is particularly relevant to this project. This work can be considered more eisegetical than exegetical: that is to say, rather than taking *out* ideas from the scripture (the *ex-* of *exegetical*), Eckhart is keen to attribute *into* the Gospel of John concepts not readily apparent in the text as such. He prefaces this conceptual insertion on the prologue of the gospel, writing that it is ‘also clear that these words of the Evangelist, if correctly investigated, teach us the natures and properties of things both in their existence and their operation, and so while they build up our faith, they also instruct us about the nature of things’ (126). With this justification behind him, and with no further warning or explanation, he leaps into an analysis of the just man insofar as he is just.

He offers fifteen points of explication on this theme, leading towards a Christological understanding of the just man and an Incarnational relationship between the just man and justice; constraints of space preclude my here analysing all fifteen. The third article, however, is particularly revealing: the ‘just man is the word of justice, that by which justice expresses and manifests itself. If justice did not

justify, no one would have knowledge of it, but it would be known to itself alone' (126-7). Eckhart here stresses the discursive nature of justice: the need for mysticism more generally to be expressed beyond itself has been discussed earlier (in relation to Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*); the movement here is for justice itself to move into discourse in order to be understood more broadly. Particularly significant is the linguistic turn: by writing that the just man is the *word* of justice, the Meister focuses our attention on the role that language and reading have in the process of justice.

Eckhart goes on to refigure the relationship between the just man and justice in Incarnational terms. First he writes that 'justice has an exemplar in itself, which is the likeness or idea in which and according to which it forms and informs or clothes every just man and thing' (127). That is to say, justice bears within itself an archetype from which instantiations are to be made: justice already carries the possibility of replication in the world (in Incarnational terms, of course, Eckhart is simply reaffirming the orthodox belief in the procession of the Trinity). He continues, writing that the 'just man proceeds from and is begotten by justice and by that very fact is distinguished from it . . . Nonetheless, the just man is not different in nature from justice . . . the just man is the offspring and son of justice' (ibid.). Here the thrust of Eckhart's argument is clear: the relationship between justice and the just man is identical with that between God the Father and Christ. In other words, this discussion centres on a fundamentally *human* consideration of justice: the *in quantum* principle by which these passages are to be read blurs the lines between justice and incarnation. The ability to talk about the just man *insofar as* he is just (that is, in strictly formal or hypothetical terms) is linked with Trinitarian discussion that allows for discussion of Christ *insofar as* he is divine or human. The purely formal divisions that the *in quantum* method allows are never instantiated in the world: as Christ's humanity is ever inextricably linked to his divinity, so too does the just man exist only through, with, and in justice.

In Meister Eckhart's vernacular sermons the theme of divinisation returns, along with its concomitant implications on justice. In his Middle High German sermon on the text *justi vivent in aeternum*, he asserts that 'God's being is my life. If my life is God's being, then God's existence must be my existence and God's is-

ness²⁸ is my is-ness, neither less nor more' (187). This, understandably, attracted the attention of the Cologne and Avignon officials assigned to assemble the dossier of heterodox statements for Eckhart's heresy proceedings. Yet, as has been seen earlier in this section, the theme of becoming one with God – divinisation – has been played out across the Christian mystic tradition. In any event, this absolute interpenetration of being that the Meister proposes has radical implications for justice. 'For just men,' he writes in the same sermon, 'the pursuit of justice is so imperative that if God were not just, they would not give a fig for God; and they stand fast by justice . . . Nothing is more painful or hard for a just man than what is contrary to justice' (186). These strong words, chosen in a rhetorical manoeuvre to rouse his audience towards truth, demonstrate Eckhart's dedication towards both the co-identity of creator and creation and the according emphasis placed on justice.

The path towards union with God for Eckhart remains the same as we have seen in Pseudo-Dionysius and the Cloud-author: love.²⁹ 'Some simple people think that they will see God as if he were standing there and they here. It is not so. God and I, we are one. I accept God into me in knowing; I go into God in loving' (188). The twofold relationship between God and mankind outlined here consists of knowledge and love: God enters humanity through the intellect, so to speak, and humanity enters God through the heart. Especially important is Eckhart's quickness to discount 'visions' of God in the corporeal or material sense: he delineates clearly the entirely separate ontological stratum in which God dwells; visions of God must accordingly be of a nature altogether different from corporeal sight.

Eckhart even goes so far in this attempt to reach a God beyond ontology as to challenge (albeit obliquely, in the context of an *in quantum* proposal, and in the vernacular) the Trinitarian basis of Christian doctrine. In his sermon on the theme 'all things that are alike love one another and unite with one another, and all things that

²⁸ This term (in the original, *isticheit*), coined by Eckhart, 'appears in the Cologne [heresy] proceedings, where *isticheit* is rendered as *quidditas* ("what-it-is"), but it is not certain what Eckhart had in mind, for his response here is totally in terms of *esse* or "existence"' (337).

²⁹ Such claims for the transformative properties of love are by no means uncommon. St John of the Cross, for example, cites Gal. 2:20 as a scriptural authorisation for this view, commenting 'in saying "I live, now not I," he meant that even though he had life it was not his because he was transformed in Christ, and it was divine more than human . . . In accord with this likeness and transformation, we can say that his life and Christ's were one life through union of love' (518). This attribution of the fusing of two into one through love (often figured in terms of romantic love), a trope common to the rhetoric of courtly love, has had a wide-ranging impact on the mystic tradition, taking the Song of Songs as its primary scriptural support. See also John McIntyre's excellent treatment of the significance of love in Christian theology more broadly: *On the Love of God* (London: Collins, 1962).

are unlike flee from one another and hate one another' (197) he describes the uncreated aspect of the soul (traditionally understood as the intellect) as a light or a spark that 'comprehends God without a medium, uncovered, naked, as he is in himself' (198). The soul wishes to know God without mediation. This spark, perfectly detached from worldly things, the Meister asserts, 'is not content with the simple divine essence in its repose . . . but it wants to know the source of this essence, it wants to go into the simple ground, into the quiet desert, into which distinction never gazed, not the Father, nor the Son, nor the Holy Spirit' (ibid.). Here Eckhart envisions the uncreated aspect of the soul seeking a divine essence beyond its Trinitarian attributes. Although he is certain to delineate very clearly that the spark of the soul seeks to move beyond the persons of the Trinity only insofar as they are personal attributes, it is easy to see the alarm that this passage might have caused in Cologne and Avignon. The striking imagery he defiantly deploys calls to mind the tropes of both journeying and emptying; the soul's passage into a 'quiet desert' in order to find a God beyond or without being has a striking resonance with both the apophatic and monastic traditions.³⁰ The essential displacedness that this mention of simple ground and quiet deserts conjures is significant: it implies a subject ever moving closer to the truth beyond appearances without ever arriving, a discontentedness with the present that presses the individual ever onwards in pursuit of ultimate truths.

Denys Turner offers a penetrating analysis of the differences between Dionysian and Eckhartian language in his work *The Darkness of God*. 'Denys [Pseudo-Dionysius] is, as it were, content to let theological language break down under the weight of its internal contradictoriness . . . it is his strategy to let *language* pass over into a silence of its own making' (151). As has been seen above, Dionysian language is rigorously aware of its own limitations; although Meister Eckhart undoubtedly has the same apophatic awareness, 'there is in Eckhart a certain rhetorical strenuousness: he twists the discourse, breaks it up, recomposes it. His rhetorical devices are *artifices*. Whereas Denys *lets* language collapse into silence and through the cessation of speech express the apophatic. Eckhart wants to force the imagery to *say* the apophatic' (ibid.). Turner makes this very valid point: Eckhart's

³⁰ Edmond Jabès writes movingly on the relationship between language of the desert and apophaticism (of a sort). 'The experience of the desert is both the place of the Word – where it is supremely word – and the non-place where it loses itself in the infinite. So that we never know whether we catch it at the moment it springs up or at the moment it begins ever so slowly to fade: the dazzling moment of its issue or its imperceptible vanishing' (172).

language is ever stretching against its constraints, desperately seeking whatever rhetorical device is necessary to make God manifest *in* his texts themselves. His brazen linguistic manoeuvres are a direct result of his constant struggle to express the ineffable divinity: thus his confrontation with fourteenth-century authorities, thus his interest to contemporary postmodern philosophers and theologians.³¹ The language of the vernacular sermons in particular demonstrates Eckhart's endless struggle with these contradictions. Writes Turner, in language strongly reminiscent of the earlier section on mystic speech (and its concomitant implications for justice), 'he will use speech, necessarily broken, contradictory, absurd, paradoxical, conceptually hyperbolic speech, to bring to insight the ineffability of God' (ibid.).

Eckhart preaches on 1 John 4:8 in Latin sermon VI, and it is here, as is to be expected, that the rhetoric of love and being interpenetrate to their fullest extent. "“God is love” first because love is common to all, excluding no one’ (212), Eckhart writes, recalling the language of commonality attributed to love in *The Cloud of Unknowing*. ‘From this joint procession two things follow. First, God is common: He is every being and the whole existence of all things (“In him, through him, and from him” [Rm. 11:36])’ (ibid.). This reaffirms the major themes developed in the preceding pages (and in the earlier section on ontology): if love is predicated as the divine attribute *par excellence*, God's commonality is emphasised and the relationship between the members of the created world strengthened. Through this all-inclusive ‘joint procession’ of God-as-love an understanding of the divine essence as participatory and as creation as mutually interdependent is established. From these notions comes a reaffirmed sense of the interconnectedness of humanity, and through this – and the allied notion in Eckhart's corpus of the divine nature inherent in humanity – a sense of justice can be developed that combines and reconciles both the divinisation through hierarchy found in Pseudo-Dionysius and the radical abandonment of self advocated by the Cloud-author. Through love's communalising force, mankind is raised towards God, God empties himself of his divinity for the sake of mankind, and the individual ego is sublated into the divine.

³¹ It is difficult to imagine even Derrida accusing the Eckhart revealed in the passage mentioned in the preceding paragraph of an essential hyperessentiality, as he does most thinkers in the apophatic tradition.

VIII. Simone Weil and J.M. Coetzee: Reading Justice

A posthumous collection of aphorisms and brief essays taken from the notebooks of Simone Weil form the volume *Gravity and Grace*; within its pages are found passages of extraordinary insight and clarity into the theological discussion at hand. Weil by no means intended to be a theologian – despite her interest in Catholicism she remained unbaptised, at the margins of the Church throughout her life. Nevertheless, her writings bear significant import and reveal a mind capable of applying the lessons of the mystic tradition to the social conditions of the twentieth century; recent decades have seen a tremendous interest in her work, bringing her within the fold of more mainstream theologians. Her writings, many written in the midst of the Second World War, are filled with deep concern for the meaning of justice in a society wracked by the tumult of conflict. South African novelist J.M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*, discussed briefly above, is likewise infused with an acute perception of what justice might mean today, with particular references to the injustices created by imperialism. These two writers, coming from extremely different backgrounds and with massively divergent aims, nevertheless both present a formulation of justice centred on *reading*; the process of reading as such is refigured in these texts as a form of practicing justice. It is in this sense that a *poetics* of justice can be realised in Coetzee's parable: through its elusive search for virtue in an unnamed land, his text schools the reader in a kenotic form of reading.

Simone Weil is straightforward in her analysis of the importance of reading to justice. In a section the editor entitles 'Readings,' Weil writes: 'Justice. To be ever ready to admit that another person is something quite different from what we read when he is there (or when we think about him). Or rather, to read in him that he is certainly something different, perhaps something completely different, from what we read in him. Every being cries out to be read differently' (134-5). Here, Weil's central concern is an exegetical openness; the necessity of reading others through an infinitely incomplete and corrective process is highlighted in this passage. Justice itself is equated with a process of reading that is always open to negotiation and correction; Weil makes the urgency of this need clear. If for Pseudo-Dionysius justice entails a progressive participation in hierarchy, Weil completes the thought by recognizing that progression will inevitably involve a constant evolution that must be accounted for through ongoing adjustment of our estimation of others and our relationship to and involvement in the world and our communities – and the texts that

form a constituent part of all these things.³² This sense of a continuous and ongoing change emphasises the necessary fluidity of the implementation of justice in the world and recognises the danger inherent in seeing history as a closed or teleological process.

Particularly critical in this project is that she assigns this conceptual process to reading: just as for Derrida textuality – and its subsequent deconstructability – is the implicit site of justice, so too does Weil extend the import of reading to social relations and assigns it a central role in the deployment of justice. ‘We read, but also *we are read by*, others. Interferences in these readings. Forcing someone to read himself as we read him (slavery). Forcing others to read us as we read ourselves (conquest). A mechanical process. More often than not a dialogue between deaf people’ (135). In this display of brittle misreadings and misrepresentations, Weil highlights the social implications of this process of reading and interpretation; she makes evident the consequences of the brutal misreadings that have plagued so much of modern history.

She is clear, however, on the frequently unintentional aspect of injustice: rarely is there an insidious desire to sin against justice, rather an inherited set of paradigms, vocabularies – in sum, *readings* – that prevent one society or individual from just interaction with another. ‘We can be unjust through the will to offend justice or through a wrong reading of justice – but the second is nearly always the case’ (ibid.). It is not through outright malice that injustice is most often committed, but rather through conflicting readings of justice or conflicted beliefs in how justice is best to be achieved. The troublesome and ever-elusive remedy, then, must be found in the source of the problem itself: reading. Poetry and literature have as much to do with the creation of a just society as philosophy and theology; without the ability to properly read the Other, justice towards the Other is impossible. The development of open vocabularies and fluid narratives thus becomes the task for a specifically *poetic*

³² André Brink points to the necessity for this progressively-oriented system of justice through the bleak lens of Apartheid South Africa in his compelling novel *Looking on Darkness*. A conversation between the narrator and his lover provides a concrete discussion of the importance of openness to change and improvement touched upon above. ‘“And one day. . . ?” she whispered. “Do you think we’ll ever arrive at a world of peace, a world without violence, a world of dignity?” “No,” I said. “For I can’t believe in Utopia. It’s impossible for this world ever to become wholly good or wholly beautiful. But it can always be made a little better than it is. And if I don’t fight to keep that small possibility open, everything will be smothered in blood”’ (291).

notion of justice, as opposed to more rigid formulaic or theoretical applications of the principle.

Weil herself seems to recognize the difficulty in determining which reading of justice ought to predominate. 'What is the difference between the just and the unjust if all invariably act according to the justice they read?' (135). Both groups have in mind an idealised justice, a set programme that they wish to implement in the world. If all govern their actions through a particular reading of justice, how can we properly condemn those whose readings of justice undeniably lead to brutality and destruction? What are the criteria to be used in determining a just and an unjust reading of the world? Weil adds, fearfully, '[w]hat love of justice is a guarantee against a bad reading?' (ibid.). It seems as though a bifurcation must be made between legitimate and illegitimate readings of justice; the greater difficulty, however, lies in safeguarding against this split itself and assuring that it does not become totalising or wrongly exclusive.

The solution Weil proposes is found in mysticism. She writes that 'mysticism is the only source of virtue for humanity. Because when men do not believe that there is infinite mercy behind the curtain of the world, or when they think that this mercy is in front of the curtain, they become cruel' (110-11). Mysticism, by preserving the memory of divine mercy that exceeds and transcends the world, promotes human virtue by reminding us of the incompleteness of our knowledge and of any consequent attempt to direct the course of history definitively or absolutely. Mysticism forces us to focus on the gaps in our understanding; it recalls to us the importance of the transcendence of the wholly other. This line of reasoning relates back to my earlier discussion of the implications of Platonic and Aristotelian metaphysics – an entirely worldly conception of justice will inevitably result in an attempt to implement the *concept* or *theory* of that justice over and above the rights of individuals. The belief that ultimate goodness is reachable in this world leads inevitably to an attempt to make that goodness manifest – whatever the cost. That is to say, totalitarianism is the ultimate end of the cruelty that Weil sees as an inexorable result of disbelieving in an infinite mercy beyond this world. Her discussion also recalls Derrida's insistence that justice must be always *a-venir*, that being yet-to-come or *at hand* is an irreplaceable component of justice. Mysticism of whatever denomination, in this light, preserves an ontological opening onto the impossible mercy – and, thus, justice – that must necessarily exceed this world.

In another passage in *Gravity and Grace* Simone Weil focuses on the crucifixion in its uninterpretability as the essential moment of justice. 'To be just it is necessary to be naked and dead -- without imagination. That is why the model of justice has to be naked and dead. The cross alone is not open to imaginary imitation' (87-8). Weil here presses forward the notion that the imitation of Christ is not to be used merely as a rhetorical tool on the path to justice, another metaphor among many to be considered. Rather, she asserts that the justice of the cross is one immune to imaginary repetition, and instead provides the greatest gulf separating humanity from God's justice. Emptying oneself completely, she proposes the most radical form of kenosis yet encountered. In essence, she takes to its conclusion the kenotic argument developed in Pseudo-Dionysius: in order to be just, to read justly, or to read justice justly, the reader must undergo a self-emptying which mirrors that of Christ. This is the true assumption of divinity, the aporetic divinisation towards justice discussed earlier deployed in starkly resolute terms.

The imitation of Christ for Weil does not have the standard, quotidian sense of acting in a generous, self-sacrificing manner to others as we imagine Christ might choose to do. Rather, it entails a very literal, unimaginative transformation into Christ's moment of supreme kenosis on the cross. Just as, paradoxically, the greatest leap linguistically is into silence, so too does Weil propose the greatest imaginative leap possible into an unimaginative *imitatio Christi*. She writes, 'I have to be like God, but like God crucified. Like God almighty in so far as he is bound by necessity' (89). Divinisation here is not a gesture of supreme self-exaltation, but rather a moment of deepest kenosis. The *imitatio Christi* is refigured as an aporetic path to justice; the abandonment of self advocated by the Cloud-author and the divinisation through hierarchy found in Pseudo-Dionysius find a synthesis in this movement. One must abandon oneself, empty oneself wholly, Weil asserts, in order to avoid the risk of reading justice in properly; the acknowledgement of the transcendent and the reminder of human incompleteness that mysticism offer a panacea to the cruelty of misreading.

Coetzee's novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* raises, under the same rubric of reading justice and the concomitant cruelties of misreading, a different set of questions. Although in a format markedly different from Weil's philosophical and theological musings (which often border on the aphoristic), *Waiting for the Barbarians* nevertheless shows a similar concern for the possibilities of a just reading

(although it focuses far more on the cruelties that proceed from imperial misreading). The process of reading the parable *per se* – set in the outskirts of a dystopic, never named empire – becomes a hermeneutical exercise that provides a rich foundation for the flourishing of justice. That is to say, through the process of reading the novel, the reader is schooled in a recognition of the ambiguities of power relations and justice. The lack of clear-cut moral high ground serves to highlight the difficulties in an unending model of justice as unfinished journey and unending hermeneutical process; the graphic representations of the Empire's unthinking, formulaic violence and cruelty makes the reader similarly aware of the disadvantages of rigid, centralised, unresponsive misreadings of justice.

The narrator is an unnamed magistrate of a small, untroubled colonial outpost. Colonel Joll, a member of the imperial government's military-intelligence division, comes to the outpost in order to ascertain the risk of a 'barbarian' attack against the Empire. The nomadic people that live outside the borders of 'civilisation' pose no real threat to the Empire; nevertheless, the Colonel is convinced that his application of torturous interrogation of barbarian prisoners will yield truth of the supposed impending attack. The narrator, far from an admirable character in many respects, nevertheless resists the Colonel's depraved campaign, albeit in a muted and often misguided manner. The magistrate himself acknowledges his ambiguous moral standing: 'I was not, as I liked to think, the indulgent pleasure-loving opposite of the cold rigid Colonel. I was the lie that Empire tells itself when times are easy, he the truth that Empire tells when harsh winds blow. Two sides of Imperial rule, no more, no less' (148). His lenient – not to say lax – rule of the border town was not that of an enlightened despot or a representation of imperial goodwill, rather a mere luxury of inconsistency or inconformity, allowable because of its relative unimportance at the time.

Particularly useful, however, are the tropes of the *reading* of justice that come up in the tale. The novel begins, in fact, with the hint that the Colonel's reading might be impaired: 'I have never seen anything like it: two little discs of glass suspended in front of his eyes in loops of wire. Is he blind? I could understand it if he wanted to hide blind eyes. But he is not blind. The discs are dark, they look opaque from the outside, but he can see through them' (1). Throughout the novel, even when indoors and vision becomes difficult, the Colonel is sure to keep his sunglasses on, shielding him from the sun and delineating him from the provincials. The novel opens, then,

with a doubled obscurity: the Colonel's darkened lenses obscuring his eyesight, and the narrator's own difficulty in reading what these strange objects could possibly be. Later on, after the magistrate's imprisonment for 'treasonously consorting with the enemy' (85), the Colonel's interrogation of him includes an exercise in reading.

One of the magistrate's hobbies as he idled his years away in the outpost of Empire was to collect archaeological remnants of the previous civilisation, including wooden slips on which obscure and incomprehensible characters were written in an ancient and lost tongue. In the Colonel's hands, these become probable evidence of coded messages between the magistrate and 'the enemy.' Asked to translate their 'coded message,' the magistrate pretends that they bear records of the various tortures the Colonel and his men have perpetrated on their prisoners. Eventually, he reads the final slip. 'Now let us see what the next one says. See, there is only a single character. It is the barbarian character *war*, but it has other senses too. It can stand for *vengeance*, and, if you turn it upside down like this, it can be made to read *justice*. There is no knowing which sense is intended. That is part of barbarian cunning' (122). Here, an invented reading of a dead language has justice figured merely as war inverted; the magistrate emphasises the necessary ambiguity of this (fictionalised, invented) language. This episode functions as a microcosm of this particular theme of the novel: the magistrate's reading is ambiguous and uncertain, but *necessarily so*. The parable offers a reading exercise in recognising the injustices that spring from an over-certain reading; the magistrate here offers a picture of the need for an uncertain, shifting relationship to the text (and the Other as text).

He continues reporting to the Colonel during his interrogation to say that the set of slips 'form an allegory. They can be read in many orders' (ibid.), each one telling a different allegorical tale. These stories of dead civilisations can be found everywhere, he claims, even 'the air . . . if you listen carefully, with a sympathetic ear, you can hear them echoing forever within the second sphere. The night is best: sometimes when you have difficulty falling asleep it is because your ears have been reached by the cries of the dead which, like their writings, are open to many interpretations' (123). The multiplicity of stories – and allegorical interpretations of those stories – breeds a polyglossic rendering of the need for an open and constantly readjusting interpretive structure. Reading stretches beyond the text in his exposition; despite his confrontation with Colonel Joll he maintains this provoking insistence on

the ambiguity of language and the necessity to be open to rereading and reinterpreting texts – and impossibility of coming to justice otherwise.

In a similarly defiant meeting with one of the guards that alternately feeds and tortures him, the magistrate completes the thought only half-implied in the previous passage. ‘Forgive me if the question seems impudent, but I would like to ask: How do you find it possible to eat afterwards, after you have been . . . working with people? . . . Do you find it easy to take food afterwards? I have imagined that one would want to wash one’s hands. But no ordinary washing would be enough, one would require priestly intervention, a ceremonial cleansing, don’t you think?’ (138). The magistrate’s bewilderment as to the practical, physical repercussions of torture move towards a realisation of the profound pollution wrought by such injustice. He continues: ‘[d]o not misunderstand me, I am not blaming you or accusing you, I am long past that. Remember, I too have devoted a life to the law, I know its processes, I know that the workings of justice are often obscure . . . I am trying to imagine how you breathe and eat and live from day to day. But I cannot! That is what troubles me! If I were he, I say to myself, my hands would feel so dirty that it would choke me – ‘ (ibid.). It is not any sort of profound metaphysical argument against injustice the magistrate here proposes, but simply a bewildered fascination with the possibility that this man, too, could sit down and eat a meal, sequestering away his barbarous daily activities. Mandel has no answer, no justification to offer. He bashes the magistrate in the chest “‘You bastard!’ he shouts. “‘You fucking old lunatic! Get out! Go and die somewhere!’” (ibid.).

What these two tremendously different writers – Simone Weil and J.M. Coetzee – working in entirely different genres have to offer to the discussion at hand is a common *geography* of justice.³³ In the same way that Derrida and Pseudo-Dionysius might be profitably or meaningfully compared, so too do these contribute to a geography, a map on which we might plot our progress on the aporetic journey towards justice. Whether figured as Neoplatonic procession and ascent, Derridean aporia or, as here, a special kind of reading, the common ground is that they all play a

³³ The sketch of Mount Carmel drawn by St John of the Cross (still extant, and incorporated movingly into T.S. Eliot’s ‘East Coker’) provides a fascinating example of an aporetic geography of justice. At the top of the page lies the inscription ‘Mount Carmel’; immediately underneath is the legend ‘[h]ere there is no longer any way because for the just man there is no law, he is a law unto himself’ (110-111). For a provocative use of St John of the Cross in contemporary South African fiction, see André Brink’s novel (banned for many years in the author’s native South Africa) *Looking on Darkness* (London: Vintage, 1993).

role in mapping out this common geography.³⁴ An essential feature to note in these occurrences is their emphasis on our own incomplete implementation of justice: mystics, theorists, and novelists all point to the *gaps* in our knowledge, the breaks or faults in our relationship to our participation in justice. In all events the map of our progress is one in which the final destination, the end of the journey, is always necessarily hidden. As Weil writes, '[e]very being cries out silently to be read differently' (135): our reading of others and of justice must constantly be examining their own incompleteness and revising their decisions.

Significantly, *Waiting for the Barbarians* ends with the magistrate witnessing a group of children at play and acknowledging: '[I]ike much else nowadays I leave it feeling stupid, like a man who lost his way ages ago but presses on along a road that may lead nowhere' (170). At the end of the parable the magistrate, broken and rehabilitated, seeing Colonel Joll's campaign against the barbarians utterly collapse, glumly accepts the journey ahead of him. Pressing onward towards a perhaps unreachable goal, he admits his own incapacities and nevertheless perseveres. These incapacities, however – an understanding of self-limitations in the pursuit of justice, a belief in the ultimately ungraspable nature of the destination to be achieved – instead strengthen the discourse of justice as developed thus far in this project. The benefit of the recognition that justice is a journey – or perhaps a pilgrimage – for which the goal must always ever be hidden is a specific reassessment of focus. The process of search itself replaces the goal of our searching.³⁵ Instead of concentrating on concepts such as the 'being' of God or the 'essence' of justice, we might focus our energies more beneficially on the process of creating justice in this world – on creating proper readings of justice, of ourselves, and of others. Through the proper recognition that reaching the transcendent and facing the aporetic are necessary impossibilities on the

³⁴ Michel de Certeau's insightful text *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984) develops the concept of geography as itself a text. De Certeau draws on the textual components of geography and movement through space – specifically, the everyday practice of walking through a city – and writes about, in essence, the rhetoric of walking. He describes 'a homology between verbal figures and the figures of walking (a stylized selection among the latter is already found in the figures of dancing) insofar as both consist in "treatments" or operations bearing on isolatable units, and in "ambiguous dispositions" that divert and displace meaning in the direction of equivocality in the way a tremulous image confuses and multiplies the photographed object' (100). This comparison between place and text is particularly useful in the context developed here of a 'geography' of justice that is dependent upon textuality.

³⁵ Jabès writes evocatively on the specifically *literary* aspect of this incompleteness: '[f]rom death to death, from silence to silence, a book is a milestone, never the end' (182).

path to justice, consequent attention can be paid to the specific demands of justice in this world.

IX. Conclusion

Through the various texts I have analysed over the course of this essay, certain themes have become clear. The relationship between mystical theology and justice that I sought to establish through various discourses consists, in the final analysis, primarily in the awareness of the incompleteness and openness of our own knowledge (*via aporia*) and the ability to school the reader of a mystic text in a form of imitative self-emptying and concordant minimisation of the ego (*via kenosis*). These dual motions of mysticism allow a sense of justice to emerge that is governed not by steadfast and immovable principles that demand unthinking and unreflective devotion, but rather an understanding of justice as an ever-evolving and unfinished process that must be always self-examining and self-correcting.

This approach, however, is not without its own difficulties. Questions of ecclesiastical and temporal authority undoubtedly still linger. Although limitations of space preclude a fuller consideration of how mysticism and the power structures of the Church Universal (in all its hypostases) might be incorporated in a manner beneficial to both, suffice it to say here that the challenges posed by such an encounter are not insurmountable and the rewards to be reaped considerable. It is difficult, to say the least, to build a cathedral atop a cloud of unknowing – and yet the possible outcome of a coherent dialogue between mysticism and the Church³⁶ seems immensely rich in potential benefits for religious life in contemporary society.

Christ's foundation of the Church's temporal authority in Matthew 16:18-19 ('you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church') seems a crushing voice in support of a rigidly institutionalised Church, yet the next verse presents Christ's voice demanding silence ('he warned his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ'). In the space of this silence the voice of mysticism might be heard, offering a counterpart and a complement to the established power of the Church. Mysticism's voice warns the Church, constantly reminding it that it must always remain a mere

³⁶ Michel de Certeau writes of the necessary difficulty that mystics must have vis-à-vis the Church. 'Although they put themselves in a *different* position from that of the Church instruction *ex cathedra*, they claim nonetheless to bear witness to the *same* God. They have to prove, at one and the same time, that they speak from a *different* place (as "mystics") and that they draw on the *same* inspiration (as "Christians") . . . The spring born by surprise in the basement must bear the same Name as the house beneath which it appeared' (1992, 181).

simulacrum of its authorisation and its goal; mysticism reminds the Church that its knowledge and its authority are ever provisional and incomplete. Through this awareness, authority would be tempered by an awareness of its own limits and of the need to responsibly be prepared to alter one's readings of a person or a situation. Informed by its mystic tradition, the Church might adopt a constant openness towards re-readings and readjustments, a recognition of the lacunæ in its knowledge, and a kenotic understanding of both the individual and the text. Through this, the Church might truly be able to make manifest the 'wisdom that is from above' which is 'first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality.' For 'the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace' (Jas. 3:17-18, AV).

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