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SAYING AND UNSAYING MYSTICISM:
THE PROBLEM OF DEFINING MYSTICISM
IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

by

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ABSTRACT

SAYING AND UNSAYING MYSTICISM: THE PROBLEM OF DEFINING MYSTICISM IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

By

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The use of "mysticism" and "mystic" as analytical terms in the social sciences is found to be problematic. Through an overview of current attempts to define the terms and a discussion of the use of the terms by representative theorists (Max Weber in sociology; Jacques Lacan in psychology) in examinations of representative "mystics" (Teresa of Avila and Meister Eckhart), the difficulties inherent in speaking psychologically and sociologically about mysticism are made clear. The identification of individuals as mystics is always tied to a political, economic, religious, and linguistic context. Any attempt to isolate elements common to all uses of the label "mystical" must take into account the motivations and cultural contexts of those who apply the labels as well as the differences in social contexts between mystical texts. Abandonment of use of the term would be premature; a better descriptive understanding may appear through an apophatic process of describing what mysticism is not.
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INTRODUCTION: Impossible Definitions

What do we talk about when we talk about 'mysticism'? What can we say about things that cannot be said, about gaps between the capacity of the subject to perceive and her ability to capture that perception in language? The question haunts scholarship on mysticism. Mysticism is less a category of human experience than a label applied with little consistency, describing phenomena reported by individuals from a broad spectrum of cultural, economic, political and religious backgrounds. As Michel De Certeau has noted, the term 'mystic' was initially an insult, leveled against those who sought salvation outside the Catholic Church.\(^1\) The ways in which we use “mysticism” say as much about the people who use it as it does those to whom it is applied.

This applies to the analytical frameworks we use to come to terms with mystical phenomena. The problem of defining mysticism is not exclusive to theology; adequate psychological, sociological, and philosophical definitions continue to be elusive. The ongoing debate between Steven Katz and Robert Foreman, among others, regarding the epistemological difficulties that arise in analyzing mystical phenomena (‘experience’ or ‘event?’) highlights the ultimate failure of any attempt to capture the nature of mystical phenomena in language. In his landmark 1978 essay “Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism,” Katz examined the varied uses of the term “experience” in discussing mystical phenomena. As Wayne Proudfoot noted in Religious Experience, “experience” did not enter the vocabulary of religious scholars

\(^1\) See the concluding pages of chapter 2
until the end of the 19th century. Trapped by the continuum of philosophical attacks on metaphysics from Descartes to Kant, 18th and 19th century religious thinkers tried to find a foundation for religious discussion that would allow them to protect religion from its Enlightenment opponents. Since the external realm of metaphysics had been undercut, these thinkers posited the internal realm of individual experience. Friedrich Schleiermacher, the 18th century Protestant theologian, was the first to make this turn, arguing that the foundation of religion was an “experiential moment,” not reducible to science, morality, or metaphysics (Proudfoot, p. xiii). This locates religion beyond concepts and language, in a subjective space where the contested meanings of the social world have no purchase. It is a place where, ostensibly, the attacks of objective science cannot reach. William James elaborated this theme in the early part of the twentieth century, prioritizing experience over institutions and traditional forms of worship. He argued that religion springs from an experiential moment in the life of a religious leader. His definition of religion emphasizes its personal, not institutional, nature: “the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, as far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.”2 Furthermore, James located the root of personal religious experience in “mystical states of consciousness” (Ibid., p. 379). The subjective inner space of experience presents a place for personal perceptions of religious truth to reside protected from the attacks of rationality.

In his article and subsequent edited books, Katz attempted to clarify the epistemological limits of this inner space. He has argued persuasively that experience

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2 James, p. 31, my emphasis
is always mediated by language and culture and that no moments of pure, unmediated consciousness are possible. In his landmark essay “Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism,” Katz writes that

“...mystical experience is ‘over-determined’ by its socio-religious milieu: as a result of his process of intellectual acculturation in its broadest sense, the mystic brings to his experience a world of concepts, images, symbols, and values which shape as well as color the experience he eventually does have. (Katz, 1978)”

Katz’ position is that while the phenomena of mystical episodes may be extraordinary, the mind that perceives these phenomena is the product of its previous experience. Mystics see with the inner eye of experience; to think that the mystic apprehends extraordinary phenomena without the patterns and habits of “ordinary” cognition and perception attacks the very foundation of the subject. What mind participates in the event if not that which is the total of our perceptual and cognitive history? To Katz (it would seem), we are the sum of our experiences – every waking moment, every bit of sensory input leaves a mark on the physiological and psychological structures that perceive it.

Contrary to Katz, Robert Forman wants to make room for phenomena in consciousness that are not mediated by individual perceptual history. Based on his reading of mystical texts and his own reports of mystical episodes, Forman argues that mystics from varying traditions have “pure consciousness events (PCEs)” that are the products of common psychological processes. Forman defines the PCE as “a wakeful though contentless (nonintentional) consciousness (Forman 1990, p. 8),” which “has been measured to last as long as forty-four seconds and yet may be
described adequately with a single noncompound sentence (Ibid., p. 25).” During the PCE, the subject is aware of being aware, but is not contemplating any particular object nor is aware of her physical circumstances. The PCE can occur as the product of a meditative practice, or it can be a completely spontaneous occurrence.

In articulating the PCE, Forman limits the range of phenomena described as mystical to a very narrow band of contentless experiences. He employs a physiological cartography developed by R. Fischer to differentiate between those mystical experiences which are marked by high metabolic excitation, emotional arousal, and mental activity from those which are marked by low levels of each. The former, termed ergotropic phenomena, include visions and hallucinations – experiences accompanied by some kind of sensory content that involve a high level of arousal, as in states described as ecstatic or rapturous. The PCE falls on the other end of the continuum, in what Fischer labels the tropotrophic range. Tropotrophic experiences include meditative states, such as yoga samadhi, marked by deep relaxation and hypoarousal. For the purposes of his thought, Forman limits “mysticism” to tropotrophic experiences, and labels ergotropic states “visionary.”

Questions of the appropriateness of this partitioning aside for the moment, this definition allows him to make comparisons among a very small range of mystical reports without having to worry about the dizzying variety of phenomena normally labeled mystical.

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1 It is interesting that he would limit mysticism in this way, because it emphasizes Forman’s own neo-Advaitan meditative practice. Like Zehnner before him, whose Roman Catholicism colored his judgement (he explicitly values theistic mysticism over monistic), it could be argued that Forman’s prejudices shine through clearly in his definition.
Forman marshals Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian texts to demonstrate his thesis. In each example, he finds evidence of a contentless moment in consciousness that he can characterize as "sheer awareness." He singles out language that indicates a release from the senses. He also cites contemporary reports, some of which are written by individuals who clearly have some familiarity with his analytical language. Although the specific language used in each account varies, Forman feels that he finds enough commonality among them to support his argument. He feels that the PCE will allow him to make the later claim that "deep and consistent psychological structures" for having mystical experiences exist in everyone, regardless of cultural origin. The proposed commonality of experiences between mystics testifies, he feels, to a commonality of psychological capacities for that experience. By drawing the boundaries of the mystical experience to exclude the shaping and controlling power of language, he is attempting to protect his theory of mystical phenomena from the endless shifts and permutations of meaning which confront it when inextricably bound to the perceptual and cognitive history of individuals.

Forman's position is designed to keep open the possibility of commonality among mystical phenomenon. If he can identify innate psychological capacities for mystical perception, the question of the origin of these phenomena can be left open. The problem with Forman's argument (aside from his arbitrary definition of mysticism) is his reliance on the writings of the mystics. The use of mystical texts to make
absolute assertions about mystical experience is dubious at best – the semantics of the language used to describe each mystic’s unique episode vary in an inaccessible way. It could be that each of Forman’s accounts reflects a common origin. The problem is Forman’s assumption that such a relationship could be proven, and that conclusions can be drawn from it.

On the other side of the Katz/Forman debate, we are left with the same questions. How do we define mysticism? How can we use “experience” in this context? In his essay “Experience,” Robert Sharf illustrates the maddening complexities involved in this debate. He notes the way experience is often used as the “terminus” of the “reliant deferral of meaning,” arguing that the term itself is useless in religious debate.¹ Cut off from the common ground of ordinary language, the mystic can only know her experience, not that of others – there is no way of knowing if one has experienced what others have experienced, and there is no way of proving it logically. What we know, as James pointed out, we know for ourselves. For the scholar, who does not even have the benefit of her own mystical experience,² all that can be referenced for comparison are the texts written by mystics. Separated from the subjective world of the mystic and battered about in the arena of common meanings, the accounts of mystical experience are far removed from the experiences

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¹ While I appreciate many of his observations about the use and misuse of the term, I don’t know that I would dismiss it altogether – I hold out some hope that psychology can develop and refine a methodology that would give us some access. I would echo Sharf’s concern given the present state of the debate, and I appreciate that Forman’s arguments are important and necessary to the advancement of the debate.
² James (his experience with nitrous oxide), Zaeher, and others excepted.
themselves and prove frustrating for scholars looking for a common core. Like God, the mystical episode is forever retreating from the written page.

The difficulty apparent in epistemological attempts to describe mysticism is common to other analytical frameworks. The relatively new disciplines of sociology and psychology are not immune to either the attempt or the frustrations. Our purpose here is to use the thought of a representative theorist from each discipline to illustrate some of the problems posed to social scientific inquiry by the use of the label "mysticism." Chapter two examines current sociological perspectives on mysticism, with an emphasis on the deference paid to Max Weber's thought, by tracing the complex social context of two Christian mystics, Teresa of Avila and Meister Eckhart. Chapter three explores Teresa of Avila's writing from a different perspective, that of French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, in order to illustrate the difficulties inherent in speaking psychologically about mysticism (difficulties which Lacan's prose embraces and celebrates). It is hoped that these portraits might offer insight into the inventive ways the social sciences have employed to wrestle with the unavoidable frustrations of discourse about mysticism. It is also hoped that the inadequacy of current analytic treatments of mysticism will become apparent. The struggle to find a satisfactory descriptive vocabulary for mysticism is a process without a foreseeable conclusion. That struggle is valuable regardless of its success, however, because it vividly demonstrates the boundaries of our language and our capacity to analyze.
CHAPTER 2: Mary or Martha? Weber and the Social Context of Mysticism

As Gershom Scholem noted in his 1966 paper, "Mysticism and Society," the lack of attention given to the relationship of the mystic to his or her social milieu has often kept scholars from recognizing not only the distinct impact society has on the creation and sustenance of mysticism but also the direct and indirect influence mysticism has on culture and society. In the thirty years since the publication of Scholem's article, the academic community has begun to engage the complex relationship of the mystic and society, with much attention and deference paid to the work of Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch. Scholars have often treated their dialogue about the place of mysticism in their religious typologies as a fixed lens through which to view the orientation of the mystic to society and the social impact of the mystic's practice. The evaluative structures developed by the two social theorists allowed later academics some apparent stability in the shifting sands of mystical studies. Willful or will-less, image-driven or imageless, monistic or polytheistic, the individual mystical phenomenon is not easily slotted or catalogued. Inclusive definitions tend to be so inclusive as to be useless or so culturally-bound that they exclude phenomena that could be included under a larger definition. The categories developed by Troeltsch and Weber served to keep things in recognizable order for the social theorists of the first half of the century. But, as Alton Pollard notes, both theorists' methodologies acknowledged the inevitability of obsolescence. What adequately described mysticism as it was understood in the late 19th and early 20th centuries would not suffice as time passed, perspectives changed, and historical research accrued.
Troeltsch and Weber. Troeltsch revamped Weber's church-sect typology and added a third term, mysticism. The "insistence upon a direct inward and present religious experience" by individuals, for Troeltsch mysticism was "the intensification and the making immediate of the world of ideas solidified in cult and doctrine into a purely personal and inner possession of the heart..."⁶ For Troeltsch, mysticism was a third religious form that was destined to take over religious expression as Christian civilization retreated in the face of the secular state. It was inherently weak, lacking both the social power of the church and the moral strength of the sect in the face of culture and the state. As Pollard notes, "[i]ts major deficiency, an absence of socially formative power, is compounded by an equivalent lack of social concern."⁷

Weber expanded Troeltsch's concern with mysticism's apparent lack of engagement with the social sphere in his revisions. To understand Weber's thought on mysticism, we need to look at his larger perspective on religion. Weber distinguished between religions that allow the possibility of self-deification and those that pose a hierarchical relation between the creature and god. In the latter forms of religion, the goal of the human is to achieve salvation, the gift of active ethical behavior performed with the awareness that god directs this behavior. In salvation religions, the adherent is an instrument of god, not attempting to himself become a god. Roughly parallel to this distinction is another common to Weber's time: that between East and West, the Orient and the Occident. The religious traditions of the Orient

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tend to accept some kind of self-deification, while the traditions of the Occident, dominated by the monotheistic Hebrew scriptures, draw an unbridgeable distinction between creator and created.

The emphasis on activity in salvation-based religions (active ethical behavior) is indicative of the position of such faiths toward the social world. Salvation is to be worked out in some relationship to the world, which for Weber was the domain of social relationships. Weber distinguishes two kinds of these relationships. When the world presents too great a temptation to regularly engage, the individual rejects its institutions and forms; salvation depends on a negative psychological relationship to the world. In the other case, salvation is to be worked out within the institutions and social forms of the world. In neither case is the world itself accepted – even for the latter, the world is temptation and must be changed or at least defended against. Together, Weber terms these modes of religiosity ascetic; the former world-rejecting asceticism and the latter inner-worldly asceticism.

In The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, Weber would make much of the way inner-worldly asceticism shaped the emergence of capitalism in the West. The impulse to turn oneself and one’s capacities over to god – in essence, to become one of god’s workers – led to the ceaseless economic activity of the Protestants of early America. Weber, however, discerned another social orientation among the salvation religions. While the ascetics work out their salvation in active relation to the world, the mystics secure their salvation by engaging in the activity of contemplation.

7 Pollard, p. 139
Unlike the ascetics, the mystics have no need for social relations – their salvation has been acquired outside of social institutions. Contemplation is solitary, not social, and all external relations must be abandoned: "For the activity of contemplation to succeed in achieving its goal of mystic illumination, the extrusion of all everyday mundane interests is always required."\(^8\) From the perspective of the sociologist, while world-rejecting asceticism is against specific social institutions and forms, mysticism is truly anti-social; mystical knowing renders the social world unimportant. The consequences this has for the maintenance of social institutions are clear. The mediatory power of the Catholic Church in matters of salvation was released not to the individual in the Reformation, but rather, as it were, back to God. Grace, in the form of the strength to maintain ethical behavior when confronted with the temptations of the world, is a gift from God; in the eyes of Weber's American Protestants, the measure of grace is social, material achievement, an uncertain measure at that. The mystic, however, has been released from uncertainty, and social activity loses its absolute importance. For him, the proper sphere of activity has changed from the social to the individual. The removal of authority from the community to the individual can result in antinomian attitudes and an undermining of the coherence of the social world.

The relation of Weber's mystic to the world is broken. Participation in social relations only makes the mystic more acutely aware of his distance from god and increases his desire to return to contemplation. Without the anxiety produced by the ascetic's uncertainty about his salvation to motivate an investment in social

\(^8\) Weber, p. 168
institutions, the mystic is at best a passive participant; at worst, "the contemplative mystic living within the world regards action, particularly action performed within the world's institutional framework, as in its very nature a temptation against which he must maintain his state of grace."\(^9\) Weber was, however, aware of the limitations of his categories. Contemplative strains in innerworldly salvation strategies can foster a more tolerant attitude toward social forms; the mystic, he concedes, is often filled with love, and communities of contemplatives can form, sometimes around a single mystic who becomes a mystagogue. Weber recognized that the line between world-rejecting asceticism and world-fleeing mysticism, as with the other distinctions in his schema, is blurred, and elements characteristic of one category often appear in examples from other categories.

Given this broad introduction to Weber's position, we need to try to summarize his understanding of the relation of the mystic to the social world. Weber's definition of mystic – one who engages in the activity of contemplation to achieve the goal of mystical illumination – focuses on the physical action of the mystic and brackets any consideration of the nature of mystical illumination. The mystic engages in activity that is not socially productive; where the mystic does participate in society, his or her mind and energy are elsewhere. The locus of meaning in the mystic's life has shifted from shared social forms to an inner psychological space, undermining the authority of those forms. While Weber took care to note that his dyads – Occident/Orient, salvation/self-deification, ascetic/contemplative – were continuums and that each

\(^9\) Weber. p. 174
“ideal type” does not exist in reality, it is clear that he viewed the mystic as socially removed, if not impotent.

What does it mean to be broken? Weber’s choice of language is revealing; his concern about the consequences of do-it-yourself salvation are thinly veiled at best. How valid are Weber’s concerns a century later? We hope to find, through our brief consideration of the mystic’s relation to society, that the usefulness of this description – indeed, of the category “mysticism” itself – has been complicated by twentieth century scholarship and the linguistic turn in philosophy. The social context of individual mystics is more complex and elusive than Weber’s categories suggest. Alton Pollard has gone to some length to describe the issues that arise from the reliance on Weber and Troeltsch, as well as to build a case for the revision of their categories.10 Using the thought of Roland Robertson to open the possibilities of the Weberian model, Pollard demonstrates the inability of Weber’s categories to adequately describe such twentieth-century mystics as Gandhi and Howard Thurman, whose mysticism fostered a deep engagement with change in the social sphere. As he writes in “Mystical Religion as Social Leaven,” “In situations of social unrest, mysticism may be a conduit for the articulation of dissatisfaction with extant social structures and for the introduction of innovations.”11

Pollard’s thesis will serve as a jumping-off place for our discussion. While the unique journeys of twentieth-century mystics clearly confound the ability of the

10 see Pollard (1992) and Pollard (1989)
11 Pollard 1989, p. 62 (original emphasis)
Weber-Troeltsch models, new analytical techniques and the explosion of mystical scholarship in the twentieth century have also changed the way we understand and evaluate the same mystical phenomena that Troeltsch and Weber referenced in building their evaluative structures. The linguistic turn in philosophy has produced new perspectives from which to view the accounts of earlier mystics, perspectives from which the complexity of the mystic's relation to society will necessarily confound the ability of the earlier theorists' models to explain. In this chapter, I hope to distinguish several layers of social discourse about mysticism – the ecclesial, political, linguistic, and gender issues raised by the lives and writings of two Christian mystics, Teresa of Avila and Meister Eckhart. Eckhart, who lived in Germany during the late Middle Ages, and Teresa, who lived in Spain during the Counter-Reformation, shared the general context of European Catholicism but lived in separate geographical, cultural, and socioeconomic worlds. These two represent the kinds of texts Weber treated in developing his thought about mysticism (he actually refers to Eckhart in The Sociology of Religion). It is hoped that this exploration will demonstrate the problems with applying Weber's general categories, developed with remarkable intuition and analytical skill but without the aid of the close historical and textual scholarship of the last century, to the lives and texts of specific mystics. As we will see, Weber's characterization of mysticism applies to Teresa and Eckhart in outline, but closer examination reveals a much more complex relationship between each mystic and "the world."
Layers of social interaction. In approaching Teresa and Eckhart, we will try to remain aware of four interwoven layers of interaction between the mystic and the social context. In all four levels of relation, we must also note that influence extends in both directions – the environment shapes the mystic, who in turn shapes the environment. The first is that between the mystic and his or her church community – how does the religious environment shape the mystic’s practice, and how does her practice reshape the religious community, both locally and generally? The second layer is that between the mystic and the political world of his time – how does the mystic’s practice reflect a reaction to the contemporary political climate, and how does that practice influence it? The third is that between the mystic and the gender construction of the period – how does the mystic’s practice appropriate gender models of the time, and how does his practice represent an embrace/rejection/renovation of them? The final relation is linguistic, the level of social meanings – how is the mystic’s practice shaped by the language of her time, and how does it reshape that language? A distinction should be made between those socially-formative actions which are intentional and those which come as an unintentional consequence of the mystic’s practice; a mystic who is fleeing the world in the Weberian sense can still influence that world. These questions will not be addressed exhaustively in each case, but should be kept in mind as general guides to help clarify complex relationships.

The mystic’s appropriation and creative use of language is of considerable interest, because it is here that the effects of the mystic’s practice are most widely felt. To
speak simply in linguistic terms, mystical texts can in many cases be described as
language clustered around an aporia, the gap between the occurrence of an
extraordinary episode\textsuperscript{12} in the consciousness of an individual and the human capacity
to translate it into (or to recreate it in) language. The individual's difficulty in
describing his or her inner reality bends, turns, and can ultimately transform
language and the reading experience. Signifiers such as God, the Infinite, the
Transcendent, and the Absolute mark the place of a hole in discourse; they are the
spots in discourse where we cannot go. To describe that place simply as a hole,
however, is to miss some of its most profound implications for society and social
discourse. When language passes through God,\textsuperscript{13} it returns to discourse with new
and different meanings. As several commentators have pointed out, the attempt to
capture the perception of a mystical episode in language has much, if not everything,
in common with poetry. The stretching of language to the edge of its capacity to
bear meaning will be an important point of consideration in both Teresa and
Eckhart, although that stretching happens in very different ways. When language
reappears after the mystical episode, it has undergone a seismic shift in meaning; it
bubbles up from the unconscious places marked in discourse by 'God' to cool and
solidify in new forms, on which new structures are built. The very foundations upon
which society is built, the words we use to describe and communicate, receive new
meaning and can result in fundamental changes in the social sphere. In some cases,

\textsuperscript{12} The words "experience" and "event" are much too loaded, given the Katz/Forman debate, to be
used to refer to mysticism. I will use other words, such as "episode," "occurrence," and
"phenomenon," to refer to the physical, psychological, and linguistic space from which mystical
reports emerge. Where "experience" is used, it is within a direct quote from another source
\textsuperscript{13} Again, a problematic choice. I will use the Absolute, Ultimate Reality, and God interchangeably as
markers of this linguistic aporia; they are not intended to imply the presence of any epistemological or
ontological assumptions.
as we will see when we turn to Michael Sells' work, the language employed by the
writers of mystical texts can evoke that magmatic phenomenon within the reader,
transforming his or her conception of the world and place in it.

The great interest in mystical texts exhibited by many postmodern thinkers derives in
great part from the creative ways the mystics dealt with the limitations of language.
Another theme that is of interest to contemporary scholars is the place of the erotic in
these texts. Teresa and Eckhart both chase after God, an Ordering Principle that has
departed the world, with great passion and effort (even though both their willful
journeys end in a paradoxical will-lessness). As DeCerteau (and Troeltsch) frames
their lives, the two lived through the great transition that marked the end of the
medieval period and signaled the beginning of the modern, with the demise of
Christian civilization and the rise of the secular state. Teresa was an uneducated
nun; Eckhart held Thomas Aquinas' prestigious chair at the University of Paris.
Their approaches to God were as different as their social circumstances, but they
shared a deep thirst for the Divine. The erotic element in Teresa’s Interior Castle is
unavoidable (and much commented upon); it is subtler in Eckhart, though by no
means absent. Both of these texts document places of impossible contact with the
Other, the ever-retreating goal of the erotic impulse. It is this claim, and its
reverberations in language, that resonate for contemporary thinkers. For our
purposes, it serves to highlight both the changes in the weltanschauung of the writer's
era, and it also indicates the changes made in the social fabric by the texts. As
DeCerteau would argue, the disappearance of God in the world created an intense
desire for completion, for meaning, projected onto the empty space that the word
'God' marks. That both writers found some kind of contact with a presence where we
find only absence fascinates postmodern writers.

As we begin our examination of the two mystics, it is important to note the
limitations our selection of these particular mystics places on our capacity to
generalize. Eckhart and Teresa may come from dissimilar social circumstances, but
they do share the fundamental tenets of Christianity. Both participate in a theistic
tradition with rigid dogmatic expectations; it would be difficult to perform this kind
of comparison across traditions. By using these two examples we propose a new
perspective on the place of medieval Christian mystics in relation to society and, as a
consequence, a new perspective on traditional sociological assumptions about
mysticism. The breadth of phenomena which acquire the adjective "mystical"
indicates that while we have difficulty pinning down the essential elements of the
concept of mysticism, the contexts in which we have chosen to use the word may say
volumes about the way we perceive ourselves as members of society.

Meister Eckhart and the Just Man

One of the debates in Eckhart studies involves the proper use of the term "mystic" to
describe his texts. As Frank Tobin reports, scholars have struggled with what
appears to be a description of identity with the God element (e.g. the 'divine spark'),
but which lacks the experiential punch of the visions of Teresa and other "mystics."
A defender of Eckhart's mysticism put it this way: "That Eckhart had profound
mystical experiences cannot be doubted by the serious student of his works'; however, he then adds the disquieting disclaimer 'but he never mentions them.'

The editor of Eckhart's works in German, Josef Quint, framed the question differently: "in the depths of his nature he possessed the mystical intuitus, but... he possessed it as knowledge rather than as feeling." In his Latin theological works and his German sermons, Eckhart engaged the problem of reconnection to the Divine with finely wrought philosophical yearning rather than devotional surrender. His capitulation to the Divine will came after an intricate intellectual process that peeled back successive layers of logical structure to reveal the aporias concealed by language. When we consider that some of his most difficult teachings were delivered from the pulpit as sermons to common congregants, the futility of the exercise seems already acknowledged and accepted by the meister. But Eckhart's use of the vernacular to deliver sermons that made stunningly creative use of language had a purpose and an impact of its own. Eckhart's innovations in the German language are frequently noted by scholars; he not only chose to present academic arguments in the vernacular, thus raising its profile and helping to create a kind of rapprochement between the clerics and the laity, his struggle to articulate his complex thoughts resulted in the creation of new words ("breakthrough" being the most often-cited). These innovations, however, are also accompanied by a more profound change in the way language is used; influenced by other contemporary mystics (arguably, by Marguerite Porete), Eckhart used language to create a moment of mystical emptying as well as to describe that moment. We will turn to the thought of Michael Sells to examine this use in more detail; for the moment it will suffice to note the impact this

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14 James Clark, qtd. in Tobin, p. 185
mode of discourse will have on future mystics and on postmodern thinkers who are finding in Eckhart a kindred spirit.

Given the limited space and the breadth and complexity of Eckhart's thought, we will focus on just a few points in Eckhart's writing and preaching which directly pertain to the engagement of the individual with society. Frank Tobin makes a distinction that serves usefully to describe Eckhart's particular brand of mysticism; rather than focus on ecstatic episodes marked by an altered state of consciousness, Eckhart's goal "is rather that his listeners become filled with the realization of their actual continuous state of union with God, a state they both strive for and possess."15 It can be argued that Eckhart sought to delineate an orientation toward existence and the world rather than encourage an escape from it. Keeping in mind the difficult complexity of Eckhart's writing, this will serve as a helpful introductory assumption.

One of Eckhart's chief themes, and one of the most troubling aspects of his thought for the ecclesiastical authorities of his day, is the identity of the ground of the soul and the ground of God. Plotinus and the Neoplatonists exerted considerable influence on Eckhart's understanding of being and God. Eckhart's notions of bullitio and ebullitio, a "bubbling" and a "boiling over", owe a great debt to Plotinian emanation. Being comes from God only, and it emanates from the undiminished divine source through successive levels of imperfect being. In Eckhart, bullitio described the principle of unity within the Trinity; echoing the unity within the Plotinian One, bullitio is the bubbling up of the Trinity within itself, a movement that
allows for the birth of the Son.\textsuperscript{16} This bubbling maintains the unity and equality of the Trinity within itself. \textit{Ebullitio}, on the other hand, is a boiling-over of being into the created world. The movement of being in \textit{ebullitio} allows for the inequality and finitude that characterizes humans and creation. This distinction is important because it allows Eckhart to maintain the unity and perfection of the Trinity separate from humans, but it also introduces a commonality between God and humans: we receive our being from God, and insofar as we identify with that being, we are identified with God.

It is here that Eckhart’s troubles with the church begin. Eckhart presented the paradoxical nature of the Trinity – three but one – and our relation to it – equality but inequality – with an ingenuity and daring that contributed to his eventual condemnation. We are less concerned with the Church’s reasoning for this condemnation than with how his thought figured in the larger context of social change at that time; it is sufficient to note that the Church clearly viewed Eckhart’s writing and preaching as a threat. The charge of anti-institutionalism has been leveled at Eckhart, and not without some cause. As Bernard McGinn indicates, Eckhart’s writing is one example of a larger concern for the institutional church: “the creation, or at least the suggestion, of an alternate way to salvation that could easily come into conflict with established sacramental and institutional religion.”\textsuperscript{17} Eckhart would not have viewed himself as an anti-sacramentalist, and he was clearly frustrated with the charges against him, allowing the possibility of error but not his

\textsuperscript{15} Tobin, p. 191
\textsuperscript{16} Sells, p. 148
heresy, which would entail intentional rejection of the church. He did not, however, emphasize the mediatory role of the sacraments in his teaching, which created suspicion in the ecclesiastical community. It will be useful to examine this area of Eckhart’s thought so that we might have a clearer understanding of his orientation to the world and social institutions. To say that his thought rendered the concrete mediatory power of the church unnecessary would be an oversimplification.

*Justice and the Just Man.* One of the central themes in Eckhart’s teaching, and certainly the most pertinent to our discussion, is the identity of God with justice. Eckhartian justice had ontological standing; we are insofar as we are just. Conversely, when we are not just, we are not. Our being (as God) is dependent on our identity with God as justice. This does not mean, however, that our salvation is dependent on actions in the social world. This identification is internal and not necessarily connected to action in the world. It is here that ecclesiastical authorities began to question Eckhart’s commitment to the intercessory powers of the church, for it seems to indicate the opening of another path to salvation. It can be argued, though, that Eckhart preached not as an alternative to the church but from a deep engagement with the structures of the church. The path one would walk to Eckhartian enlightenment included a passage through and participation in the rituals of the church. Eckhart wrestled in language with the inability of language to describe his perception of the workings of the soul. By the same token, as McGinn points out, several different readings can be made of Eckhart’s teachings, supporting several different viewpoints. The implications of the paradoxes elaborated by Eckhart leave

17 McGinn, p. 249
him open to divergent interpretations. For our purposes, it will suffice to note the multiplicity of interpretations and the possibility that the worst of the church’s fears were unfounded.

The distinction Eckhart makes between unbegotten justice and begotten justice will open a path for us into his thought on the birth of the Son in the soul, another key theme. God in his potentiality is unbegotten justice. Through bullitio, God gives birth to begotten justice in the form of the Son. For Eckhart, the necessary incarnation of the Son in history is only one aspect of that birth, a birth which takes place within the Godhead. As God is eternal, so must the birth be eternal; the Son is eternally being born in the soul – this is the salvation that is marked by the birth of the Son. Eckhart’s emphasis of the eternal element of the birth of the son introduces a constancy and immediacy to the notion of salvation – the son is eternally being born in the soul. That birth, however, is the birth of justice, and insofar as we are not identified with justice, we are not. Our being is dependent on our identification with God’s justice. As Frank Tobin notes,

"The just man does not, by acting justly, cause some justice to come into existence. Rather, by uniting with justice, which is infinite and eternal, he, the creature, escapes from the nothingness which he is in himself and becomes one with justice which alone, as divine really is... Justice makes the just man real." 18

Following Augustine, Eckhart elaborates a paradoxical freedom for creatures in relation to the Divine; in themselves, humans are slaves, and the only way to find

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18 Tobin, p. 91
freedom is to identify with justice. The charges of pantheism that are often offered by critics are tied up in this identification – Eckhart’s proposition that everything that has being is God, since God is all being, is easily read as pantheistic until one understands that Eckhart’s definition of being is much narrower than that of his accusers. God is not part of that nothingness which is not aligned with divine justice; thus, the human that does not identify with justice does not have being, or identity with God. Here it is necessary only to note the radical connection Eckhart draws between being and justice. It is important to qualify that connection, which would seem to release Eckhart from a Weberian rejection of the world, by remembering that his definition of justice doesn’t necessarily include action in the world. An examination of justice opens larger questions about the kind of life Eckhart espouses, upon which we will now touch.

*Mary and Martha.* Traditional interpretations of the Gospel narrative of Jesus’ visit with the sisters Mary and Martha read the story as an allegory about the proper relation of the active to the contemplative life. Jesus’ praise of Mary for her desire to visit with her guest has been interpreted as the clear superiority of the contemplative life over the active, as represented by the busy Martha. Eckhart, however, offers a new interpretation that shifts value and illustrates his thought about action in the world. Martha is an exemplar of the proper way to engage the world – in contemplation through action. As McGinn notes, “Eckhart says that as long as we are in this world we should strive to be like Martha, the soul who is inseparably

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19 Tobin, p. 94
joined with God but at the same time fully active in the world." Insofar as the
ground of the soul is identical with the ground of God (the godhead), the soul will
engage the world as God, i.e., as divine justice. While Eckhart does note, to the
consternation of church officials, that it is the internal identity of soul with justice
rather than external works of justice that matters, he clearly does not advocate a
withdrawal from just action in the world. Just action follows freely from the identity
with divine justice, and while the salvific action occurs in the internal space of the
soul’s union with God instead of the sphere of physical action, it does not render that
action meaningless or superfluous. Rather, just action is a function of the soul’s
identity with divine justice. The life of action springs from the life of contemplation;
to return to the metaphor, Martha is the perfection towards which Mary should
strive.21 Eckhart’s own life could be presented as a model of this perspective. Far
from a cloistered contemplative, Eckhart traveled as an itinerant preacher, actively
engaging both the intelligensia of his time and the people affected by the decisions of
the ecclesiastical authorities.

Again, there is room here for varied interpretation. Removing the necessity of social
action from salvation, however reinforced by assertions of actions springing from the
contemplative position, threatens the stability of the church – salvation ultimately, in
Eckhart’s thought, resides in the internal relation of the soul to its ground, not in
external mediation of God’s forgiveness. Eckhart’s preaching of detachment
contributes another layer of complexity to this question. Eckhart’s brief German

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20 McGinn, p. 253
21 Caputo, p. 104
work On Detachment provides a rich collection of reflections on the orientation of the soul toward the world, and is worth examining at some length. He opens the piece by placing detachment highest among the virtues: "I find no other virtue better than a pure detachment from all things; because all other virtues have some regard for created things, but detachment is free from all created things."\textsuperscript{22} The "regard for created things" relates to his desire to keep a place in the soul free from temporal and spatial concerns; humility places the soul in a position of subordination to other souls, and mercy entails moving out of oneself to the shortcomings of one's fellow humans, and "through this his heart becomes troubled."\textsuperscript{23} Because the soul shares the same ground as God, it is thus eternal and unchangeable; any action means a leap into temporality. He even places detachment from created things above love, which, in Eckhart's thought, "compels me to love God." Detachment, on the other hand, compels God to love the soul, and that kind of love is greater "because God is able to conform himself, far better and with more suppleness, and to unite himself with me than I could unite myself with God." God is drawn because his natural place is unity and purity, which comes from detachment. The challenges such reasoning presents to ecclesiastical authority is clear; the hierarchy created by humility in the presence of the divine (and, by extension, the clerical agents of the divine) is pulled down by the emphasis on detachment. Likewise, the notion that the individual soul could "compel" God to do anything could be understood as a direct challenge to orthodox views. This language is tempered somewhat by the place of grace in this process, as Eckhart writes: "the equality [between God and man] must

\textsuperscript{22} Colledge and McGinn, p. 285
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., p. 287
come about in grace, for it is grace that draws a man away from all temporal things, and makes him pure of all transient things." Before one can compel God to reside in the soul, it seems, God compels the soul to rid itself of attachment. Included in these attachments to be released is the soul's attachment to prayer and good works. Eckhart states his delicate position succinctly. Because of the immobility of God's detachment, no amount of prayers or good works could ever serve to move God. He notes that even Jesus' suffering and death as a human did not change God more than if he had never become human. Eckhart is not, however, declaring the futility of prayer. The eternal nature of the Divine makes God aware of all temporal events at "his first everlasting glance – if we can think of his first glancing at anything"; every prayer is heard eternally and answered eternally. All earnestness and effort are still necessary; God's eternal knowledge that it happens does not change the need for its (from the perspective of creatures) temporal enactment.

Although we need to leave this text before even really sketching it, one more element will attract our attention. Eckhart makes a distinction between the outer man, or our "sensuality", and the inner man, which is our "inwardness." This distinction seems to mirror traditional mind/body distinctions in Platonic and Christian thought, and Eckhart makes it clear that the five senses are open to be used for "beastly purposes" and "carnal delight" if not guided and led by the spiritual powers of the inner man. The distinction is important to note for two reasons. First, although the senses can be turned to a lower purpose, there is a clear relationship between the inner and outer man: "you should know that a spiritual man who loves God makes no use in his

24 Colledge and McGinn, p. 288
outer man of the soul's powers except when the five sense require it; and his inwardness pays no heed to the five senses, except as this leads and guides them, and protects them." 25 The senses are guided by the inner man, but he does not abjectly condemn the outer man; he simply states that the use of the senses should be led by the soul. This connection is vital, because it does not entail an abandonment of the body. The soul should guide the work of the body, but the body is not to be rejected in and of itself.

The second point has to do with the discursive space Eckhart describes by using the image of the inner man. That Eckhart and other contemporary and immediately subsequent mystics would look to an inner space for the advent of God is natural, as DeCerteau and other commentators would hold, because of the creeping disappearance of God in the realm of the outer man. In speaking about this inner space, the thought of Peter Homans is potentially useful. In *The Ability to Mourn*, Homans traced the social origins of psychoanalysis to the same collective loss of cultural values and symbols that had its beginning in Eckhart's time. Psychoanalysis emerged, Homans holds, as a way to mourn the death of these shared symbols. Mourning, in Homan's sense, is a necessary reaction to the loss of meaning that began in Eckhart's time and was well underway in Teresa's. The parallels between the development of psychoanalysis and the foundation of the "mystical science," as DeCerteau refers to it, are significant. One of Eckhart's key contributions to the thought of the time is his elaboration of an inner discursive space where God might speak his unspeakableness. As we look at Teresa's castle, where a fiction is used to

25 Ibid., p. 290
describe that which cannot be described, we will notice the ways in which this internal discourse (and its inherently fictional nature) could be construed as a new space for relationship with God, a space removed from the ultimate control of the church. Eckhart is careful to distinguish the ecstatic episodes that characterize the writing of other mystics from his own description of identity with God in the ground of the soul. All extraordinary phenomena – visions, raptures, and the like – are only waystations on the path he advocates. Frank Tobin notes, “nor does the attainment of such states of consciousness [mystical episodes] which are experienced as ecstatic and are clearly distinguishable from the consciousness of everyday existence, assume any importance for the spirituality he advocates for his listeners.”

Rather, Eckhart is advocating a union with God so transparent and so complete that every moment of the creature’s life is suffused with the divine will. Living in identity with divine justice means living without a why; as Sells writes, “The apophatic language of... Eckhart ties human ‘nobility’ or authenticity to an acceptance, beyond all consolations, of the no-thingness that underlies human existence.”

DeCerteau places Eckhart at the beginning of a transitional period in civilization, marked by the rise and eventual fall of a mystical science that reshaped the intellectual sphere. As has already been noted, changes in the social sphere – the fall of Christian civilization, the rise of the secular state – paralleled the rise of this “science”, the opening of a new discursive space in which the old forms of the medieval period were transformed:

That transformation... took place within the world that was ‘passing away.’ It respected, by and large, the religious language that had been

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26 Tobin, p. 191
27 Sells, p. 195
passed on to it, but used it differently. It still addressed, generally, the
members and producers of that universe (clerics, the faithful) in the
terms of their tradition, but it deconstructed from within the values
they held to be essential. From the certainty of the divine Interlocutor
whose language is the cosmos to the verifiability of the propositions
that made up the content of revelation, from the priority of the Book
over the body to the (ontological) supremacy of an order of beings over
a law of desire, there was not one postulate of this medieval world that
was not touched or undermined by the radicalism of these mystics.28

Eckhart was one of the founders of this movement, but Teresa was “the greatest
formalization” of “this field of shifting historical boundaries.”29 According to
DeCerteau, the themes that were introduced with Eckhart and his immediate
predecessors reached the apogee of their development in Teresa. We are less
concerned with tracking DeCerteau’s intricate set of themes from Eckhart’s writings
through Teresa’s life as we are with simply noting DeCerteau’s acknowledgement of
the great social change that accompanied the elaboration of the mystical project.

Before we turn to Teresa’s radically different mystical writings, we should first briefly
recap our thought about Eckhart to this point. Eckhart took fundamental elements
of the Christian tradition – the birth of the Son, the Trinity, and the relation of action
to contemplation – and invested them with meanings unenvisioned by medieval
scholars. Any “experiential” elements in Eckhart’s mysticism – any personal details
at all – are absent from his writings and preaching, so we cannot make judgements
about his path to mystical enlightenment as such. His mysticism could be
characterized as an intellectual awakening rather than intense emotional episodes,
and he cautioned against desire of all kinds, including the desire for contact with

28 DeCerteau, p. 7
29 Ibid., p. 16
God through visions and raptures, because they implied a subject-object relation. For Eckhart, the supreme relation was not a relation at all, but the uncovering of the identity of the ground of the soul with the ground of God, and this identity was spoken of in terms of justice. Eckhart preached a kind of willful will-lessness that made truly just action possible. The inner space which he elaborated created room for a fundamental connection with the ground of being that would justify movement in the world, in the face of the retreat of the Christian moral imperative from the social world. We will now see how the differences between the scholastic mystic Eckhart and the converso nun Teresa are more superficial than they might immediately appear; great commonalities of purpose and achievement exist between the two mystics, especially in regard to their shared social influence and engagement, not in spite of, but through their mysticism.

**Teresa and the Spiritual Marriage**

Teresa’s birth in 1515 in the Castilian town of Avila came over 200 years after the birth of Eckhart in Germany. They were both born in rural settings and entered the religious life at young ages, but while Eckhart quickly entered the academic fast track, studying in the great intellectual centers of France, the options open to a woman in religious orders at the time were extremely limited. The ecclesiastical authorities of Teresa’s day were opposed to vernacular translations of the Bible, fearing the impact unmediated contact with the scripture would have on the uneducated “idiots” – people who did not know Latin. Teresa and her fellow nuns were limited to instruction given by the clerics who oversaw their spiritual practice,
and the confessional extended the priests’ knowledge and control of the inner lives of the nuns. The Counter-Reformation was in full swing, as the Inquisition sought to reclaim ground lost to the humanists, Protestants, and Illuminists (a group which truly promulgated an alternative salvation strategy and from which Teresa fought to differentiate herself), and a climate of reform in the church in some respects paralleled the currents of reform. In response to threats to the universal claim of the Catholic Church to govern social behavior, the Church clamped down in the places where, such as Spain, the political situation made it possible. Teresa was the product of a time of great social ferment, a time also of great physical danger for anyone who fell outside accepted social standards. Twentieth-century scholarship has uncovered Teresa’s secret converso heritage, a connection with the much-persecuted Jews that Teresa concealed with excruciating care. In 16th century Spain, lineage determined the social fate of the individual, and the discovery of Teresa’s Jewish lineage would have been disastrous. Her concern with the social inequity this persecution presented (along with the very real fear for her life) contributed to the emphasis on individual virtue rather than purity of lineage in her writing. This position had intentional social implications, for it changed the standard for moral perfection from the social construction of race and placed it in the hands and capacities of the individual. The impact of this revaluation is noted by Teofanes Egido, who calls it “a revolutionary basic axiom ahead of its time, virtually subversive, which is difficult to appreciate today.”

Although (as Mary Frolich would argue) it is difficult to cast Teresa as a

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30 Frolich, p. 165
31 Egido, p. 165, qtd. in Frolich, p. 164
radical individualist, this move promoted an interruption in the chain of social
determination of individual sanctity.

The distinctions between Eckhart and Teresa are large and daunting: Eckhart was
educated, taught and wrote at the heart of the intellectual and ecclesiastical debates
of the day, and enjoyed all the privileges granted his sex, while Teresa, woman and
_converso_, was far removed from traditional positions of ecclesiastical influence.
While Eckhart's mysticism appeared in the theological paradoxes he presented in
highly nuanced scholastic language to both his academic and lay audiences, Teresa's
mysticism was written in a conversational style, inextricably tied to the body and
limited in audience (initially) to the few nuns of her convent and her startled
confessors. Whereas Eckhart's body was not present in the text, Teresa's body was
the text – all of her mystical episodes were related in terms of physical pleasure and
pain. The very mystical episodes that Eckhart shunned in favor of a sustained
engagement with the Divine were prevalent in Teresa's account of her spiritual
struggles; the _Interior Castle_ (which will be the focus of our discussion) tracks the
movement of Teresa through various visions, raptures, delights and consolations of
the soul that, while not necessarily literally physical in nature, apply the language of
erotic love to the relationship between herself and the divine. These differences serve
our purposes by highlighting the great diversity of mysticism within a tradition, but
there are commonalities that go beyond the shared religious language. Although
Teresa's experiential, episodic encounters with the divine seem far removed from
Eckhartian intellectual enlightenment and closer to a kind of escape from the social
world, a closer examination reveals Teresa's thought to include both a sustained engagement with the divine and a deep concern with action in the world. Her speech-as-writing also proved revolutionary in terms of its reordering of the relation of language to meaning. We will examine both the engagement with the social world advocated in her writing and the real impact her style of writing had on society.

*The fiction of the soul.* The *Interior Castle* explored in sparkling detail the depths of the inner space of the soul hinted at by Eckhart. Teresa's introduction of the device of the castle is worth quoting here, because it establishes the terms on which she will discuss the soul, which cannot be readily described in language:

"Today, while beseeching our Lord to speak for me because I wasn't able to think of anything to say nor did I know how to begin to carry out this obedience, there came to my mind what I shall now speak about, that which will provide us with a basis to begin with. It is that we consider our soul to be like a castle made entirely out of a diamond or of very clear crystal, in which there are many rooms, just as in heaven there are many dwelling places."  

Two elements of this statement, the opening lines of the first chapter, should be noted. Teresa writes in the prologue that she is "just like the parrots that are taught to speak; they know no more than what they hear or are shown, and they often repeat it." In the later statement, Teresa references this "parroting" by first noting her lack of personal inspiration and then introducing the structuring metaphor of the book as the product of her request that God speak for her. Teresa wrote from a very

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32 Teresa, p. 35
delicate place. Her confessors judged her autobiography too dangerous for female eyes, so she wrote a second book, *The Way of Perfection*, specifically for the nuns. Without the social standing that education would confer, the writings of women were eyed with great suspicion on the part of the ecclesiastical authorities, especially in the wake of the Illuminist and Free Spirit movements, which featured women prominently. Teresa had to be careful to avoid charges of heresy; turning authorship of the *Interior Castle* over to God through divine inspiration served as a defense against critics who saw in her writing a dangerous freedom from clerical control. This strategy will allow her to introduce a variety of different opinions about the spiritual life that could not have been expressed otherwise.

The second element of the passage which bears noting is the necessarily fictional nature of her description of the soul. The soul is *like* a castle. The implications of this are important; if the soul *were* a castle, the moradas would seem to be description of objects encountered in ecstatic episodes. The castle is an extended metaphor for the nature of the soul, but it resists reification. Later in the text, Teresa makes clear the incapacity of language to adequately capture her perception of the inner world: “I believe it would be better for me not to say anything about these remaining rooms, for there is no way of learning how to speak of them; neither is the intellect capable of understanding them nor can comparisons help in explaining them; earthly things are too coarse for such a purpose.” 34 The use of this metaphor opens a space for God to dwell, a space in the imagination for the soul, which previously had no

33 Teresa, p. 83
34 Teresa, p. 85
location. This also will prove important for Teresa's power to communicate her message; rather than a literal recounting of a specific episode or series of episodes which could be dismissed as the product of either demonic possession or physiological pathology, the Interior Castle is a richly detailed fiction that describes the soul without being hopelessly tied to a claim for objective truth. Because she is writing metaphorically, she can feel free to use language of bold erotic power to illustrate the nature of the relation to the divine. It is to the revolutionary power of Teresa's use of erotic imagery that we now turn.

A delightful wounding. The first three moradas (mansions) of Teresa's castle contain the traditional structures of socially-mediated spirituality. By the third morada, after learning to control the many urges to act sinfully in the outer world, the power of ecclesiastical authorities to mediate faith changes drastically. The person in the third morada feels a sense of superiority – the temptations of the external world no longer have appeal – but they are still bound to social approval; here, the temptation is moral righteousness and inflation. Teresa introduces humility as the key to overcoming these difficulties, and advocates detachment from the things of the world. In the fourth morada, the extraordinary episodes of consolations and spiritual delights seem to announce the entry of the soul into an inherently anti-social realm, where the concerns of the church and social institutions are displaced by a much more immediate, emotionally charged relationship to the divine. In the inner space of contemplation, very much separate from the social world, Teresa has episodes that affect her on a more profound level than those of mediated religiosity. While the
first three moradas were characterized by external action – an open confrontation with temptations – the final four cannot be attained without the grace of God. Humble and free of attachments, the soul must wait passively for God to guide it through the rest of the castle.\textsuperscript{35}

It is in the sixth morada that the erotic nature of her engagement with the divine begins to be keenly expressed. God has invaded Teresa’s soul through the consolations and spiritual delights described in the fourth and fifth moradas, and they have left her in exquisite agony. With each subsequent visit from God, her desire to remain in union with God grows, so that it increases to painful proportions during periods of absence. As her journey progresses in depth, so does her suffering; it is a necessary complement to the deepening joy she feels in closer approach to God. She writes:

“It [the soul] feels that it is wounded in the most delightful way, but it doesn’t learn how or by whom it was wounded. It knows clearly that the wound is something precious, and it would never want to be cured… It knows that He is present, but He doesn’t want to reveal the manner in which He allows Himself to be enjoyed. And the pain is great, although delightful and sweet. And even if the soul does not want this wound, the wound cannot be avoided. But the soul, in fact, would never want to be deprived of this pain.”\textsuperscript{36}

The baldly sexual nature of Teresa’s description has been much commented upon. Anyone who has seen Bernini’s famous sculpture of Teresa awaiting God’s arrow cannot help but notice Teresa’s rapt, orgasmic expression. As Jacques Lacan noted,

\textsuperscript{35} Alison Weber accounts for the jump from the militant imagery of the first three moradas to the more peaceful, receptive imagery of the second by noting that Teresa was trying to bring together two very different allegories for the monastic life common in Teresa’s day: the \textit{miles Christi}, or the Christian as soldier actively fighting evil from inside, and the \textit{sponsa Christi}, or the Christian as spouse of Christ. It is the second allegory which offers some justification for Teresa’s erotic imagery.
Teresa is clearly coming; the question is “where is her coming from?” The penetration of Teresa by the Divine has left her at the extremity of her capacity to capture her inner life in words. Immediately after this passage she confesses, “I am struggling, Sisters, to explain for you this action of love, and I don’t know how.”

This passage, and Teresa’s elaborations of this penultimate episode in her mystical transformation, are significant for the sheer boldness of her language. Teresa manages both to enliven spiritual discourse with a corporeality missing from traditional theology and to invest the limited, corporeal nature of language with new spiritual meaning. As Mary Frolich notes, “she grasped the essence of Christian mysticism as fundamentally a living relationship with God in Christ that does not exclude – even though it surpasses – the body and its sensual experiences.”

This “living relationship” has clear implications for life in the world. The incorporation of the body in spiritual discourse leads to the inclusion of the social world in the practice of the mystic; if erotic desire for the Other is valorized, then the love that is the source of Christian social action must be a reflection of that ultimate relationship.

This living relationship is consummated in the seventh morada. Throughout, Teresa has relied upon the analogy of contemporary Spanish courtship to chart progress along her spiritual path; the betrothal of the sixth morada gives way to the marriage

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36 Teresa, pp. 115-116
37 Ibid, p. 116
38 Frolich, p. 168
39 As Max Weber himself wryly noted, the mystic is perhaps more dependent on the social world than the ascetic because the charity offerings that sustain her are provided by community members actively engaging society and the economy.
of the seventh. This marriage brings an end to the ecstatic pain and pleasure of the earlier moradas, and Teresa feels at one with God in a profoundly deep way. This profound union does not mean a complete withdrawal from social action. Teresa writes that the constant engagement with God felt in the seventh morada does not carry the intensity of the soul’s first encounter with God — if it did, any action in the external world would be impossible. Indeed, the soul’s capacity and desire for social action increases after the spiritual marriage: “You may think that as a result the soul will be outside itself and so absorbed that it will be unable to be occupied with anything else. On the contrary, the soul is much more occupied and once its duties are over it remains with that enjoyable company.”

Teresa also makes interesting use of the Mary/Martha dichotomy explored by Eckhart. She describes the soul as divided between the part that receives divine favors and the part that must contend with the painful trials that remained continuous, despite the felt presence of God:

“while suffering some great trials a little after God granted her this favor, she complained of that part of the soul, as Martha complained of Mary, and sometimes pointed out that it was there always enjoying that quietude at its own pleasure while leaving her in the midst of so many trials and occupations that she could not keep it company.”

The beauty of this brief passage lies in its acknowledgement of simultaneous engagement with the world of exterior concerns and the innermost realms of the soul. Teresa does not side with either Mary or Martha; they represent two halves of a complete soul. The coexistence of Mary and Martha within the soul appears in Teresa’s historical path, which we will now briefly consider.

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40 Teresa, p. 175.
41 Teresa, p. 176
The emergence of Teresa’s mystical episodes coincided with a rising determination
to reform the monastic system for women. Changes in the requirements for women
in the Carmelite monastery had created an environment Teresa felt distracted from
the spiritual life. Misogyny was rampant in the church at the time, and women were
held to be more fragile than men and less capable of the physical and psychological
rigors expected of the monks. Because of the weakened regulations, some
conversation was allowed in the monastery, little prayer actually took place, and a
class system had developed, in which those with the means could bring servants and
live in relative luxury compared to poorer nuns. Influenced by her first deep visions,
Teresa began to abandon the “vanities” of the Calced (reformed) Carmelite convent
and pursued a more stringent spiritual practice. After receiving a terrible vision of
hell, Teresa decided to found her own convent, St. Joseph,\textsuperscript{42} which provided the kind
of rigorous environment she felt was necessary. Throughout her life, Teresa had
suffered from ill health that both limited her ability to live an active life and increased
the agony of her spiritual practice. Her health, however, did not keep her from the
great apostolic work of the second half of her life. Her extraordinary effort to found
“discalced” convents throughout Spain was accomplished “without losing the
intensity of her contemplative life and habitual union with God.”\textsuperscript{43} Mary and
Martha worked together comfortably and cooperatively in Teresa’s life.

\textsuperscript{42} Kavanagh, p. xiii
\textsuperscript{43} Kavanagh, p. xiv
Deeper questions about the nature of that reform, however, can and should be raised at this point. Teresa stood in delicate relationship to ecclesiastical authority throughout her life, and her determination to create a new monastic order was met with great resistance and suspicion. Her reforms could rightly be seen as a rejection of orthodox modes of conduct; they clearly were designed to release her from at least some of the overwhelming scrutiny to which she was subjected. As Alison Weber has noted, in rejecting contemporary expectations of women religious, she fought to restore the authority of the monastic rule.\textsuperscript{44} One way of more closely examining Teresa's relationship to authority is to look at her relationship to her confessors. Teresa constantly reinforced the gender norms of her time; women were weak and unintelligent, subject to great errors in judgement. She counseled her nuns to tell their confessors everything about their spiritual practice so that they might avoid mistakes, and rejected most accounts of visions and extraordinary episodes as products of malnourishment or physical and mental exhaustion. In all this, she seemed to hew closely to the authority of the church. Teresa, however, made very creative use of the limitations imposed upon her by the authorities. While she followed her own advice and kept her confessors informed of her practice, she did not necessarily listen to them. Teresa exercised the right to choose her own confessor, and cycled through several until she found one that was sympathetic to her cause. As she writes deep in the \textit{Interior Castle} (a book, we should note, that was intended as a guide for women and would have held little interest for male clerics of her day),

\textsuperscript{44} Weber, p. 123
"Despite all these struggles and even the persons who tell one that the locutions are foolishness (I mean the confessors with whom one speaks about these things), and despite the many unfortunate occurrences that make it seem the words will not be fulfilled, there remains a spark of assurance so alive... that the words will be fulfilled... And in the end, as I have said, the words of the Lord are fulfilled."\(^{45}\)

This passage underscores a key distinction for Teresa between her duty to fulfill the ritual expectations of her faith and the true source of authority. She receives ultimate guidance from within. Teresa's decision to listen to the words of God spoken within her soul as opposed to those spoken through the church is emblematic of the larger historical trends noted by DeCerteau. As the absolute social and political authority of the Church began to retreat at the end of the medieval period, gaps appeared in the capacity of the clerics to determine meaning. In their "mourning," the mystics of the period turned to an inner space to find that authority and furthered the process of rending the fabric of cultural meaning. To (perhaps mis)appropriate a concept from Peter Berger, tears began to appear in the sacred canopy that enveloped the medieval spiritual world, and a new place had to be created where the divine words could be spoken.

Interestingly, Teresa founded St. Joseph's in 1562, the same year her autobiography, *Libro de la Vida*, appeared in its first form. All her books were written at the command of her confessors, and although she wrote them with great pain and effort, she did not reject or circumvent the requests. As we noted earlier, Teresa implies that God provided the inspiration for her writing — she served merely as the vessel of its production. The circumstances under which Teresa came to write are fascinating:

\(^{45}\) Teresa, p. 122 (emphasis added)
the motivation for writing came from the external authority of the church, and the central images came from God. Nowhere is Teresa's will or desire apparent in the writing effort other than indirectly, in her desire to satisfy her obligation to her superiors. And yet it is everywhere, in the descriptions of extraordinary episodes drawn from her own life and in the (apparent) spontaneity of her conversational writing style. Teresa created a social space where she could present a vision of her soul and her own highly nuanced relation to the divine without bringing the wrath of the Inquisition upon her. Alison Weber has convincingly argued that Teresa was well aware of the implications of her language; her conversational tone was not necessarily an expression of the way women spoke, but rather of the way her male supervisors and other clerics expected women to speak. As Weber notes, "It seem[s] possible that Teresa's 'rhetoric for women' was a 'rhetoric of femininity,' that is, a strategy which exploited certain stereotypes about women's character and language. Rather than writing like a woman, perhaps Teresa wrote as she believed women were perceived to speak."46 The misogyny of Teresa's time actually offered her a means to express her extraordinary inner life without attracting the ire of ecclesiastical authorities. Of course, the Inquisition did pay close attention to Teresa's writing, and she faced great resistance to her efforts to reform the Carmelite convents. It could be argued, however, that her deliberately feminine rhetoric, with its explicit deference to authority, protected Teresa from the full force of the Inquisition's investigations. Weber notes, "The depreciatory statements about women in this work must be understood as part of a strategy that carves out an area of 'insignificant' discourse unworthy of male scrutiny."

46 A. Weber, P. 11 (original emphasis)
It is important to point out that while Teresa wrote to communicate, an essentially social action, her teachings dealt with the proper spiritual practice of individuals. From the perspective of Max Weber, this can be interpreted as leading to a rejection of social involvement – the individual would learn to find salvation without mediation. As we have seen, however, Teresa’s mysticism led to a renewed engagement with society. After her spiritual marriage in the seventh morada, she makes explicit the necessity of action in the world: “This is what I strive for, my Sisters; and let us desire and be occupied in prayer not for the sake of our enjoyment but so as to have this strength to serve… Believe me, Martha and Mary must join together in order to show hospitality to the Lord and have Him always present and not host Him badly by failing to give Him something to eat.”

Teresa’s action springs directly from contemplation, and it is stronger and more vital for it.

Concluding thoughts

Neither of these brief portraits could begin to justify the claim that Weber’s implied opinion of mysticism is completely unfounded. The question is not so much the complete invalidity of Weber’s thought as it is the inadequacy of any sweeping sociological pronouncements about “mysticism.” One more bit of theory, this time from later in the century, should serve to underscore this problem vis à vis Weber. Victor Turner’s thought on the relation of liminality to social structure offers a much different understanding of the relationship of mystic to society. To Turner, the

47 Teresa, p. 192 (my emphasis)
interstices of society serve as a ground from which new social forms spring and find renewal. To facilitate the social transitions individuals make at key moments of their lives, societies create rites of passage that mark the change of social status. The key element of this passage is a period of time spent in a liminal space. Society constructs the liminal space in the gaps between structural elements; the ritual passes through a place where there is no society, where the participant is stripped of all social status and is forced to react in a very different manner than they are accustomed. This passage could be described as a return to the womb, in which the participant is symbolically recreated and reborn in his or her new role. In the liminal space, the initiate is immersed in communitas, what Turner describes as “the quick of human relatedness:”

“Communitas breaks in through the interstices of structure, in liminality; at the edges of structure, in marginality; and from beneath structure, in inferiority. It is almost everywhere held to be sacred or ‘holy,’ possibly because it transgresses or dissolves the norms that govern structured and institutionalized relationships and is accompanied by experiences of unprecedented potency.”

Turner relates communitas to the sense in which Martin Buber used the word “community” in Land Thou: as a “being no longer side by side (and, one might add, above and below) but with one another of a multitude of persons.” Communitas is the ground of all symbol and myth. It is the place from which we gain our sense of relatedness, and it is revivifying, a respite from the dominance of structured society. As opposed to the cognitive organizing that characterizes society, communitas has an existential nature: “it involves the whole man in his relation to other whole

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48 Turner, p. 128
49 Ibid, p. 127
men." Turner considers communitas to be a necessary counter to the rigidity of social categories; it provides movement and dynamism in human relations. As such, it is unstructured and chaotic, not sustainable for any length of time. He notes that periods of social upheaval in which the upwelling of communitas overwhelms social structure are frequently followed by a corresponding overcompensation in social structure – anarchy is followed by political dictatorship, a period of relative moral openness is followed by a reactionary return to religious control. A dialectic is at work, in which society depends on the immersion of individuals in communitas to energize tired forms and ways of relating. Likewise, the power of communitas is dependent on the concrete forms and status levels of the social structure.

Our interest in Turner's thought derives from the dynamic relation it posits between the institutions of society and the marginal or liminal places where society ends or is interrupted. The society functions properly because of time spent by individuals (and cultural elements such as language) apart from society – it creates movement in the system. Members in society overcome the isolation that structure breeds by dipping into the chaos and disorder of communitas. Turner notes that "[p]rophets and artists tend to be liminal and marginal people, 'edgemen,' who strive with a passionate sincerity to rid themselves of the cliches associated with status incumbence and role-playing and to enter into vital relations with other men in fact or imagination." Teresa certainly lived and wrote on the margins of society, both as a woman and as a secret converso, and although Eckhart held a position of high esteem in scholastic

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50 Ibid., p. 127
51 Ibid., p. 128
theological circles, his unorthodox thought, preaching in the vernacular, and eventual condemnation relegated him to the outer boundary of Christian society. The marginal status of mystics such as Teresa and Eckhart illustrates Turner's notion that social weakness is compensated by sacred power. In Turner's system, it is not accidental that those who wield special spiritual power, frequently characterized as dangerous and evil (such as witches), are without social standing or the ability to acquire it. Communitas offers an underground, unconscious compensation for the disenfranchised and socially powerless. This place, from which Eckhart and Teresa speak their texts (Eckhart from the pulpit, Teresa in conversation with her fellow nuns), is also a place into which language, the very building blocks of society and culture, retreats and is reshaped. Here, in the molten heat of the mystical episode, words become elastic and lose their form, only to bubble back to the surface and take on new form, from which new social structures are built. The mystics we will examine share this ability to change not only the meanings, but the potentialities of words and language as a whole.

We can now examine Teresa and Eckhart in light of Turner's thought regarding the location of sacred power in society. As we noted above, the ladder of sacred power in a society tends to be organized in inverse relation to the ladder of social power; sacred power is an equalizing counterforce to the material strength of those in positions of social prominence. Thus, those with the greatest sacred power would, in Turner's thought, be those with the least social power. This perspective generates two courses of inquiry for us to follow through the lives of mystics: first, we should
examine the relative marginality of the mystic's lives in society, and second, we should examine the relative marginality of the mystic's writing in relation to society. It is with these questions in mind that we will look at Teresa and Eckhart.

The origin of the words “mystic” and “mystical” offers intriguing insight into the social nature of these phenomena. In The Mystic Fable, DeCerteau examines the history of the words and the episodes they described in the medieval and early modern periods. From the beginning, the term “mystical” denoted an experience outside the control of the Church:

“This proliferation of private experiences, which was tied to the individualization of practices (from the development of the auricular confession to personal devotions), appeared dangerous. 'Mystical' came to designate what had become separate from the institution.”

When medieval writers used the term “mystic” initially, it was an insult. The space that mystics used for their discourse was opened in partial separation from the Church; new words and expressions were injected into the Church’s discourse from a place over which they had little control. The only place from which new words could come was revelation, and although revelation was at base a solitary experience (with some Biblical exceptions), ecclesiastical approval was necessary for it to achieve legitimacy, and the Church had rested on the canonical revelation for some time. The delicacy of the mystic's position is exemplified in Alison Weber’s treatment of Teresa, who couched the potentially controversial aspects of her

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32 DeCerteau, p. 86 (original emphasis)
experience in ecclesiastical forms and language.\textsuperscript{53} A discontinuity emerged between the discursive appearance of a word and its meaning in the mystics' new writings; as DeCerteau notes, the appearance of a "secret" vocabulary which does not relate to the lived experience of a community but rather to the unique consciousness of the individual created the need for hermeneutics: "There could be no 'secret tradition' without the introduction of a double reading, hence ambiguity, into the orthodox language. This was intolerable to theologians who thought they could hold onto things of the spirit with words, thus guaranteeing an institutionalization of meaning."\textsuperscript{54} The position of the Church in late-medieval contact with mystical phenomena was to reject any removal of power, or any change in discourse, caused by the new language of the mystics. As the transition to the modern period continued, however, the discourse of the mystics inexorably led to changes in the Church's discourse and, ultimately, to changes in its power to maintain the sacred canopy. Two points should be drawn from this. First, in the eyes of the socially powerful, mystics\textsuperscript{55} disrupted social institutions and stood outside the institution's prescribed salvation strategy. Second, the mystics helped to create a radical shift in language, the foundation of all society, that deeply impacted both the Church and secular modes of discourse.

Teresa's profile most easily fits Turner's model; she stood far outside places of ecclesiastical and social power. As a converso woman, she was relegated to the

\textsuperscript{53} DeCerteau also considers this delicate balance as a general characteristic of mystical writing of the time; see p. 166
\textsuperscript{54} DeCerteau, p. 110
farthest reaches of the social order, and her only opportunities for social influence were as a mother or as the leader of other women in a convent, her leadership always subject to male supervision. Since social power was held for men, and traditional forms of sacred power – positions in the Church hierarchy – were prohibited beyond an initial point, the great power Teresa held to influence both the Church and secular society came from a space she created herself, within her imagination. This is not to say that Teresa’s writings and reforms were generated in a one-dimensional compensation for a lack of normal social power; rather, Teresa’s influence seems to match Turner’s description of liminality and communitas, which reserves any judgement of individual motivations. As for our second line of inquiry, that of the implicit message of Teresa’s writing in relation to society, it is clear from our brief look at the Interior Castle that Teresa expected the mystical path to increase the individual’s ability and desire to contribute to society. Teresa’s mysticism implied the authority of the inner voice, but it also demanded a renewed effort to make changes in the social sphere; while works do not determine salvation, the deep concern with the rest of humankind that fosters such works does matter. As she writes in the last chapter of the Interior Castle, “The Lord doesn’t look so much at the greatness of our works as at the love with which they are done. And if we do what we can, His Majesty will enable us each day to do more and more…”

Eckhart does not appear to so easily fit Turner’s model. He rose quickly through the ecclesiastical ranks to occupy a position of relative power and influence; he

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53 In DeCerteau’s sense: those Christians living on the threshold of modernity whose reported experiences and writings received the label “mystical”
participated in the intellectual debates of his day and influenced his contemporaries. As a male in the Church of his day, Eckhart was able to move and teach with fewer obstacles than faced Teresa two hundred years later. Yet Eckhart made two choices that were decisive in his marginalization. He taught and preached in German, which brought theological discourse, the language of ecclesiastical power, to the common congregant; this broadened the field of discourse and allowed those distant from ecclesiastical power to participate, in whatever manner, in the conversation. He also chose to use idiosyncratic, poetic language that he felt would make a closer approach to the truth of theological paradoxes than the scholastic language of his day could. His highly nuanced teaching of identity with the Divine led the Church to marginalize him by condemning his teachings posthumously. In the sense that he stood on the edge of the ideological boundaries of the church, Eckhart spoke from the margins of his society. From those margins, he preached an active life through contemplation, an orientation toward the social world rather than an escape from it. The will-less actor Martha, rather than the contemplative Mary, served as Eckhart’s example of the proper Christian life. His concern with this orientation evidences itself in his radical equation of being with justice – our very being is dependent on our alignment with the will of God, which is justice itself. As with Teresa, Eckhart holds that while works themselves do not bring salvation, the will-less orientation that produces truly just actions does.

56 Teresa, p. 194
57 Michael Sells cites modern scholarship in support of the contention that Eckhart was actually influenced by Marguerite Porete, the Beguine mystic who died during Eckhart’s lifetime. Sells argues that the flexibility of gender roles in Eckhart’s interpretation of the Trinity had much in common with Porete’s writing. Ekhart’s reading in the vernacular also, it seems, brought the voice of women into theological discourse, a radical act by the standards of the time, especially since Porete was executed for heresy. See Sells, ch. 5-7.
The great twentieth-century Catholic theologian Karl Rahner understood the relationship of contemplative to society as one of mutuality; while the contemplative might focus on the internal space of the soul rather than on the external world as the field of salvation, he or she is not necessarily an ‘individualist.’ As Rahner put it:

"... the true law of things is not: The more special and distinct in character, the more separated, isolated and discontinuous from everything else, but the reverse: The more really special a thing is, the more abundance of being it has in itself, the more intimate unity and mutual participation there will be between it and what is other than itself."

Both Teresa and Eckhart engaged members of society and social institutions as a necessary part of their spiritual practice. Their mysticism served to reformulate rather than reject key elements of their social world, and the changes wrought by their use of language were far-reaching. Their lives bear out Mary Frolich's well-argued position in The Intersubjectivity of the Mystic: "...mystical transformation increases both autonomy (capacity for existential self-determination and commitment) and communality (capacity to give oneself for the sake of structures of shared meaning, shared goods, etc.)." While the concerns of Weber and Troeltsch were well-founded – the period that saw the growing independence of the individual's spirituality from the dominance of the Church also saw a decline in the social power of the Church – the position of individual mystics in relation to this change is complex and difficult to reduce to their categories. As we first noted, this challenge to the Weber and Troeltsch models is less a threat to the models

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58 Rahner, qtd. in Frolich, p. 144
themselves, which presumed eventual obsolescence, than it is intended to highlight the need for contemporary social theorists to reexamine their ways of thinking about mysticism. The mystics' use of language reminds us of the ultimate mysteriousness of the Divine and served to bring the Church into a greater acknowledgement of its humility; as Bernard McGuinn writes, "[t]he task of theology for Eckhart was not so much to reveal a set of truths about God as it was to frame the appropriate paradoxes that would serve to highlight the inherent limitations of our minds and to mark off in some way the boundaries of the unknown territory where God dwells." In their acknowledgement of our incapacity to know the mind of God, the teachings of such prominent mystics as Teresa and Eckhart served to rejuvenate tired forms as they changed them irrevocably, for good and ill.

59 Frolich, p. 140
Chapter 3: "Where is Her Coming From?" Teresa of Avila and Mysticism in Lacan

"You who never arrived
in my arms, beloved, who
was lost from the start..."61

"I want you to want me
I need you to need me
I'd love you to love me..."62

Reading Lacan is a frustrating experience. The great French psychoanalyst wrote in elliptical and at times obscure prose that was intended to illustrate his theory that the unconscious is structured like a language by playing in its obverse – language must be structured like the unconscious. What appears, in reading the Écrits, is a hole – the distance between the reader and the text, between subjective experience and the capacity of language to communicate that experience. Interpretations of Lacan abound, and each offers a new vantage point from which to view the ever-shifting gap that is Lacan’s writing. Systematic it is not, as Lacan himself noted.63 In reading Lacan, it is important to rely on his interpreters, but at best we can hope only to find a vantage point of our own, not a definitive understanding of his thought.

Lacan’s examination of desire rests on just such a hole – the “gaping hole” of the mirror stage, the gap between mother and child. Our desire chases itself endlessly through objects, looking for a reconnection that cannot occur until we return to unconsciousness in death. And so what Lacan finds at the heart of our desire, at the

60 McGuinn (1981), p. 31
61 Rilke, Ranier Maria, p. 131
62 Cheap Trick, Live at Budokan
heart of ourselves, is an emptiness beyond our ability to articulate. The religious implications of this emptiness are everywhere in the age of what Lacan calls "the myth of the God is dead"; the God that spoke and thereby ordered our world has retreated and left a lack, a signifier marking His absence. Lacan doesn’t necessarily see the death of God; rather, God has become unconscious, unable to make Himself heard in human language.

What, then, do we do with mystics who experience the voice of God in a manner beyond all language? How does Lacanian desire account for the visions and raptures of Teresa? Where Lacan sees a blank, the mystics write in sensual terms of an experience beyond the blank; they return with content from a content-less experience. Our intention is to explore Lacanian desire in light of the mystical phenomena recorded by Teresa in the Interior Castle. By reading the Interior Castle, it is hoped that we will come to a better understanding of desire and jouissance.

It will be necessary to first build a scaffolding on which to hang our understanding of Lacanian desire. In reading Freud, Lacan brought a perspective informed by Kojève, Heidegger, Levi-Strauss, and Saussure, among others, which changed the face of psychoanalysis and informed much of twentieth-century philosophical thought. As an entry into his thought, we will first examine the genetic development of desire as it appeared in his reading of Freud’s oedipal system. Lacan’s use of Saussurian linguistics will be sketched, as will his distinction between the realms of the

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63 Lacan FS, p. 142: “What puts this book on the wrong track from start to finish is that they suppose me – after which anything is possible – they suppose me to have an ontology, or, what amounts to the
symbolic, the imaginary, and the real. We will also develop a working understanding of his notion of "empty" and "full" speech as conditions of ego-transcendence. This preparation will help us look at the nature of female jouissance, which is key to approaching Lacan's understanding of mysticism.

We will then turn to the Interior Castle, looking for ways in which Teresa's experience might be read in terms of Lacanian desire. Specifically, we will look at the discursive space Teresa creates for the ineffable soul and how that space relates to language and interiority. We will also examine the nature of Teresa's prayer and compare her speech to the Other with Lacan's full speech. Finally, we will look at the physical body of Teresa as it appears in the textual body in an attempt to find the traces of an impossible communication with the Other. It is hoped that this will broaden our thought about the parameters of Lacanian thought, especially its ability to account for extraordinary excesses of desire, and will offer a new perspective on Teresa's mysticism.

The Cry

Lacan's reading of the Freudian Oedipal complex varies significantly from the classic psychoanalytic interpretation, and these variations impact the psychoanalytic theory of desire in important ways. Lacan changes the emphasis, not (necessarily) the content of the Oedipal system, to emphasize the acquisition of language as the pivotal moment in the conscious development of the child (indeed, as the birth of consciousness itself). Before the movement to consciousness, the infant exists in the same thing, a system."
Eden of preoedipal bliss, union with the mother. The child lives an undifferentiated existence; he is part of a single unit, the mother-child dyad, in which all his needs are met. This early period, when the child exists (for us, observing) separately in a biological sense, when he sleeps unknowing in his crib while his mother is away, is the ground of Lacanian desire. Comforted, warm, fed, the child does not yet have a separate identity because he doesn’t need one.

The cry of the infant, loosed in response to a lack – the lack of the breast, of warmth – is for Lacan the first articulation of desire. The cry is also the first use of language, in a Lacanian sense: “not a name or the ‘signal of an object,’ but a demand (that is to say, speech) addressed to another.” This articulated desire produces a response – mother arrives to nurse, to rock, to change diapers. But the child’s experience of lack opens, through his development, a chasm that cannot and will not be bridged in the child’s life. The dyad becomes cracked – mother, the other half, pulls away, does not respond as she has in the past. Here, when the mother truly becomes a (m)other, the child experiences the splintering of reality that characterizes consciousness.

The cry is not simply a biological stimulus that demands a response (food, comfort); it is a demand for recognition. The unpredictability of the mother, who doesn’t necessarily come in response to the cry, indicates that the child requests not the

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64 In the interest of maintaining continuity with Lacan’s writing on the Oedipus complex, the child will be male in our introductory discussion.
65 It is not clear at what approximate age the child leaves this state. It would seem that the child’s cry in the delivery room would signal the beginning of the end of this period, which ostensibly continues into language acquisition (Muller and Richardson fix the mirror stage, to be discussed later, at somewhere between six and 18 months).
66 Borch-Jacobsen, p. 206
objects of need, but rather the desire of the mother. The split that has developed between mother and child means that the child has no control over the comings and goings of his mother; since the cry does not automatically summon the breast, the cry must capture the desire of the mother. If the mother desires the child, acknowledges him as something-to-be-desired, the child will be a subject. The cry is the demand for recognition, desire for one's own desire, for the self-as-subject. The fact that this formative act of consciousness is linguistic is everything for Lacan; the differentiation of the world into subject and Other is not simply consonant with language acquisition - it is language acquisition. The cry is an acknowledgement that there is someone else to whom one must address oneself - there is an other, which is simultaneously an Other.

The Other, in Lacan, is that which "I" am not, and the genetic ground of this signifier is the mother, that from which "I" am separated. Why does this separation occur? The interruption of preoedipal bliss is brought about by language, in that with language comes differentiation and discretion; the weight of social expectation mandates the weaning of the child from the breast. It is here that the third element of the oedipal triangle enters - the Father. For Lacan, the Father is the Law, the social demand placed on the child, and language is that Law. The community of subjects, separated from the Other and each other, use language to communicate its desire, to signify an unsignifiable lack.

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67 In *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva points to the darker motivations for creating and implementing the Law. As the mother is pushed into abjection - that which must be feared - the Law appears to keep the abject contained: "Obviously always arbitrary, more or less; unfailingly oppressive, rather more than less; laboriously prevailing, more and more so."(p. 16)
Lacan separates human consciousness into three discrete realms - the Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real – that can only be sketched briefly here. The Symbolic is the realm of language and signification (which will be examined a bit more closely in a moment). Here is where the Other, the signifier of radical difference, is found. The Imaginary is the realm of images, of our sensory perception of the world and its play in our consciousness; it is the place of “others,” our imaginary conceptions of individuals in our field of awareness. The Real is the realm of “brute fact,” which is completely outside our capacity to connect.\(^{68}\) It is the un-known, eternally withdrawn and withdrawing from our experience.

**Signifier and Signified.** Lacan’s reliance on Saussurian linguistics is important to touch on briefly here because the system depends on the relation of signifier to signified (and the impossible relation to the referent, the Real). Saussure divided the linguistic unit – for our purposes (although certainly not limited to this), the word – into the signifier and the signified. The signifier (S) is the phoneme or group of phonemes that make up the spoken or written portion of the word; the signified (s) is the concept or image which related to the sounds emitted during the act of enunciation. The signified, in the realm of the imaginary, is separate from the Real, the referent in reality. The relation between signifier and signified is rendered by the formula S/s. For Lacan, the key element of this formula is the bar that separates the signifier from the signified. The signifier is constructed arbitrarily, in that it has no inherent relation to the concept or image signified. The sounds of the spoken word do not

\(^{68}\) Muller and Richardson, p. 87
receive their meaning from the signified in any direct way; they receive their meaning in relation to the other signifiers only. This disconnection from the signified is absolute and has deep consequences for our understanding of language and existence itself. The endless chains of signifiers that define and encircle our existence are veils masking an ultimate lack, an inability to make connection with others and the Other. The Symbolic is the realm of these disconnected signifiers: "it is the comprehensive structure whose discrete elements operate as signifiers related only arbitrarily to a signified," the order of these structures, and/or the law which governs this order.69

It is here, into the world of the Symbolic, that the child enters with his cry. The cry is a signifier, a sound emitted that corresponds to the experience of lack situationally indicated by a pang of hunger, or the discomfort of a soiled diaper. The lack that the child feels, however, can never be satisfied. Thrust now into the realm of the Symbolic, he stands above the bar in more ways than one. In the Oedipal system, the child is now forced to enter the social realm signified by the Father, and with this move to seek to establish himself as a subject. The child's desire to return to the preoedipal connection with the mother is blocked by the acquisition of language, by the Father who prevents the reabsorption of the child by the Mother. Forced out of unconsciousness, the child develops a consciousness through the differentiation of his experience into objects onto which his subjectivity could be projected.

69 Muller and Richardson, pp. 87-88
The Mirror Stage. The development of the ego follows from this exile into language and differentiation. Out of the chaos of drives and disconnected strivings, the child catches a glimpse of himself in a mirror and sees a unified whole, which he identifies as himself. This image, projected onto the flat surface of a mirror or another person, is the emergent ego to which the child connects all his disparate experiences. This emergence of the ego through the mirror stage is the distinctive element of the Lacanian ego and has far-reaching implications. The ego is external to the subject, a unified whole discovered, constructed, examined, and discussed as an object ("I") about which the subject speaks. This radical alienation at the center of the subject's consciousness, the "self-deception at the basis of one's relationship to reality,"\textsuperscript{70} poses the "I" as Other (in that the "I" is the signifier for the objectified ego) even to itself. Everything is Other; the subject is trapped in the utter emptiness of his existence in the Symbolic realm. The child spends his life searching for himself in external objects forever separated from him, lost from the start and unaware of the emptiness that he is. The Oedipal cycle serves to keep us from awareness of this emptiness: "As for Lacan, he knew that the Oedipus was only a myth – 'less idiotic' than others, of course, but a myth all the same, intended to defer confrontation with 'the absolute Master, death.'"\textsuperscript{71}

Empty Speech and Full Speech. When we speak, we speak the language of emptiness. Signifiers disconnected from their signifieds rub against each other for a meaning that cannot correspond to reality; in language we chase the eternally ungraspable

\textsuperscript{70} Kristeva 1987, p. 21.
\textsuperscript{71} Borch-Jacobsen, p. 166
Real through objects. Lacan's distinction between the ego – the objectified “I” – and the subject that speaks about the “I” underlies his distinction between “empty” and “full” speech. Empty speech occurs "where the subject seems to be talking in vain about someone who, even if he were his spitting image, can never become one with the assumption of his desire"\(^1\) – in other words, speech in which the “I” is discussed as external object. The purpose of the analytic encounter is to discover the analysand's truth spoken not as object but as subject, in full speech: "speech from which the mirages of the subject have been cleared away through a recollecting of the past."\(^2\) In the act of speaking language, the subject communicates the content of the signifiers, but also communicates the fact of communication and the method, the how, of that communication. What distinguishes full speech from empty speech is the awareness that one is speaking and speaking nothing, in the sense that language ultimately veils a lack. As Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen notes:

> Full, true speech, in this sense, says nothing other than what empty, lying speech says. But it says that it says (it). And, saying that – saying *nothing* but that – it carries speech to *speech itself*, in its essence of pure speech decontaminated of all language (original emphasis).\(^3\)

Full speech is the goal of Lacanian analysis, a recognition through language of its, and the subject's, essential emptiness. Once this veil of language is lifted, the truth of our desire reveals itself as no-thing, beyond all things.

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\(^1\) Lacan 1977, p. 45  
\(^2\) Wyschogrod, p. 99  
\(^3\) Borch-Jacobsen, p. 139
Desire Unto Death. At the root of the infant’s cry is the desire to return to the unconsciousness of union with the mother. It informs all of language; what we want is to fill the lack which was created when we left our Mother, to fall back into the content-less void before consciousness, into emptiness. For Lacan (and Freud), this is ultimately the desire for death. At the root of every desire for objects is the insatiable desire for the time when the subject was not a subject, when he did not exist. When we desire others, we desire beyond their nature as objects – we desire their desire, we desire the emptiness that describes our own emptiness. Once the object of desire has capitulated and acknowledged the subject, the magical attraction vanishes, moves elsewhere. Desire can never be fulfilled in the Lacanian system; it is unsatisfied and unsatisfiable “perpetual motion,” in one commentator’s critical view. Indeed, one difficulty with the Lacanian model is that it leaves no fixed point at all – the subject speaking fully simply acknowledges his emptiness.

Oedipus and Sexuality. In the Oedipal system, the child desires to be the desire of the Mother, to be understood both in the sense of the child wanting to be the object of the Mother’s desire and of the child wanting to be that desire in its emptiness. In Lacan’s reading of the Freudian sexual economy, the child wants to be the Phallus of the Mother – that which the Mother lacks and will complete her. Lacan’s use of the Phallus is highly nuanced, and it would require a separate paper to approach it properly. A brief examination will be helpful in negotiating the twists and turns of sexuality in the Lacanian system. The Phallus is that which fills the mother’s lack,
but it is not simply or even the penis – the emphasis on the genitality of the Freudian Oedipal complex is softened in Lacan. The child is the Phallus insofar as he completes the Mother as the other half of the dyad. When the Father interferes, refusing to allow the reabsorption of the child by the Mother, the child looks to the Father as competitor (he who has the phallus) and as ego ideal (he who should be emulated to acquire the phallus). The Father is not the Phallus by virtue of an inherent physical superiority (i.e. from his penis) but because he has been symbolically castrated by entering the Law-of-the-Father, which gives him control of the Phallus: “the phallus is a title, which he has received so that he can bestow it in accord with symbolic pact and law.”

How does this system relate to a female child? Lacan does not emphasize the Freudian Electra complex, instead relying on the symbolic nature of the Phallus to explain his use of it to describe the girl’s emergent desire. As a non-genital symbol, the phallus names the desire, not the sexual organ. The phallus is present in a way that the girl’s sexual organs are not:

Strictly speaking, there is no symbolization of the woman’s sexual organ as such…. And this is because the imaginary provides nothing but an absence, whereas elsewhere there is a very prevalent symbol… The feminine sexual organ has the character of an absence, a void, a

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55 Harpham, p. 80  
56 Borch-Jacobsen, p. 213  
57 Lacan does believe that the phallus retains some correspondence to the penis, insofar as the Oedipal identification of the boy with his father is more entrenched because of his sex. The girl assumes the symbolic Phallus with greater ease for having nothing physical to lose by the castration.
hole, which causes it to be less desirable than the masculine sexual organ in terms of provocativeness."\textsuperscript{78}

So the girl desires the phallus (insofar as it is \textit{not} the penis) for much the same reason that the boy does – it is the signifier of the power of the social order, of the subject standing as an erect statue, apart from the Other and others. As Borch-Jacobsen notes, Lacanian desire is fundamentally a desire \textit{to be a subject, not to have an object}.\textsuperscript{79}

It is from the recognition of the subject as empty that brings about \textit{jouissance}, or enjoy-ment. The French connotation of \textit{jouissance} emphasizes sexual pleasure, so that the experience of one’s truth brings a feeling akin to sexual pleasure, and vice versa. The \textit{jouissance} of the man follows this model clearly, but the \textit{jouissance} of women follows a different, “supplementary” model. We will take up this difference, key to understanding Lacan’s thought about God and mysticism, as we consider the \textit{Interior Castle}. For the moment, it will be worthwhile to note that the return to the Other that is the desire of Desire would be a return to a Mother, i.e. to (a) woman.

\textit{God and Jouissance}. The child departs from the Mother with a cry. What happens to that Mother, who does not enter the world of differentiation in language (unlike the biological mother, who is bound by the same Law as the child)? Insofar as the Mother is the Other, she is beyond signification and beyond words. She is the Unsayable, the name which cannot be spoken. The parallels between Lacan’s ideas about the Mother and the apophatic approach to God are unavoidable; Lacan himself addresses them in “God and the \textit{Jouissance} of \textit{The Woman}.” If the Mother is

\textsuperscript{78} Lacan 1981, pp. 198-199, qtd. in Borch-Jacobsen, p. 217
that which is unconscious, then that unconscious is feminine. The Woman ("the" is written under erasure because, as Lacan notes, "[t]here is no such thing as The woman since of her essence... she is not all") is that which is beyond language: "There is woman only as excluded by the nature of things which is the nature of words." Cut off by the "gaping hole" between she and her child, the Woman cannot enter the symbolic Law of which the child has irrevocably become a part. She does, however, make herself heard in a "supplementary" jouissance. As Mark Taylor notes:

She can, nonetheless, be heard. The Woman is heard in her cry – a cry that cannot be stilled. The cry of The Woman is le cri that repeatedly interrupts E-cri-ts and perpetually disrupts all é-cri-ture. Though always rumbling, le cri cannot be heard until language withdraws. Instead of a silence that "complements" speech, the beyond of the cry is a "supplement" that exceeds language. If the Woman has been made un-conscious, she manifests herself in neurotic symptoms that force her cry through the veneer of conscious order. What makes its appearance in the parapraxes, neuroses, and accidents of conscious discourse is the repressed desire of the (m)other. The distinction Taylor points to between the silence that makes speech possible – the spaces between words, the pauses that make possible emphasis – and the silence that goes beyond speech – that which makes itself known as disruption – is key to understanding Lacan's thought about mysticism. He does not embrace the God of theism, but he does outline a space from which some

70 Borch-Jacobsen, p. 220
80 Lacan FS, p. 144
81 Ibid., p. 144
82 Taylor, p. 112
God might make itself known. True atheism, he notes, is not the myth "God is dead," but rather the acknowledgement that God is unconscious, unknown.\(^{83}\)

If God is unconscious, then the voice that speaks God is that which cannot speak, the voice of the Woman. Indeed, Lacan holds that the mystics are those that go beyond the Law to find jouissance elsewhere:

There are men who are just as good as women. It does happen. And who therefore feel just as good. Despite, I won't say their phallus, despite what encumbers them on that score, they get the idea, they sense that there must be a jouissance which goes beyond. That is what we call a mystic.\(^{84}\)

It is this jouissance that we will use in examining Teresa.

**The Ex-stasis of Teresa**

Teresa was born in 1515 in Avila, Spain, the daughter of a converso wool merchant who wanted to use Teresa's marriage as a way into social legitimacy. In defiance of her parents, Teresa joined an Augustinian convent at age 16 and transferred to a Discalced Carmelite monastery at 20. She was often ill as a young woman; she had a near-death experience that influenced her later spiritual life and an attack of brucelosis that lingered with her throughout her life. The relationship between pain, physical and spiritual, and the ecstatic experience of Teresa appears throughout her autobiography and the Interior Castle.

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\(^{83}\) Taylor, p. 111

\(^{84}\) Lacan FS, p. 147
Our task is to look at the desire of Teresa as it (dis)appears in this text. In order to examine the desire of the mystic in the Interior Castle, we must first look at the space in which the text is situated. Teresa is speaking to her fellow nuns at the command of her confessor; the Interior Castle is intended as an instruction manual of sorts, a guide composed by Teresa as a distillation of her experiences recorded in earlier works. She speaks about soul, the meeting-place of the human and the divine. In his marvelous section on Teresa in The Mystic Fable, Michel de Certeau describes this inner speech of the soul as "a speaking that does not know what it echoes."\(^5\) This speech is in search of a place to be spoken; Teresa invents the metaphor of a castle "made entirely out of a diamond or of very clear crystal, in which there are many rooms, just as in heaven there are many dwelling places"\(^6\) as the imaginary place in which the soul could find discursive space. This space, as de Certeau notes, is necessarily a fiction – the soul cannot be spoken. The castle is the signifier for an absence, the absence of the soul in discourse.

The moradas (mansions or dwelling-places) of the castle mark the progressive movement of the seeker through this interior speaking. Teresa describes the process of movement through the dwelling-places in terms of entrance to a new space, which she takes pains to note is within. She accounts for the paradoxical difficulty of entering the soul ("[f]or if this castle is the soul, clearly one doesn't have to enter it since it is within oneself."\(^7\) ) by placing the non-seeker in the courtyard of the castle, where one is so absorbed in worldly concerns one doesn't notice the castle. This

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\(^5\) de Certeau, p. 189  
\(^6\) Teresa, p. 35
distinction between the world of external objects and the fictional (in the sense that it can be objectified) interiority that excludes these objects is elaborated through the text. The seeker can enter the first moradas through personal effort alone (God does influence the process – all things are done through His will – but His grace in the first moradas should be distinguished from the more dramatic grace of the later moradas), but progression requires great sacrifice. The seeker in these dwelling-places is tormented by “snakes and vipers and poisonous creatures” which creep in from outside the castle; each is an external, worldly object that distracts the seeker from the interior speech. Teresa is clear that the world, i.e. exteriority, must be abandoned to move deeper into the interior space, but this abandonment is not absolute; after the consummation of the union with God in the seventh morada, she returns to the world to help others move inward. Indeed, the criterion in determining the truth of any supernatural experience is the results it produces in the external world: if the experience is true, only good works can come of it. Teresa advocates the abandonment of attachment to the world, not an abandonment of the world itself.

The Gates of the Castle. Teresa enters the castle through the interior speech of prayer. Teresa’s prayer is a speech to God as ineffable center of the soul, a speech that addresses that absence which is within. In opposition to those who don’t pray - those who speak of and to the world of external objects - prayer is a speech to the space where language cannot reach. She is careful to distinguish the prayer that allows access to the soul from other prayers:

87 Teresa, p. 37
Insofar as I can understand, the gate of entry to this castle is prayer and reflection. I don't mean to refer to mental more than vocal prayer, for since vocal prayer is prayer it must be accompanied by reflection. A prayer in which a person is not aware of whom he is speaking to, what he is asking, who it is who is asking and of whom, I do not call prayer however much the lips may move.\textsuperscript{38}

Mindfulness is the only criterion of right prayer. Teresa's prayer is speech that both communicates a meaning (uses language) and is aware of itself as speech. It is spoken to an absence and speaks from an absence, i.e. the humble subject who is nothing before God. In recollecting the "mirages of the past" as mirages through a turning-away from exteriority, it speaks itself as emptiness asking that emptiness beyond language to acknowledge it. As such, it is very near to Lacan's full speech, sui-referential and self-aware – it speaks itself.

Teresa's prayer, however, includes something which is missing in Lacanian full speech – it receives an impossible response from the Other. God communicates with Teresa in locutions, language beyond language. Teresa experiences ecstasies, raptures, spiritual delights and consolations that she describes in great detail; it is in describing the locutions that we find a reminder of the fictional nature of the text. Locutions come from "some interior part of the soul," "the superior part" of the soul, and "some are so exterior that they come through the sense of hearing, for it seems there is a spoken word."\textsuperscript{39} This audible word serves to highlight the interiority, indeed the unspeakability, of the mystical experience; the Other has with this exception remained inaccessible to language. Great mysteries are communicated

\textsuperscript{38} Teresa, p. 38
to Teresa; she learns the secrets of heaven and the Trinity but cannot put them into words. In delights, she describes her experience in lushly sensual terms (fragrances, breezes, flowing waters), but reminds us that the language is only a necessary illusion: “I don’t say that it is a fragrance but am merely making this comparison.”

She must translate the ineffable contact with the other into sensual terms; language is ultimately the language of the body. It is no surprise, then, that the most intimate contacts with the Other are rendered in the sexual language of jouissance. As Lacan noted in reaction to Bernini’s The Agony of St. Teresa, “you only have to go and look at Bernini’s statue in Rome to understand immediately that she’s coming, there is no doubt about it.”

*The Body of Language.* The ineffable interior space of Teresa’s soul is made fictionally exterior in the text – her speaking body. Her body registers contact with the Other; it is the place and record of that contact. The soul, de Certeau notes, is a place where the subject is hollowed out so that the Other can appear. Indeed, Teresa’s body is marked by the pain; she answers the command of the Other voiced through her confessor and writes in spite of its aggravation of her headaches, in spite of her body’s desire(?). Her obedience to God keeps her involved in the task of writing, and God speaks in the emptiness she provides: “Today, while beseeching our Lord to speak for me because I wasn’t able to think of anything to say nor did I know how to

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89 Teresa, p. 119
80 Teresa, p. 118, my emphasis
91 Lacan FS, p. 147
begin to carry out this obedience, there came to my mind what I shall now speak about…”\textsuperscript{92}

If the physical body records the passage of the Other in the pain of her illness, the fictional body records those aspects of the passage which are beyond language, often in the language of pain. Deep within the castle, in the realm of the “supernatural,” Teresa experiences a wounding that is the mark of contact from God. Teresa has received “favors” from God, brief moments of comfort sent to sustain her through difficult periods of faith, and these favors have increased her desire for God; this desire only heightens her awareness of the gap between herself and the Other. Thus the favors “leave it [the “butterfly” that is Teresa] with greater pain.”\textsuperscript{94} Caught by this distracting desire, Teresa feels a sudden “blow” that is not a blow, an “arrow” that is not an arrow, which causes a sharp wound deep in the soul:

…in my opinion, it isn’t felt where earthly sufferings are felt, but in the very deep and intimate part of the soul, where this sudden flash of lightning reduces to dust everything it finds in this earthly nature of ours; for while this experience lasts nothing can be remembered about our being.\textsuperscript{95}

Our being, that which is conscious and capable of expression in language, is suspended in the forced contact with God. Immersed in the experience of the Other, the body loses itself in its capacity to collect the minutiae of differentiated existence. This immersion leaves a mark on the soul and on the fictional body; Teresa knows that she received a “vivid knowledge of [Him]” so that the pain increases beyond all

\textsuperscript{92} Teresa, p. 35
\textsuperscript{93} Ibid., p. 67
that she had experienced before. The pain is so great that she "begin[s] to cry aloud."^96

While it is felt beyond the language of the body, the wound has a physical dimension that is important in terms of Lacan's understanding of desire as desire-for-death. The depth of Teresa's experience of the Other brings her to the brink of physical death. She doesn't die physically as a result of the wounding, but she does seek a kind of death, presented thematically in the text as the metaphor of the silkworm. Teresa the earth-bound caterpillar must die in the cocoon of Christ to be reborn as the butterfly that can be lifted to the heavens. A second, more permanent death follows, when the butterfly dies at the spiritual marriage of the seventh morada. Openness to the Other requires death to the world of objects, and immersion in the Other requires a death to the self. But would Lacan see such a death as an adequate return to the Other? The re-union with the Other elaborated in the spiritual marriage of the seventh morada is a permanent in-dwelling of the divine, in which Teresa has no doubt about her salvation (i.e. her eventual return to the Other). It is not, however, an immersion in the unconscious bliss of the preoedipal state. As Teresa notes,

It should be understood that this presence is not felt so fully, I mean so clearly, as when revealed the first time or at other times when God grants the soul this gift. For if the presence were felt so clearly, the soul would find it impossible to be engaged in anything else or even to live among people.^97

^91 Ibid., p. 166
^95 Ibid., pp. 166-167, my emphasis
^96 Ibid., p. 167
^97 Ibid., p. 176
The impossibility of social contact after a complete immersion experience is valuable to note. If Teresa became completely Other, she would be beyond language, beyond any commonality with others and thus beyond any capacity to bring about change. Indeed, as Teresa's own truth criterion makes clear, God reveals Himself to facilitate the good works that follow from a healthy faith. If not a re-union, then, Teresa's contact with the Other is at least a brief connection that sustains her capacity to bring solace to those in the wilderness of separation from the Other. It is a bridging of the gap between God and humans that writes itself in the body and speech of Teresa, and in the text that is her soul's impossible body.

Conclusion

Following his comments about Teresa's jouissance, Lacan continues:

And what is her jouissance, her coming from? It is clear that the essential testimony of the mystics is that they are experiencing it but know nothing about it. These mystical ejaculations are neither idle gossip nor mere verbiage, in fact they are the best things you can read... Given which, naturally you are all going to be convinced that I believe in God. I believe in the jouissance of the woman in so far as it is something more...  

That something more is difficult to unpack, and it is intimately tied to Lacan's ideas about love and the sexual. The jouissance of the woman is supplementary to male jouissance insofar as it is beyond signification, and thus is ultimately unable to enter discourse. Teresa cannot explain her experience; she knows it is, in a way that cannot be communicated except by negating her communication before it is made:

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98 Lacan FS, p. 147
"neither is the intellect capable of understanding them nor can comparisons help in explaining them; earthly things are too coarse for such a purpose."\textsuperscript{99}

It is clear that there is desire in Teresa, a desire that increases as she receives contact from God. In Lacanian terms, Teresa's increased awareness of her separation from the Other only intensifies her desire – absence makes the heart grow fonder. Likewise, Teresa is aware of the emptiness of her desire, and of the emptiness of the objects around her. Teresa's relationship with her confessors is interesting in this regard. She chides her audience for not informing their confessors of every detail of their spiritual life, emphasizing the inability of the nuns to make decisions for themselves. Indeed, emphasizing the weakness of women generally and their incapacity to make wise decisions places them in a better position to hear the speech of the Other – their inability to think elaborately testifies to their emptiness. Guidance is necessary, she writes. But her own journey would have been diverted several times if she had minded her confessors: "despite all these struggles and even the persons who tell one that the locutions are foolishness (I mean the confessors with whom one speaks about these things)... there remains a spark of assurance..."\textsuperscript{100} She changed confessors whenever she encountered an unsympathetic ear; what mattered was not the voice of others, but the voice of the Other, which spoke through the emptiness of specific others. The object, the confessor, doesn't exist as an influence on her.

\textsuperscript{99} IC, p. 85
\textsuperscript{100} IC, p. 122
How could Lacan account for a desire so great that the Other feels obliged to make itself known (or, is empowered to bridge the unbridgeable gap of desire)? This is the most difficult question to answer given Lacan's position. Of course, we can never know what speaking occurred in Teresa's soul; we have only her fictions from which to work. Regardless of "truth" claims (which, as Lacan noted, have little to do with the "facts" of an occurrence already disconnected from the event by memory), the text highlights an important limitation to Lacanian thought: what is the difference between no-thing and that which cannot be spoken? If thing-ness necessitates language, then how does one account for the variety of Teresa's experiences? Language requires sociality, and Teresa's experience occurs in a place far beyond any social contact that would agree on a meaning, however ephemeral it might be. The significance of Teresa's text is not as description of an indescribable event, but as the trace of the passage of the Other.
CONCLUSION: Unsaying mysticism

Lacan leaves us with a series of difficult questions. If the ever-retreating Other takes with it all accounts of impossible contact, what is the purpose of discourse on mysticism? If the subjective life is closed to our prying analytical eyes, what significance does the label "mystic" have outside of its use as an indicator of social relationship? And how, given our discussion of the relationship of mystic to society in chapter 2, could "mystic" and "mysticism" apply uniformly across the varied cultural, economic, and geographic contexts of those who receive them?

As when we began this work, the question of definition haunts the field. When we talk about mysticism, we talk about an area of human life forever removed from the limited capacities of our analytical tools. We can perceive mysticism only as it reverberates through the arena of shared meanings and through the changes it influences in language and institutions. Those who feel the reverberations identify as points of origin individuals who symbolize the changes brought into society from an unidentified place. That identification of individuals as mystics, that labeling, is always tied to a political, economic, religious and linguistic context. Any attempt to isolate elements common to all uses of the label "mystical" must take into account the motivations and cultural contexts of those who apply the labels as well as the differences in social contexts between mystical texts.
To propose the abandonment of the term, though, would be premature. A better descriptive understanding of mysticism may appear, in some sense, through an apophatic process—we can describe what mysticism is not. Although Weber’s categories may not adequately capture the social context of mysticism, we can hear the echo of that context in his writing. The definition is constantly being revised, and that process of revision is invaluable to our understanding of our linguistic and analytical capacities. Perhaps the most difficult question raised by Lacan’s thought on mysticism is that of communication. If language is unable to convey “mystical experience,” how can it convey “ordinary experience?” How can we communicate at all? It is possible that communication occurs in that moment between the statement and revision, revision and statement—between cataphasis and apophasis, apophasis and cataphasis. If so, we might be able to say that Michael Sells’ “mystical language of unsaying” is a heightened occurrence of a much more common process. As far removed as we are from the mystic’s perception of mystical phenomena, as unbridgeable the gap between the subject and the Other, the capacity to communicate about these things (and about nothing) may be closer than it appears.
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