

Mysticism in Literature

A consideration of the place of mysticism in literature poses some initial difficulties in the matter of definition. It should therefore be these qualities that imbue works which can properly be called both literary and mystical. The habit is quite current, unfortunately, for any literary work to be called "mystical" as long as it manifests a deep religious attitude or experience, deals with the supernatural or even the preternatural, or sees nature as a veil that at once conceals and reveals the Absolute. In the strictest sense, mysticism is the direct, intuitional experience of God through unifying love. There have been and are mystics in this strict sense outside the Catholic Church, even among non-Christians (e.g., the Mohammedans or pagan Greeks). Such experiences, however, are difficult to identify. When absorptions in the Soul of the universe or in some universal Mind are described, it is difficult to determine whether these are an experience of a personal God in charity. Oftentimes there is question only of a religious experience in the realm of ideas and feelings. Without prejudging the mystical quality in this strict sense in the writings of Blake, Huysmans, Emerson, or Goethe (to take these as representatives of different literatures), it seems possible and even necessary to distinguish their vague and often pantheistic-tinged absorption from the more effective union with a personal God that gives depth and fire to the writings of such mystics as St. John of the Cross, St. Francis of Assisi, and St. Catherine of Siena.

It may not be an oversimplification to say that the first type of mysticism is an "I-It" relationship, the second an "I-Thou" realization, and that consequently from this second more intimate confrontation a more profound, moving, and universally significant

literature would be expected to arise. This expectation is largely fulfilled in the writings of the "I-Thou" mystics; the frustration that so often hampers the efforts of these mystics to state their experiences arises from the very fact that their union with God in intuitive love has been so intimate, so unique, so literally ineffable that it defies capture in human words.

"I-It" Mystics. The whole course of world literature has been definitely shaped by those who wrote what may be called mysticism in a broad sense. This mysticism is specified by an intense realization of the difference between things of this world and the great otherworldly spiritual realities. Since many of these writers receive separate treatment in this encyclopedia, they cannot be singled out here for extensive consideration. To give but a sampling, and restricting mention to those who are of acknowledged literary importance, there are from ancient times and up to the 12th century Plato and Plotinus, Philo Judaeus, Avicenna (Ibn Gabirol), and Maimonides (Moses ben Maimon); in later times, Samuel Coleridge and Blake in England, Jonathan Edwards and Emerson in the U.S., Johann Herder and Klopstock in Germany, and the Symbolists in France. Many more, without being clearly Christian, have spoken eloquently of a world beyond sense, and their collective testimony to these invisible realities has been a force constantly and powerfully working against the materialistic and positivistic influences that always threaten to infiltrate a literature written by sense-fettered and earth-bound men.

"I-Thou" Mystics. It is, however, with mystics in the strictest sense of the word that one enters the realm of a literature that is unique in its intrinsic beauty and significance. The Epistles of St. Paul and St. John and the

Apocalypse open the way to the subsequent attempts of Christian mystics to recount in human language the sublimity of their experience of direct knowledge of God. St. Paul distills the literary difficulty that all Christian mystics have faced when he states (almost in complaint) that he was “caught up into paradise, and heard secret words, which it is not granted to man to utter” (2 Cor 12.3). His account of his raptures and visions is nevertheless magnificent prose. St. Augustine hints at something of the same difficulty in expressing the ineffable when he says: “Thee when first I saw, Thou liftedst me up, that I might see there was something which I might see, and that as yet I was not the man to see it” [*Confessions*, tr. Watts (London 1912) 1.373]. But Augustine overleaped the barrier of expression to give the world in the *Confessions*, and indeed in much of his other work, abiding literary masterpieces. The influence of Neoplatonism gave a distinct literary quality to the work of Dionysius the Areopagite, one of the great shapers of subsequent Christian mysticism.

The Middle Ages saw a great flowering of mysticism. Most of the accounts of mystical experience are superb in the fervent tenderness and modesty that make them gems of affective literature. Such, for example, is St. Bernard of Clairvaux’s sermon on the *Song of Songs*:

I confess, then, though I say it in my foolishness, that the Word visited me, and even very often. But although He very frequently entered into my soul, I have never at any time been sensible of the precise moment of His coming. I have felt that he was present. ... You will ask, then, how, since the ways of His access are thus incapable of being traced, I could know that He was present? But he is living and full of energy, and as soon as He has entered into me He has quickened my sleeping soul, has aroused and softened and goaded my heart, which was in a state of torpor, and hard as a stone. He has begun to pluck up and destroy, to plant and to build, to water the dry places, to illuminate the gloomy spots, to throw open those which were shut close, to inflame with warmth those which

were cold, as also to strengthen its crooked paths and make its rough places smooth, so that my soul might bless the Lord, and all that is within me praise His holy Name. [*Life and Works*, ed. J. Mabillon (London 1896) 4.457.]

Others whose prose possesses this literary charm were Richard of Saint-Victor, St. Bonaventure, and St. Dominic; there were also mystics who were great poets, such as St. Thomas Aquinas, whose majestic hymns (e.g., *Pange lingua* and *Sacris solemniis juncta sunt gaudia*) are obviously the fruit of his own mystical prayer.

The literary qualities of the English mystics have often been adverted to. There is a simplicity and charm to their recounting of their experiences, which recalls the Franciscan influence that stemmed so largely from St. Francis of Assisi himself, *I Fioretti*, and from the *Laudi* of his followers. But there is much Augustinian influence at work, too, as may be seen in the anonymous *The Cloud of Unknowing* (between 1345 and 1386). Other true masterpieces of the English school are Walter Hilton's *The Scale of Perfection*, Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love*, and Richard Rolle's poems.

On the Continent, Jan van Ruysbroeck introduced a superb symbolism in his *The Book of the Sparkling Stone* and spoke with great ardor in *The Adornment of the Spiritual Marriage*. The same intimate fervor is manifest in the works of St. Bridget of Sweden and St. Catherine of Siena. The great German mystics, such as Mechtilde of Magdeburg and St. Hildegarde of Bingen, had profound literary influence. But it is to Spain that one looks for the greatest mystical literature, beginning with the Catalan, Ramon Lull, and culminating in the rich prose of St. Teresa of Avila and the sublime poetry of St. John of the Cross.

One of the seminal literary achievements of the mystics was in developing and deepening (if not in originating) various symbolical “frames” for the account of their experiences. Such, for

example, are the symbols of the ladder, the pilgrimage, and, with particular influence, the bold symbols of earthly wooing, love, and marriage as analogues of the divine union. But even more fruitful for deeply affective and intimately moving revelation has been the mystics' constant meditation on the Passion of Christ. It has been this intimacy that has given the "I-Thou" mystics the source of the superb literature produced by them. They, like (but how much more profoundly than) their paler "I-It" counterparts, speak in a

chorus of loving testimony to the reality (in truth, a personal reality) of the God with whom they had achieved direct, intuitive knowledge through unifying love. That they were not able to speak of this experience more often in what are called the accents of literature lay in the fact, as Julian of Norwich said in her *Revelations of Divine Love*, that "Ah, hard and grievous was His pain ... for which pains I saw that all is too little that I can say; for it may not be told."