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Unholy Rapture: Mysticism in Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire*

KATHLEEN M. BLUMREICH-MOORE

Readers of Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire*, *The Vampire Lestat*, and *The Queen of the Damned* cannot fail to notice the way in which the author consciously upends traditional religious values, creating for her sinister characters a dark, often perverse version of Christianity. Rice's vampires worship Satan in Masses which incorporate essential elements of the Catholic liturgy; they frequently speak of salvation through the blood not of Christ but of their victims; they seek sanctuary in hallowed places, inhabiting sacred crypts and taking residence beneath cathedral altars; they form philosophies based on twisted interpretations of Scripture, the Ten Commandments in particular. It is thus not surprising to see that Rice's vampires engage in a form of ecstatic spirituality traditionally reserved for only the most devout lovers of God: mysticism.

Indeed, as I will argue in this essay, the "vampire experience," if I may call it that, is in essence the "mystic experience," warped and deformed to serve depraved rather than holy appetites. By examining in detail an episode from *Interview with the Vampire*, it becomes possible to see that Rice is not only drawing on mystical practices, language, and imagery, but is creating a new, and fascinatingly horrible "Vampiric Way."¹

At this point a definition of mysticism may be helpful. According to Aryeh Grabois, "The term implies an immediate knowledge of God attained through personal religious experience. It is primarily achieved in a state of prayer and there are different degrees of communion, ranging from short, temporary mystical states to a permanent union with God, the so-called 'mystical marriage'" (Grabois 539). While among ascetic monastic movements—the Cistercians in the 12th century and the Franciscans in the 14th, for example—the mystic experience eventually came to be conceived of as an "integral step on the path to salvation" (Grabois 539), among most religious the experience nevertheless retained its aura of exclusivity: the devotee is somehow elected, chosen by God to participate in the union. As one scholar has pointed out, despite the promise of the "second great theological principle, that Christ in redeeming mankind gave to man the possibility of sharing in the divine life" (Knowles 6), it is recognized that "among Christians, as among all God's creatures, there is a diversity of gifts . . . there are those to whom a higher knowledge and love are given . . . these chosen ones are capable of receiving not only the gift of faith and the power to love and serve God, but a new supernatural knowledge of love"

(Knowles 7).

Thus the mystic experience is not considered open to any man or woman merely curious about spiritual communion with God. Rather, the opportunity to share in the divine comes only to those "called." Practicing medieval mystics such as Richard Rolle, Julian of Norwich, Margery Kempe, and the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* were each careful to include in their autobiographical accounts of spiritual enlightenment unambiguous, unqualified warnings to the reader that the decision to embark on a journey toward union with God is not something to be made lightly. To become a mystic is to devote one's life primarily to contemplation, to focus one's thoughts and passions on things heavenly and eternal.

Should it happen that a man or woman truly feels called to the mystic's life, he or she would then set out to work through a three-stage spiritual program commonly referred to as the "Mystic Way." The process, from purification to illumination to union, "describes in general terms the way in which the soul of the mystic usually develops; and is paralleled by the other formula, 'Beginner, Proficient, and Perfect,' which many of the mediaeval teachers preferred" (Underhill 26).

Purification refers to "the purification of character and detachment from earthly interests . . . Such purification always marks the early stages of mystical experience; and is an intensive form of . . . self-conquest" (Underhill 26).

Illumination, the second stage in the Mystic Way, means "that peaceful certitude of God, and perception of the true values of existence in His Light, which is the reward of the surrendered will: a perception which, as it grows, enters more and more deeply in to the truths of religion and the meaning and loveliness of life. . ." (Underhill 27). As Evelyn Underhill has noted, however, the stages of purification and illumination are not strongly delineated. "[I]n many mystics, purification and progressive illumination are seen to go hand in hand; for the nearer these draw to the vision of the Perfect, the more imperfections they discover in themselves" (Underhill 27).

Union, the final stage in the Mystic Way, and the ultimate goal of the mystic, suggests "that perfect and self-forgetting harmony of the regenerate will with which God makes the full-grown mystic capable of 'being to the Eternal Goodness what his own hand is to a man'" (Underhill 27). The "flower of the consecrated life," this spiritual marriage with God frequently brings "with it an astonishing access of energy and endurance, a power of dealing with persons and events far beyond the self's 'natural' capacities . . ." (Underhill 27).

It is important to note here that even though mysticism was practiced in virtually every medieval religion, and continues to be practiced today, peculiar to Christian mysticism is the notion that in place of "the absorption of the soul into the divine . . . the union [is] one of love and will, in which the distinction between creature and creator [is] permanently retained" (Grabois 539). While the meeting of soul and Godhead can be described quite literally as a commingling, the mystic himself yet keeps the human faculty of reason, a sense of self-possession, and the ability to distinguish physical sensation.

Here a term critical to my discussion must be considered. "Rapture" is perhaps best defined as the state of ecstasy experienced by the mystic when he or she has entered fully the spiritual marriage bond. Richard Rolle, the 14th-century hermit, and mystic writes in his famous devotional treatise, *The Fire of Love*:

[R]apture . . . comes through the lifting up of the mind to God in contemplation; all perfect lovers of God go this way—and only those who love God . . . there is a definite seizure, a something outside nature . . . one way is to be rapt by love while retaining physical sensation, and the other is to be rapt out of the senses by some vision, terrifying or soothing. I think that the rapture of love is better, and more rewarding (Rolle 166).

According to Rolle, and many other mystics, physical phenomena are not only expected counterparts to rapture, but are integral to the experience itself: such sensations are often construed as manifestations of God's real and holy presence. There is, however, no hard and fast rule about what a mystic may—or must—feel during such moments of full-blown spiritual delight. For Rolle, heat and song served to hallmark the mystical experience. For St. Hildegarde, God was Light—the Living Light—and thus her revelations of the divine frequently focus on images of brilliance and radiance. For Julian of Norwich, the sign of God's presence came via "ghostly words" heard only in her mind. For other mystics such as Margery Kempe, God's grace, power, and glory were made evident as they gripped the devotee with near-hallucinatory visions, sobbing, and convulsions.

But beyond these sometimes idiosyncratic sensations, there appear to be two aspects of the mystical experience which Rolle, St. Hildegarde, Julian of Norwich and others shared in common. The first is that one lasting benefit of rapture comes in the form of heightened perception. The mystic, upon coming out of the near-trance-like state, is endowed with a new way to see. Suddenly all of God's creation appears clear and fresh, more beautiful and delightful than the mystic has ever before noticed. The second aspect is that despite whatever attempts the mystic makes to express his experience in language, ultimately his "record" can be no more than a pale reflection of the actual union. Given the nature of the mystic experience, it is not a thing easily captured in thought or word. It is, in sum, ineffable.

Perhaps this has been a rather lengthy prologue to any discussion of mysticism in Rice's *Interview with the Vampire*. Yet it seems to me that if one is to appreciate the author's manipulation of this dimension of spirituality, one must first understand the theological context out of which she appears to have worked.

The first indication that Rice is indeed adapting mystical language and imagery for her own fictional purposes occurs very early on in *Interview with the Vampire*. Shortly after we are introduced to Louis, the protagonist of the novel, we are made privy to certain facts concerning his history. And it is significant that almost from the start of the narrative, Louis points to the atmosphere of frenzied spirituality out of which he is to emerge not blessed, but damned.

"You weren't always a vampire, were you?" [the boy] began.

"No," [Louis] answered. "I was a twenty-five year old man when I became a vampire, and the year was seventeen ninety-one."

... "How did it come about?"

"There was a tragedy ..." the vampire started. "It was my younger brother ... He died" (4).

By Louis' own admission, it was the death of his brother, Paul, that precipitated his transformation from human to undead. And it is through this initial piece of information that Rice begins to create a startling contrast not only between the two brothers, but between the spiritual paths each chose. While Louis concerned himself primarily with earthly matters—tending the indigo plantation, enjoying fine food, drink, and music—Paul interested himself in entirely different things. We are told that "Prayer was all that mattered to him, prayer and his leatherbound lives of the saints" (5). It would appear that by the age of twelve, Paul had already received his calling to the mystic's life.

Louis was initially sympathetic to Paul's ever-increasing religious convictions, even going so far as to build an oratory so that Paul could have the peace and privacy he required for his prolonged periods of meditation. But then Paul's devotions began to take over his life. He spent hours on end staring into the darkness with arms outstretched in the form of a cross, he became so engrossed in spiritual ecstasies that, typical of the mystic, he no longer cared for his own health or creature comforts, and he began to see visions of St. Dominic and the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Again, Louis at first accepted and encouraged Paul's role as contemplative, determining that when his brother came of age he would see to it that Paul entered the priesthood. Yet when Paul's visions increased in both frequency and intensity, causing the plantation slaves to fear him and label him "mad," (6) Louis, in a fit of "vicious egotism" (7) rejected his brother. Unable to believe that *his* brother had been touched by divinity, that *his* brother could possibly be meant for sainthood, Louis confronted Paul. The brothers quarrelled, Paul going away "crazed and grieved" (8), and only moments later falling to his death.

Perhaps naturally enough, Louis is then plagued with feelings of guilt over Paul's death. Had it not been for the argument, had it not been for Louis' own disbelief, Paul would perhaps have lived. But Louis takes his self-recrimination to a morbid extreme, succumbing to despair, wishing only for "self-destruction," desiring only to be "thoroughly damned" (16).

What is so ironic about the situation Rice creates is that Louis eventually casts aside Paul's licit mysticism for Lestat's illicit, hellish version; he ultimately exchanges the gift of light and love offered by God through grace for the gift of darkness and evil offered by Satan through vampirism. In rejecting Paul, and in symbolically destroying religion by beating the priest who insists that Paul was possessed of the devil, Louis readies himself to embark upon a corrupt and sullied mystic quest of his own.

Indeed, as we follow the narrative, we can see Louis passing through the stages of

the Mystic Way: purgation, illumination, union. Shortly after Paul's death, Louis meets Lestat, the vampire who is to become his mentor and, in terms of the mystic experience, his God-substitute. The meeting between Louis and Lestat is not, however, serendipitous, and it seems to me that this is a crucial fact. In the first place, the planned nature of the meeting simply serves to underscore Louis' mental, emotional, and spiritual preparedness to enter into a relationship based not on the mystic ideal of love and will, but on the satanic perversion of it: hate and will. Louis is ripe for Lestat's advances.

Secondly, and more importantly, the lack of coincidence in this episode points to yet another way in which Rice is manipulating traditional mysticism to suit her characters' needs: just as the mystic is chosen by God to participate in the ineffable experience of rapture, so too is Louis chosen by Lestat to share in the dark glories of vampirism. It makes little difference that Lestat's motives are hardly pure in selecting Louis—Lestat is far less interested in the condition of Louis' soul than in the condition of Louis' plantations; Lestat's presence conjures in Louis the same effect as that of God on the devotee. Lestat is described as luminous, radiant, enchanting, his eyes "[burning] with an incandescence" (13), his beauty capable of spellbinding Louis, who, in fact sees Lestat as so extraordinary that he appears "no more human . . . than a biblical angel" (16). Further, Lestat so impresses Louis that he is nearly rapt out of his senses. Louis becomes in this section of the novel like the mystic who, comprehending the grandeur of God, moves progressively through purification toward complete spiritual illumination by coming to grips with his own human imperfections and resolving to turn from them. Louis tells us:

. . . the moment I saw him, saw his extraordinary aura and knew him to be no creature I'd ever known, I was reduced to nothing. That ego which could not accept the presence of an extraordinary human being in its midst was crushed. All my conceptions, even my guilt and wish to die, seemed utterly unimportant. I completely forgot *myself*! . . . I forgot myself totally. And in the same instant knew totally the meaning of possibility. From then on I experienced only increasing wonder. As [Lestat] talked to me and told me of what I might become, of what his life had been and stood to be, my past shrank to embers. I saw my life as if I stood apart from it, the vanity, the self-serving, the constant fleeing from one petty annoyance after another, the lip service to God and the Virgin and a host of saints whose names filled my prayer books, none of whom made the slightest difference in a narrow, materialistic, and selfish existence. I saw my real gods . . . the gods of most men. Food, drink, and security in conformity. Cinders (13).

Yet again, there are grim ironies in Rice's Vampiric Mysticism. Unlike the mystic who becomes dead to sin in order to become truly alive to the joys of Christian virtue, Louis' self-conquest involves losing all in his soul that speaks of reverence for the Deity, love, and compassion. Louis not only takes on a new god, voluptuousness of the flesh, but also has "to witness the taking of a human life [the overseer's] as

proof of [his] commitment and part of [his] change" (15). Surely there is no act so antithetical to the meaning of Christ's passion as this. And unlike the mystic who often takes "light" as emblematic of his surrendered will, and who just as frequently refers to God's in-dwelling love as a preternatural heat or fire, Louis, in order to become illumined to Lestat's black powers, forsakes forever both light and heat. As Louis slinks toward union with Lestat, he prepares to see his last sunrise.

Because Rice is fashioning a perverse model of mysticism, there are obvious differences between the mystic's and Louis' goals. The paths they take, however, are strikingly parallel. As mentioned earlier, the stages of purgation and illumination often go hand in hand so far as the development of the mystic's soul is concerned. Louis' case is essentially the same. The more he purifies his human character, the more he detaches himself from all that is "good," the closer he comes toward a complete understanding of what it is to be a vampire. It is interesting to note that Louis even experiences something commonly described in devotional literature as the Dark Night of the Soul. Coined by St. John of the Cross, the phrase refers to a phase of purgative contemplation during which the mystic suffers true mortification. Sensually and spiritually, the mystic feels as if he has been plunged into utter darkness. The experience is characterized by a dying to affection for all things as well as by a negation of the self and all things above. The mystic may even lapse into moments of near-despair, so overwhelmed is he by the weight of his own sin and by the arduousness of the spiritual quest itself. Immediately after the overseer has been murdered, Louis says:

'I want to die . . . This is unbearable. I want to die. You have it in your power to kill me. Let me die.' I refused to look at [Lestat], to be spellbound by the sheer beauty of his appearance. He spoke my name to me softly, laughing (16).

And then later, when Louis must decide finally whether to continue on his course toward damnation—in essence whether to complete his own mystical journey—he says:

. . . I lay there in the face of my own cowardice and fatuousness again . . . Perhaps so directly confronted with it, I might in time have gained the courage to truly take my life, not to whine and beg for others to take it. I saw myself turning on a knife then, languishing in the day-to-day suffering which I found as necessary as penance from the confessional, truly hoping death would find me unawares and render me fit for eternal pardon. And I also saw myself as if in a vision standing at the head of the stairs, just where my brother had stood, and then hurtling my body down on the bricks (17).

The fundamental distinction between the mystic's Dark Night of the Soul and Louis' is that the mystic emerges victorious, strengthened in the Faith. Louis, on the other hand, does not. Too quickly, and for lack of courage, he is seduced by Lestat and is thus carried rapidly along toward the final stage in this now-corrupt Mystic Way: union and its concomitant, rapture.

Given the way in which Rice has so far transmuted the mystic experience, we should not be surprised to see that this most precious moment of Christian epiphany is likewise abused. The description of Louis' profane union, his unholy rapture with Lestat, abounds with the imagery and language so often found in devotional literature. Louis' transformation from human to undead (his "change") is ushered in with an allusion to a common biblical and mystical motif—Christ as lover:

'Now listen to me, Louis,' [Lestat] said, and he lay down beside me now on the steps, his movement so graceful and so personal that at once it made me think of a lover. I recoiled. But he put his right arm around me and pulled me close to his chest. Never had I been this close to him before, and in the dim light I could see the magnificent radiance of his eye and the unnatural mask of his skin. As I tried to move, he pressed his right fingers against my lips and said, 'Be still. I am going to drain you now to the very threshold of death, and I want you to be quiet, so quiet that you can almost hear the flow of blood through your veins, so quiet that you can hear the flow of that same blood through mine (17-18).

Just as the mystic's soul embraces Christ in an act of love and will upon a spiritual marriage bed, so too Louis embraces and is embraced by Lestat. And it is significant that Louis is reminded of the role his own will plays in the carnal blood-union with his hellish savior. As Lestat prepares to drink from Louis' neck, Lestat tells him, "It is your consciousness, your will, which must keep you alive" (18).

Surrendering now to Lestat's firm guidance, Louis breathes in the atmosphere surrounding his remaining seconds as a man:

Candles burned in the upstairs parlor, where we had planned the death of the overseer. An oil lantern swayed in the breeze on the gallery. All of this light coalesced and began to shimmer, as though a golden presence hovered above me, suspended in the stairwell, softly entangled with the railings, curling and contracting like smoke (18).

Down to the last details, Rice is careful to create a setting not only conducive to, but powerfully suggestive of visionary, mystic experience. Louis is beginning to see through the cloud of unknowing which yet hides the face of his demonic god, which yet separates him from Lestat, from the rapture inherent to the Vampiric Way.

And then through Louis, Rice provides us with this highly allusive passage:

'Listen, keep your eyes wide,' Lestat whispered to me, his lips moving against my neck. I remember that the movement of his lips raised the hair all over my body, sent a shock of sensation through my body that was not unlike the pleasure of passion . . . within minutes, I was weak to paralysis. Panic-stricken, I discovered I could not even will myself to speak . . . I felt his teeth withdraw with such a keenness that the two puncture wounds seemed enormous, lined with pain. And now he bent over my helpless head and, taking his right hand off me, bit his own wrist. The blood flowed down my shirt and coat, and he watched it with a narrow, gleaming eye. It seemed an eter-

nity that he watched it, and that shimmer of light now hung behind his head like the backdrop of an apparition. . . 'Louis, drink.' And I did.

Then something happened . . . How pathetic it is to describe these things which can't truly be described . . . I saw nothing but that light then as I drew blood. And then the next thing was . . . sound. A dull roar at first and then a pounding like the pounding of a drum, growing louder and louder . . . And then there came the pounding of another drum . . . The sound grew louder until it seemed to fill not just my hearing but all my senses, to be throbbing in my lips and fingers, in the flesh of my temples, in my veins . . . and then Lestat pulled his wrist free suddenly, and I opened my eyes and checked myself in a moment of reaching for his wrist, grabbing it, forcing it back to my mouth at all costs; I checked myself because I realized that the drum was my heart, and the second drum had been his (18-20).

Is this not the mystic experience of rapture twisted to focus on the blood as a means to damnation rather than as the avenue to eternal life? Like the mystic enveloped in God's power, Louis does keep his spiritual eyes wide open: simultaneous with becoming one with Lestat, Louis yet retains a sense of self-possession, yet retains the capacity to discern the physical phenomena that accompany his spiritual marriage to Lestat.

Significantly, Louis' warped mystic experience does not end here. Like the Christian devotee, Louis too is endowed with heightened senses, particularly a new way to see. But not surprising is the fact that Louis' fresh vision focuses primarily on things of man's creation and on things that appeal to the flesh rather than to the soul. Immediately after the union with Lestat has been consummated, Louis tells us:

I saw as a vampire . . . Lestat was standing again at the foot of the stairs, and I saw him as I could not possibly have seen him before, starkly white, so that in the night he was almost luminous; and now I saw him filled with his own life and own blood: he was radiant, not luminous. And then I saw that not only Lestat had changed, but all things had changed.

It was as if I had only just been able to see colors and shapes for the first time. I was so enthralled with the buttons on Lestat's black coat that I looked at nothing else for a long time. Then Lestat began to laugh, and I heard his laughter as I had never heard anything before . . . It was confusing, each sound running into the next sound, like the mingling reverberations of bells, until I learned to separate the sounds, and then they overlapped, each soft but distinct, increasing but discrete, peals of laughter. . . . When I saw the moon on the flagstones, I became so enamored with it that I must have spent an hour there. I passed my brother's oratory without so much as a thought of him, and standing among the cottonwood and oaks, I heard the night as if it were a chorus of whispering women, all beckoning me to their breasts . . . I was dying as a human, yet completely alive as a vampire . . . (20-21).

Finally, precisely like the mystic, Louis deems his experience ineffable. Three times he tells the boy recording their conversation that there are no words or metaphors suitable to expressing what the "change" actually involved. And perhaps herein lies the greatest irony of Rice's Vampiric Mysticism. Although for Louis, as for all vampires, drinking blood is the ultimate experience, the exchange of a life guided by God's grace and power for a life guided by satanic devotion to death and darkness proves, in the end, to be unsatisfactory. When Louis becomes dead to himself literally, he finds that he is disappointed in his God-substitute. Lestat can teach Louis how to be a vampire, how to find the nourishment he needs to survive. But unlike God, Lestat cannot teach Louis how to find spiritual succor. For Louis, immortality brings only a brooding emptiness, a longing to fill the years with meaning where there is none. For Louis, this unholy rapture brings no enlightenment save the knowledge that he is now condemned and never will there be any salvation. For Louis, as for many of Rice's dark angels wandering the earth, the Vampiric Way falls far short of its promises.

Notes

¹An expanded version of this essay, in which I provide examples from Rice's later novels, is currently in the works. Suffice it to say, however, the fundamental "experience" described in this piece remains constant throughout the Vampire Chronicles.

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