Mystical Poetics

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Abstract and Keywords

The development of Christian mysticism is deeply bound to poetics. This examination first considers Platonic poetry, Hebrew creation, and Christian kenosis as sources of poetic mysticism, before turning to an elaboration of the role of rhythm, language, and the poetic imagination. The appraisal then considers the historical development of mystical poetry, beginning with early Christian reflection on the figurative and lyrical use of scriptural language to express a deep personal relationship with God. The development of vernacular mysticism, and its adoption of this scriptural model, is then explored through a detailed consideration of four mystical poets (Dante, Jacopone, Hadewijch, and Angelus Silesius). The interaction of poetic form and spiritual content is elaborated throughout, with the aim of demonstrating how poetics allows the mystical writer to achieve a result for the reader otherwise not possible in discursive forms of communication.

Keywords: mystical poetry, rhythm, Plato, creation, Song of Songs, vernacular mysticism, Dante, Jacopone da Todi, Hadewijch, Angelus Silesius

THE very emergence of mysticism is bound up with poetry. Not the poetry of the mystics, but the poetry of the Bible and the μυστήριον (mystery or secret) considered to be contained therein. The first Christian mystics engaged in reflection upon scripture, and especially upon scriptural poetics. In confronting its figurative and lyrical language they developed an understanding of the poetic capacity of words to embody and express the mystical experience. The development of vernacular mysticism brought about the flourishing of mystical poetry, which applied the poetic capacity demonstrated in scripture to the recording of mystical experience in the form of personal narrative. It is not possible within the confines of this chapter to write a history of poetics and mysticism, however through the consideration of some of the tradition's consummate representative figures in the Latin West, one can observe how the specific interaction of poetic form and spiritual content allows the mystical writer to achieve a result for the reader otherwise not possible in discursive terms of communication. Before considering these historical examples, it is necessary to explore ideas of mysticism and poetry, in terms of their definitions, histories, and the rhythm that connects them, all of which contribute to our understanding

of the descriptive capabilities of the poet mystic to re-present the mystical transformative experience. After demonstrating the integral role of poetry within the story of mysticism, this examination will close with a brief consideration of its recent history, and the future importance of poetics for the mystical endeavour.

The Rhythmic Precedent

The definition of mysticism persistently offers difficulties. As reflection upon mysticism has developed, attention has moved beyond the tendency to focus upon the moment of mystical ecstasy to include the process of preparing for and expressing the mystical experience (though the ecstatic moment and its recording need not be separate). Bernard McGinn's sustained reflection on the topic and his influential body of work has (p. 242) proffered a well-regarded and oft-cited definition that takes this broader view into account. He writes, 'the mystical element in Christianity is that part of its belief and practices that concerns the preparation for, the consciousness of, and the reaction to what can be described as the immediate or direct presence of God' (McGinn 1991: p. xvii; Lamm 2013: 3–4). The definition expands the notion of mystical experience beyond a private, subjective moment, and toward a more sustained engagement with a wider, communal mystical process that includes its communication (McGinn 1991: p. xviii).

Within this wider consideration, the importance of mystical experience is not lessened. The mystical experience is one of all-encompassing actuality, which both saturates one's world with the transcendent, and draws one to ascend beyond that world. Indeed, according to McGinn, 'One thing that all Christian mystics have agreed on is that the experience in itself defies conceptualization and verbalization, in part or in whole' (McGinn 1991: p. xvii). As such the mystical experience is less an informational experience, than it is a transformational encounter (McGinn 1991: p. xvii). The challenge for the mystic is to find a form that records and enacts the unique nature of their experience. This in turn shifts our scholarly attention to the range of linguistic and stylistic strategies that aim to enact the state of mystical experience for the reader. Furthermore, it is essential to recognize that these accounts exist in tension with the aim to express the immediacy of the mystical experience. Gadamer's characterization of writing as a kind of 'alienated speech' is helpful (Mazzoni 2007: 105–22). In writing, 'meaning has undergone a kind of self-alienation through being written down' (Gadamer 1997: 393–4). The reader then transforms words back into performative meaning. As part of the attempt to address the fundamental challenge of mysticism to find a form that can record and enact the originative mystical experience, some mystics turn to poetics. Poetics can make demands upon the reader that differ in kind and magnitude from those required by discursive forms of writing, and in this way it is a genre capable of addressing the transformative end of mystical composition. To understand mystical poetics is therefore not to focus upon a subjective experience, but a communicative process. It is a creative enterprise that expresses through rhythm the human desire to live in relation to God, and the transformative capacity of living that relationship.

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The ability of poetry to make these transformative demands arises in part from its unique rhythmic nature, which recapitulates the rhythmic nature of human experience itself. Rhythm is integral to our physical being, embodied in life and death, inhalation and exhalation, sleep and wakefulness. Equally it manifests itself in our external world, in our experience of the days, seasons, and tides. Most important here, it is definitive of the spiritual lives of individuals, in the dynamic between sin and redemption, spirit and flesh, secular and religious. This last rhythmic set, characterized by its movement 'from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven', both expresses and enacts the relationship between humans and God, finite and infinite. Only in this rhythmic oscillation does the creature maintain and retain its identity in relation to the created. Rhythm (ῥυθμός), derived from the ancient Greek to flow (ῥεῖν), establishes what its etymology suggests, performing, and hence enacting, a flowing relationship between divinity and creation. The embodying of this relationship by the poet is eloquently described by Shakespeare in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, in a passage that refers to the divine poetic madness of the *Phaedrus*, which sets out an oscillatory pattern that would be formative for the Christian Neoplatonic tradition:

> The poet's eye, in fine frenzy rolling,
> Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;
> And as imagination bodies forth
> The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
> Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing
> A local habitation and a name.

> (5.1.13–18; Foakes 1984: 124)

Here the poet and mystic share a common task. This rhythmical character may be found in Greek, Jewish, and Christian reflections, which bring together both spiritual and poetic rhythm. These examples demonstrate the capacity of poetics to perform, and hence enact, a transformative union between divinity and creation in the spiritual life of the believer.

Platonic Poetry

Theseus' lines from Shakespeare's comedy draw directly upon Plato's *Phaedrus*, which articulates the need for true poets to enter a state of madness so that they may move beyond the confines of human conceptual knowledge, and be filled with the knowledge of the gods (Plato, *Phaedrus* 244a ff.; Cooper 1997: 522). Most are familiar with Plato's opinions on poetry and the poets from book 10 of the *Republic*, but the exile of those poets concerned with mere entertainment from the ideal republic ought to be weighed against the opinion Socrates offers in his lesser read dialogue the *Ion*. Here Plato describes the special relationship the poets have to the gods in the production of poetry:

> For of course poets tell us that they gather songs at honey-flowing springs, from glades and gardens of the Muses, and that they bear songs to us as bees carry honey, flying like bees. And what they say is true. For a poet is an airy thing,

winged and holy, and he is not able to make poetry until he becomes inspired and goes out of his mind and his intellect is no longer in him. As long as a human being has his intellect in his possession he will always lack the power to make poetry or sing prophecy.

(Plato, *Ion* 534b–c; Cooper 1997: 942)

For Plato, the poets are recipients of a 'divine gift', but this occurs at the cost of their intellects: '*they* are not the ones who speak those verses that are of such high value, for their intellect is not in them' (Plato, *Ion* 534d; Cooper 1997: 942). For Plato, poetry can convey to us divine truths, but the true poets must become emptied vessels, dumb to the very truth they bear within themselves. Only as an emptied self can the poet, with the (p. 244) unconscious pathology of the honeybee, shuttle back and forth, in the rhythmic oscillation of verse, to and from the divine source. For Plato, it is not the poets who master their subject, but the subject that masters *them* (Plato, *Ion* 534c; Cooper 1997: 942). Plato goes on to explain that we, as the audience, may gain access to the truth the poets convey, but this is not a direct transfer of knowledge. Instead, Plato develops the analogy of magnetic rings, where the truth poetry conveys diminishes in potency at each stage of removal from its divine source (Plato, *Ion* 533d–e, 535a–b; Cooper 1997: 942–3). Here Plato establishes the central problem of the tension between the divine object and the inability of either finite minds or finite words to contain it. Equally, he suggests the rhythm of both emptying and filling as a means to address this challenge.

Hebrew Creation

The Greek notion of poetic making would be essential for later Christian mystics, as would the Jewish notion of creation, which would give humans a special role within it.[1] Plato and Platonism does not have the Hebrew concept of a personal God, through whose will the world is created, and by which humans are given a special role in that creation. Similar to the divine–creature rhythmic oscillation we find in Plato, the creation of Genesis begins with the institution of a rhythmic relationship. Creation is preceded by stasis in which the 'Spirit of God hovered over the waters' (Gen. 1: 2). Then, through the productive action of the Spirit, God created the most basic rhythms of creation: light and dark, day and night, seasons, days and years (Gen. 1: 5, 14). In the act of creation, God's word is more than a means of communication with humans; it is also the creative power of God (Gen. 1: 3, 6, 9, etc.; Ps. 33: 6). When humans are created, they are made in the image of God. As the image-bearers of the divine they are created to have a relationship with God, and equally, as *imago Dei*, they are given a special relationship to creation as co-creators (Gen. 1: 27). Humans are to continue and extend the creative activity of God through fruitful multiplication, and they are to have dominion over creation (Gen. 1: 28). However, beyond this, extending the artistic metaphor, humans become the readers of divine poetry, as Nicholas of Cusa later explained, when we investigate the proportions of things through arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy, we 'are led to marvel at the divine art and excellence' (Nicholas of Cusa, ed. Bond 1997: 166). Furthermore, in their creative poetical capacity, humans can also participate as co-creators, in the capacity of what

Shaftesbury described as a 'second maker, a just Prometheus under Jove' (Shaftesbury, ed. den Uyl 2001: i. 129). Consequently, humans occupy a middle position between God and the rest of creation. As we shall see, when combined with the Christian anthropology, this establishes a strongly rhythmic relation, and a natural anthropological end in divinity that overcomes the necessity for Platonic madness.

(p. 245) Christian Kenosis

In the Christian revelation, the Platonic emptying of the poet, and the human place and role within creation of the Jewish tradition, are brought together. The Johannine Logos is described as the creative word of God who becomes incarnate as Jesus Christ (John 1: 1). With the incarnation of the Word, the poet need no longer leave the intellect behind. Instead, the 'divine gift' previously only accessible through the loss of the intellect is made incarnate through Christ, and consequently available to the intellect. The Platonic pattern, however, is not entirely left behind. Though the believers need not empty themselves of their intellect and go mad, there remains an act of self-emptying in the conscious emulation of Christ. In his Epistle to the Philippians, Paul describes the action of Christ as one of self-emptying (ἐκένωσεν). This kenotic act of the sacrifice of his equality with God serves as a model whereby humans can approximate divinity, just as divinity approximates humans:

> Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.
>
> (Phil. 2: 4–8)

Paul's exaltation, to be of the same mind as Christ, draws not a direct comparison, but an analogical one between Christ and the believer. Believers do not engage in an outpouring of divinity, but in an outpouring of their own wills, so that they might become more Christ-like. In both directions, there is a transformative flow between divinity and humanity. In Christ, this flow is crystallized in the form of his hypostatic union, whereas for believers it becomes a rhythmic oscillation between spirit and flesh, and sin and redemption modelled on Christ's kenotic self-emptying, and the believer's being filled by God's grace. This rhythmic pattern in the life of the believer is given meter through life in the Church, in its calendar, and in its liturgy.

Poetry and Mystical Poetry

The tension between the finite and the infinite that establishes the rhythmic oscillation disclosed in each of the Greek, Hebrew, and Christian models is also at the centre of mystical poetry. The unique nature of the mystical poet's object, and the particular challenge of their task, places the mystic's own use of language at odds with other established

forms. Their deliberations are neither that of discursive mathesis, nor cognitive mimesis. Unlike other forms of theological reflection, mystical poetics does not record or systematically order a particular understanding of God. At the same time, mystical poetry is set apart from other forms of poetry. In general it is possible to say (p. 246) that poets are concerned with the manifest created universe, whilst the mystic is concerned with the singular, immutable absolute behind creation. Further, whilst all poetry is concerned with something of an ineffable quality in its object, mystical poetry is concerned with the most ineffable (so much so that calling its object an 'object' itself becomes problematic). Finally, while each poet must struggle with the limitations of language in order to communicate their end, the mystical poet is particularly challenged by the earth-bound nature of human utterance. Mystical poets, therefore, are required to engage in a strategy of rhythmic double movement, so that their readers might behold both what is beyond the rational mental discipline of the sciences, and the imitative representation of the mimetic arts.

Because their subject can never fully be described through the positive language of presence, absence equally plays a role in the mystic's goal of describing the experience of the divine. Cataphatic and apophatic discourse almost always exist together in dynamic tension (Sells 1994: 206–18). Paradoxically, in the double movement of mystical poetry, the infinite nature of the divine subject also means that there is no language that does not relate to it as symbol, that is, literally as a mark (σύμβολον) of the divine creator. This is the insight afforded to the mystic in their experience of divine union, and from this insight mystical poets regain all language on a higher symbolic plane. Language becomes approximate and playful, capable of giving presence to absence, materiality to the immaterial, lexicon to the non-lexical. But in order to do this, mystics must possess, beyond their personal insight, a poetical capacity, or better, linguistic virtuosity, which allows them to take advantage of this realization.

The term virtuoso is frequently used to describe one who has a special skill in the interpretative performance of music. Virtuosi often walk a fine line between brilliant interpretative performance that reveals the familiar as new, and dangerous indulgence that takes them too far from the original. The case is not dissimilar for the mystic, who aims to show God anew, but who does not claim to offer a new revelation. Virtuosi mystical poets possess a proficiency that allows them to bring the reader along, first by familiar paths, and then to increasingly unfamiliar territory. In doing so, mystical poets disrupt expectations, but nevertheless hold the reader through the superiority of their poetic creation. As a reader's world is subverted, everything is at stake, all truth lies before the reader, not as static, but as charged with living, breathing intensity. The work of the virtuoso presents an incongruity, something that cannot be assimilated and that defies understanding. Yet the reader cannot simply cast off this unassimilatability, because, while it defies, it simultaneously assimilates the reader into its new logic. Such incongruity makes us aware of a gap between the everyday understanding of the self in its world and the real nature of being. In the work of the mystical poet, one does not encounter a fulfilment of one's expectations of the divine. Instead, we come to see their contingency and incompleteness. In doing so the reader does not come to know God as an object, rather in overcoming those finite beliefs that separate the reader from God's infinite reality they escape the ceaseless

reifying of the transcendent into delimited language. This is possible through the language of poetics, which is formed by the words of everyday discourse, but which are set apart from this discourse by the form in which (p. 247) they are encountered. Our everyday language aims to communicate directly, and avoid equivocacy. Indeed, the word 'transparency', giving the connotation of seeing through the word to the thing itself, has today become synonymous with truthfulness. Poetry does the opposite with words. Its figurative language explores nuance and delights in multiple meaning, exposing the radical similarity between the seemingly incongruent, and the profound incongruity amongst the seemingly similar. Its lyric discloses an internal rhythm, greater than any individual word, divulging the connective tissue of creation that links humans and the divine.

The Mystical Interpretation of Poetry

Within the development of Christian mysticism we first see this transformative use of poetic language not in mystical poetry, but in the scriptural exegesis of the Greek Fathers that would give birth to Christian mystical poetry. The first use of the adjective *mystikos* is by Clement of Alexandria to describe the language of scripture, Christ and his teaching, and the deeper understanding that arose from its study (McGinn 1991: 100–8; Clement, *Stromateis* 5.6.37; Stählin 1960: 351–2). Clement and other early Greek Fathers including Origen and the Cappadocians used mystical interpretation as a means of seeking out secret or hidden Christological meaning in scripture (Bouyer 1980: 42–55). The practice of mystical interpretation is an ethical and spiritual exercise that transforms its practitioners. Through exegesis, the hidden meaning vested in scripture, made available through the incarnation of Jesus Christ, is renewed, allowing the exegete to know God more wholly. The application of this language of transformation to the description of personal mystical experience occurs later, as we shall see, with the production of mystical poetry.

Nowhere was this transformative power found more by the early Fathers than in one of the Bible's most influential poetic books, the Song of Songs. In turning to the canticle, they were building upon, and likely influenced by, Jewish and Gnostic precedents. The Christian reading of the Song, where Christ is the bridegroom of the Church (Matt. 9: 15, 25: 1–13; John 3: 28–9; Eph. 5: 23–5; Rev. 19: 7, 9), is anticipated in the *Midrash Rabbah*, where God is the bridegroom. Esoteric commentaries, which may have influenced Origen, took this reading further, considering the canticle to be an act of divine self-description, rendering the text the most holy of all books (McGinn 1991: 20–1; Scholem 1965: 38). Additionally, whilst Christianity maintained that the central salvific message of scripture was open to all, the Gnostic notion of uncovering esoteric meaning provided a model for various possible levels of poetic meaning in scripture. In the case of the Song of Songs, Origen explains, this would allow the initiated exposed to the Canticle's erotic language to hear its poetry 'in purity and with chaste ears' (Origen 1957: 22).

(p. 248) All interpreters provide their own justifications for their attention to the Song of Songs, but there are overarching reasons for this attention in the poetics of the text itself.

Robert Alter maintains that the Song of Songs is the only biblical text that is free from both instruction and exhortation. There is no priestly hierophant or annalist of a people's history. It consists instead of the voices of two lovers, longing for and enticing one another (Alter 1985: 186). Furthermore, nowhere more in the Bible, he contends, does one find the transfer of meaning, where one thing is represented by or through another, than in the poetry of the Song of Songs (Alter 1985: 189). The text is replete with symbolic language attested to by a catalogue of figurative forms of language—anabasis and catabasis, chiasmus, metaphor, metonymy, meiosis, parallelism, paronomasia, periphrasis, pleonasm, simile, synecdoche—that can be identified in the text (Hunt 2008). These two observations, that the story is free from didactic and historical content, and that the text is characterized by symbolic representation, reflect how the text introduces a degree of ambiguity or openness where meaning is connoted rather than literally denoted. This, combined with the evocative nature of its erotic subject, leaves the text open to continual reflection, a successive process of searching, and the making and remaking of meaning that naturally arises from the contemplation of the divine.

Origen, probably the most influential interpreter of the Song of Songs, establishes a means of mystical interpretation that would be fundamentally influential on the subsequent development of Christian mysticism (Astell and Cavadini 2013: 28–32; Astell 1990: 1–8, 17; Matter 1990: 20–41; McGinn 1991: 108–30). The aim of exegesis is to open the reader to the transformative experience of Christ's presence through the interpretative possibilities that the scriptures offer. In the prologue to his commentary on the Song of Songs Origen explains that the three books by Solomon, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs, correspond to the threefold division of knowledge, which he calls moral, natural, and inspective (Origen 1957: 40). For Origen, these things remained hidden, but are now revealed through Christ incarnate and the pedagogy of the Logos. God's self-emptying act makes the Word both manifest and available in both Christ and scripture. This in turn allows believers to empty themselves of the selfish will of the flesh, and become more God-like (McGinn 1991: 11; Torjesen 1985: 39–41, 130–8). Once one has learned to act in an ethically informed manner, and one's habits are conducted according to the natural order, the soul may 'proceed to dogmatic and mystical matters, and in this way advances to the contemplation of the Godhead with pure and spiritual love' (Origen 1957: 44). According to Origen, this final stage of study 'is that by which we transcend visible things and contemplate somewhat of things divine and heavenly, beholding them with the mind alone, for they are beyond the range of bodily sight' (Origen 1957: 40).

In this highest stage of mystical interpretation the evocative physical imagery becomes the means for a transformative spiritual experience. For Origen's initiate, the words of the female speaker are no longer associated with the physical. Instead, physical eros, educated by the Word by the time the Song of Songs is encountered, is led back to its transcendent source. One need look no further than the famous opening lines: 'Let (p. 249) him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! For your love is better than wine' (Song 1: 2). When the lover is God, then the most physical imagery of the poem becomes the means to describe the most spiritual of relationships. Origen explains: 'When her mind is filled with divine perception and understanding without the agency of human or angelic ministra-

tion, then she may believe that she has received the kisses of the Word of God himself' (Origen 1957: 61). The Song of Songs then describes the direct reception of God's teaching in the most immediate physical image. The mouth is the orifice through which the rest of the body is most accessible. Through it nourishment is received, and from it communication is uttered. Here communication, by virtue of receiving a kiss, then wine, is silenced to reception, and then induced to inebriated panegyric. As with many lines in the song, the kiss is situated within a structure of intensification, when the love that the kiss expresses is described as better than wine, with all its intoxicating qualities (Alter 1985: 62–84). While lines like these intensify the description, they also introduce an ambiguity through their use of figurative language that, when read in the context of the relationship between humanity and divinity, became key to the development of allegorical and typological methods for the interpretation of scripture. The poem as a whole stresses proximity and vulnerability, which open the individual to the experience of God's presence. The distinction between the outer and inner meaning of scripture developed by Origen, particularly in relation to the Song of Songs, was advanced by influential monastic figures such as Gregory of Nyssa, and later Bernard of Clairvaux, William of St Thierry, and Rupert of Deutz. With the last of these figures the description of the experience of God through the reading of scripture would become personalized to the degree that it would move beyond exegesis (McGinn 1994: 328–33; Astell and Cavadini 2013: 28).

The Vernacular Poet-Mystic

The development of vernacular mysticism, beginning in the mid-thirteenth century, witnesses a shift from reading and reflection upon scriptural poetry, from which arises mystical experience, to the use of poetry itself to record first-person narratives of mystical experience. Here, we explore the rise of mystical poetry will be explored with varying foci through the examples of Dante Alighieri, Jacopone da Todi, Hadewijch van Antwerpen, and Angelus Silesius. The emergence of mystical poetry is part of a larger shift toward first-person accounts of the encounter with the divine, often with the aim of providing a programme for the reader to experience a similar union themselves (Renevey 2013: 564). The reasons for this vernacular development are the subject of much recent scholarly attention (Georgianna 2006: 87–94). For the purposes of this study its import lies in the application of the poetic capacities expressed in scripture, through the familiar force of the vulgar tongue, to individual experience. In the short studies that follow, individual experience may either come in the form of the author's (p. 250) own personal first-person experience, as is the case with Jacopone and Hadewijch, or the first-person experience of a character, either Dante's pilgrim or Silesius's Cherubic Wanderer.[2]

Dante

It is difficult not to begin with Dante (1265–1321) and his *Divina Commedia* (1309–20), written in his native Tuscan Italian. Dante developed *terza rima*, characterized by tercets forming a chain rhyme pattern (ABA BCB CDC DED, and so forth). This style interlinks each stanza to the next, by rhyming the first line of each new stanza with the middle line

of the preceding tercet. This triune pattern doubtless suggests the dynamic unity of the Trinity, but more than this, it offers a pattern of ascent, with the middle line of each gesturing upward and beyond itself to the next stanza (Figure 13.1).
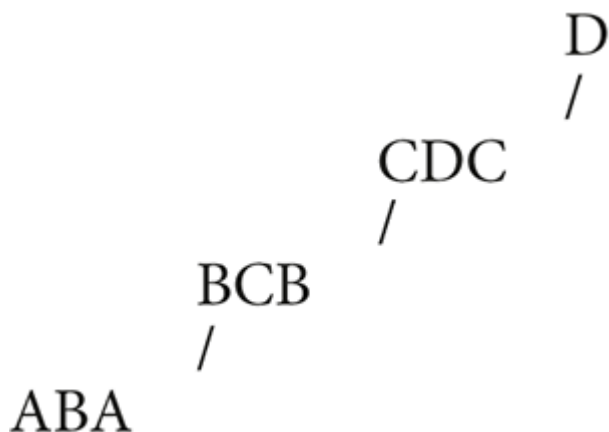
This combination of repetition and progress, enacted throughout the three-part epic, is also repeated in the work's content. The progress of the poet-pilgrim, and the reader who accompanies him on his journey, is from the known to the unknown, the familiar to the unfamiliar.

Dante uses his poetic virtuosity first to bring his readers into the world of the *Comedy*, then to subvert this world, and in so doing effect an apophatic move whereby their expectations of the divine are undermined. The strangeness of the figure of Beatrice provides the strongest example among the many that are encountered in the text. The fellow poet Virgil, Dante's trusted guide through the Inferno and up the mountain of Purgatory disappears near the summit and is replaced by Beatrice—a character readers know is coming, yet of whom they know not what to think. It is at this point that the full force of virtuosic irony enters the text. Beatrice is Dante's own personal Jesus, the object of eros from the *Vita Nuova* apotheosized into the way of salvation. Through Beatrice, Dante offers his own vision presented as testament. It is Beatrice who is the efficient cause for Dante's journey of redemption. For the pilgrim to have been met by Christ, for example, (p. 251) would have given the reader yet another interpretative handle, a familiar figure of authority and doctrine to appeal to for meaning. Instead, they are met by the aloof figure of an obscure thirteenth-century Florentine girl with whom Dante had fallen in love at first sight when she was 8 and he 9. Through this strange creation, Dante deprives his readers of the known God. Yet despite this, Dante's readers are left with no choice but to follow, for they have been seduced into Dante's world, and are captive to the meaning the poet creates. In this manner, Beatrice recapitulates the complete and utter incongruity of Christ. For Dante, the absolutely fantastical notion that God would appear in the figure of a poor first-century Jew from the backwater colony of Galilee, was an incongruity that had been reified into the doctrinal figure at the centre of the dominant meaning-making force in Western civilization. Beatrice recapitulates this incongruity. By confronting the reader with a reality presented as religious truth, yet without pre-assigned meaning, an entirely new consciousness of subjective appropriation opens up.

Beatrice, as Dante's own Christ, represents the possibility of a mystical union which he is still prevented from achieving because of the finite nature of his own understanding. This is illustrated in the moment where, at the summit of the mountain of Purgatory, he stares into her green eyes, and sees the alternating image of the lion and the eagle:

> As the sun in a mirror, not otherwise / twofold within them shone, / now with one nature, now with the other. // Think, reader, if I marvelled, / when he beheld the thing itself stand still, / and yet its image transformed itself.

> Come in lo specchio il sol, non altrimenti

> la doppia fiera dentro vi raggiava,

> or con altri, or con altri reggimenti.

> Pensa, lettor, s'io mi maravigliava,

> quando vedea la cosa in sé star queta,

> e ne l'idolo suo si trasmutava.

> (Dante, Purgatorio, XXXI. 121–6; Chimenz 2003: 596)[3]

The gryphon, the two-form beast in one, is a representation of the union of man and God, a symbol of the hypostatic union and incarnate love that takes the form of Beatrice in Dante's fantasy. Here, her nature, itself a union through love of finite and infinite, remains divided in Dante's own understanding. Nevertheless, what cannot be represented as united is nevertheless expressed as one, both in the rhythmic oscillation of the lines and the image.

In the final canto of Paradise, readers experience the end of their apophatic journey. Here the poet's powers are only negative, they can only abstract from the understanding. What follows is Dante's beatific vision. Staring into the light at the height of the Empyrean, Dante is presented with three self-reflecting Trinitarian circles, painted with the effigy of man. As he strains his eyes to see the way in which the human shape is suited (p. 252) to the circle, achieving mystical union between humanity and the triune transcendent God, he is struck by the answer in a flash (Dante, *Paradiso*, XXX. 140; Chimenz 2003: 910). However, it is at this very moment of insight that the poet Dante reports:

> Here the high imagination could not; / But now my will was turning with my desire, like wheels / with an even motion, together with // the love that moves the sun and other stars.

> A l'alta fantasia qui mancò possa;

> ma già volgeva il mio disio e 'l velle,

> sì come rota ch'igualmente è mossa,

l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stele.

(Dante, *Paradiso*, XXX. 142–5; Chimenz 2003: 910–11)

In the lines preceding, Dante references the impossibility of squaring the circle (Dante, *Paradiso*, XXX. 133–5; Chimenz 2003: 910). Just as the circle cannot be measured by the terms of the square, Dante's simile states that the divine cannot ever be expressed in human terms. Understanding cannot communicate this moment because here the self moves beyond understanding. Here, where all meaning falls away, the nothingness of the self that apophasis has made possible aligns itself with the unutterable transcendence of God. In this moment Dante describes the Pilgrim's will and desire, the ground of individual identity, as aligned with the infinite love of God. It is in this complete ontological indeterminacy, free of the reifying tendency of the finite understanding, free even of religion, that mystical union is achieved. In the *Commedia*, the end of each of the cantiche recording Dante's three-part pilgrimage resolves itself in a single line that rhymes with the middle rhyme of the previous tercet. In the *Inferno*, this links to the first line of the *Purgatorio*, and likewise between the *Purgatorio* and the *Paradiso*, leading the reader on a constant upward journey. In the final cantica Dante concludes with triune rhythm referring beyond itself once more, but this time not to another part, but to the divine force behind the dynamic Trinity: 'the love that moves the sun and other stars' (Dante, *Paradiso*, XXX. 145; Chimenz 2003: 911). Here the rhythmic oscillation ends, explained above as key to the pattern of mystical poetry, and the poem falls silent.

Jacopone da Todi

Of the sources that came to constitute the birth of Italian vernacular poetry, Dante occupies the most honoured place. However, numbered among his few predecessors is a Franciscan friar and mystic who wrote with a spiritual intensity and emotive lyricism not before seen in the language. Born Jacopo dei Benedetti (c.1236–1306), after the death of his wife he became a *bizoccone*, a holy repentant fool. Though conversant in Latin, (p. 253) Jacopone wrote his laude in the vernacular. These range from bitter diatribes against corruption in the Church to paeans about the ecstasy of divine love. The development of his poetry reflects his own spiritual growth, from crisis and conversion, to controversy and exile, to reflection and reconciliation, increasing in the richness and complexity of mystical insight they display.

The ballad-form of the lauda that Jacopone employed had already been adopted from its secular origins, most notably by Francis himself, as evinced in his famous *Cantico delle Creature*. The form, derived from Provençal lyric love poetry, is characterized by the *tenson*, usually taking the shape of a dramatic dialogue between lovers. The *tenson*, also called the *tenso* or *tenzon*, from the old Provençal word for dispute or quarrel, was originally an interlocutory challenge between two troubadours. The challenging troubadour first offers two opposing statements, and calls upon his adversary to choose one. The challenger then takes up the remaining position, and an exchange follows with both troubadors maintaining the metre of the initial challenge. This rhythmical dialectical struc-

ture became a fundamental vehicle of expression for Jacopone's spiritual journey. Lauda 3 explores the tension between the demands of the body through the use of the *tenson*: 'Hear a tenson which takes place between the body and the soul' ('Audite una 'ntenzone, ch'è 'nfra l'anema e 'l corpo') (Jacopone, *Laude*, 7.1; Mancini 1990: 31). In this poem stanzas alternate between the voices of the body and soul, the body complaining bitterly to the soul, and the soul mortifying the body toward its end: 'Filthy evil body, luxurious and greedy / I always find you deaf to my salvation / Suffer the lashes of this gnarled cord' ('Sozzo, malvascio corpo, lussurïoso e 'ngordo, / ad onne mea salute sempre te trovo sordo; / sostene lo fragello d'esto nodoso cordo') (Jacopone *Laude*, 7.11–13; Mancini 1990: 31). Here the soul, accusing the body of gluttony and lashing it, continues by saying that it must dance to what it perceives as discord. This requirement that the body attune itself to the soul is repeated in alternating quatrains as the soul piteously resists.

The vigorous mortification of the third lauda is replaced in the similarly structured lauda 43 by the internal struggle towards virtue between the hatred of evil and the need to love, the rage against sin and the sin of rage, and the withdrawal of contemplative life and the obligation to active ministry. Within the quatrains themselves, each verse has an interior rhyme, which reinforces the inseparable tension experienced by Jaccopone acted out in rhythmic oscillation. However, this tension provides no resolution, as his concluding metaphor submits: 'I remain caught between two blades of shears each cutting into me / now I will shorten my speech and end here' ('demoro enfra le forfece, ciascun coltel m'affétta, / abrevio mea ditta, en questo loco finare') (Jacopone, *Laude*, 43.61–2; Mancini 1990: 140).

In later laude the move beyond the binary logic of spirit and flesh is expressed by the inability of this binary to incorporate Christ's love. This is articulated in the experience of *nichil*, an apophatic nothingness, brought upon by a realization of the measureless nature of the superabundant divine love that is the efficacious end of the incarnation: (p. 254) 'O love, you love so much / that I cannot say how much this love is because it is / because it is immeasurable!' (Jacopone *Laude*, 82.1–3; Mancini 1990: 281).

The hypostatic union, effected in the loving action of the incarnation, is capable of suspending the opposition of spirit and flesh in Christ, and the senses and intellect of the believer:

> All acts, old and new, / are founded on nothingness, / are formed without form, / have no ending or number, / are united with truth / affection is crowned / the intellect is quitted / in love is transformed.

> Tutti li atti vecchi e novi

> enn un nichil so' fundati;

> so' formati senza forma,

> non n' ò termen né quantetate;

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uniti co la Veretate,

coronato sta l'Affetto,

quïetato lo 'Ntelletto

ne l'Amore trasformato.

(Jacopone, *Laude*, 82.68–75; Mancini 1990: 283)

In his earlier laude, the intellect fought for the interest of the soul against the flesh, or struggled to contemplate what seemed to be the madness of Christ's love. Equally, the emotions endeavoured to find the correct path to virtue, or longed for union with Christ. Here, however, the tenson is no more, and love beyond sight or sound, without form or number, founded not on foundation, but upon infinity, quietens the intellect, and transforms emotion from a reflection of the self, into a reflection of divinity.

In one of his last lauda, Jacopone describes the final stages of his mystical journey, where his soul almost comes to be unified with Christ: 'In Christ transformed, it is almost Christ, / Conjoined with God the soul is all divine.' (Jacopone, *Laude*, 89.99–100; Mancini 1990: 322). This intoxication with the divine is reflected in the cracking of the tenson found in the ecstatic song of love with which the lauda ends:

Love, Love-Jesus, I have reached the port, / Love, Love-Jesus, you have brought me here, / Love, Love-Jesus, comfort me, / Love, Love-Jesus, you have enflamed me so much, / Love, Love-Jesus, consider my needs, / Allow me to stay, love, in your embrace, / With thee transformed in true charity, / In the supreme truth of transformed love.

Amor, Amor-Iesù,   so' iont'a pporto,

Amor, Amor-Iesù,   tu m'ài menato,

Amor, Amor-Iesù,   damme conforto,

Amor, Amor-Iesù,   ssì m'à' enflammato,

Amor, Amor-Iesù,   pensa l'opporto,

famme en te stare,   Amor, sempre abracciato,

con teco trasformato   en vera caritate

e 'n summa veretate   de trasformato amore.

(Jacopone, *Laude*, 89.251–8; Mancini 1990: 326–7)

(p. 255) Here the repetition of love literally threatens to overcome the form of the poem. At one point a remarkable interruption occurs, when the voice of Christ breaks in and calls Jacopone away from his ecstasy: 'Restrain this love, you who love me; / no virtue can

be found without order!' (Jacopone, *Laude*, 89.147–8; Mancini 1990: 323). In response Jacopone protests that his love madness is not his fault, and in the audacity of intoxicated love blames Christ for his condition. In a final development, enfolded into the unfathomable love of God, the soul becomes indistinguishable from the object of its desire, and in so becoming, its will and intellect are annihilated, and refounded upon nothingness: 'This height of heights / founded upon nothingness [nichil] / shaped in nothing / is established in the Lord' (Jacopone, *Laude*, 92.337–40; Mancini 1990: 345). This is the culminating moment of the continuous upward path of mystical ascent presented as the life story of Jacopone's spiritual journey through the lauda. There is, however, yet a more common mystical pattern, wherein the mystic undergoes repeated union and separation, and for this we may look to the poetry of Hadewijch.

Hadewijch

Hadewijch van Antwerpen (fl. 1200) has been considered one of the greatest poetic genii of the Low Countries, and the greatest writer of all medieval women (Mommaers 1980: p. xiii; van Baest 1998: 7; McGinn 1998: 200–1). A Flemish beguine, writing in Brabantian Middle Dutch, her poetic virtuosity is exercised in her appropriation and adaptation of the motif and form of secular northern French *trouvère* love poetry to her unique form of *Minnemystik*. This is manifest in her greatest poetical achievement, the *Strophische Gedichten*, or stanziac poems. In the *hohe Minne* tradition, the representation of love usually presents itself as absence and potential, as opposed to presence and fulfilment. As such, Hadewijch most often casts God as the female mistress, and herself as the knight errant, with love (*minne*) as the dynamic that defines the relationship between the two. Much consideration has gone into understanding what Hadewijch means by the term *minne* (McGinn 1998: 200–22), however for our poetical purposes we may turn to a definition that she offers in her twenty-second stanziac poem, where she describes what she 'discerns in love's nature (*bekinne in minnen natuere*)' (Hadewijch, *Strophische Gedichten*, 22, l. 15; van Baest 1998: 159; van Mierlo 1942: 140):

> It has no form, no cause nor shape either, / And yet it makes itself to be tasted as a created reality. / It is the material of my blessedness, / Which I long after at all times; / Thus I suffer my days in much bitterness.

> En hefft forme, sake noch figuere;

> Doch eest inden smake alse creatuere;

> Hets materie miere bliscape

> Daer ic in alre tijt na hake

> Dus leidic mine daghe in meneghen suere.

> (Hadewijch, *Strophische Gedichten*, 22, ll. 17–21; van Baest 1998: 157; van Mierlo 1942: 140)

Mystical Poetics

Here *minne* is a force that has the nature of divinity, formless, without cause, and invisible. At the same time Hadewijch experiences it at the most visceral level when she writes that it makes itself to be *tasted* as creature. Her descriptive choice is especially noteworthy, for it is neither sight nor sound, touch nor smell, but taste, the most intimate of senses. Her interaction involves the active physical consumption of *minne*, an internalization that evokes both erotic and eucharistic contexts. This physicality is reinforced when she describes love as 'the material of my blessedness', the absence of which is the cause of much bitterness (Hadewijch, *Strophische Gedichten*, 22, ll. 17–21; van Baest 1998: 159; van Mierlo 1942: 140). Through love's poetic materialization, Hadewijch is better able to evoke its absence and the ever-present longing that accompanies it.

Throughout the twenty-second poem, and the stanziac works in general, Hadewijch uses the ever unconsummated union at the centre of chivalric literature to bring together the extremities of joy and suffering, labour and tranquillity, speech and silence, visibility and invisibility (Hadewijch, *Strophische Gedichten*, 22, ll. 13, 24, 33; van Baest 1998: 159–61; van Mierlo 1942: 139–40), so that she can evoke what she calls the savage wasteland of love's landscape: 'So savage a wasteland never was created / As love (*minne*) can make in her landscape!' (Hadewijch, *Strophische Gedichten*, 22, ll. 29–30; van Baest 1998: 161; van Mierlo 1942: 140). This characterizes the complex and sophisticated love affair that is at the heart of Hadewijch's poetry. The love she describes is not the unreflective and confident new love of sweetness and infatuation. Rather it is defined by the terrifying paradox of experiencing the inescapable necessity of the self as the vehicle that affords the possibility of *minne*, and necessity to escape the self that would allow *minne* to be consummated.

Hadewijch describes this moment in the seminal fortieth stanzic poem, when opposites coincide in love's abyssal nature: 'To whoever love (*minnen*) overthrows so that he may overpower her / Her sweet nature will yet become manifest' (Hadewijch, *Strophische Gedichten*, 40, ll. 33–4; van Baest 1998: 269; van Mierlo 1942: 257). Only in the overwhelming overthrowal of self by *minne*, and in the overpowering of *minne* by the self is the paradox overcome. This saturation is repeated by the saturation of the word itself into the stanza that describes the ecstatic moment:

> Then he experiences good speed in love to the full, / Where love with love pours love out all of her love. / And thus love is all sated with love, / Where he has fruition of sweet love.
>
> Soe heeft hi vol der *minnen* spoet
>
> Daer *minne* met *minnen* haer *minne* al scincket
>
> Ende so werdt die *minne* al *minne* volvoet
>
> Daer hi ghebruket der sueter *minnen*.
>
> (Hadewijch, Strophische Gedichten, 40, ll. 45–8; van Baest 1998: 269; van Mierlo 1942: 257)

This is why the description of love is always one that is characterized for Hadewijch by suffering, burden, and separation, since the self is both the obstacle and path to union. (p. 257) Consequently, the moment of union in which love can become known may only ever be one of anamnesis, when the self recovers itself, but loses its union with love.

Beyond the figurative adaptation of the courtly motif, Hadewijch also refashions its rhythmical form, providing her own virtuosic treatment of the *trouvère* model. In its secular form the genre's lyrical structure takes a highly mnemonic form, reinforcing the structural integrity of the poem, and allowing it to be recalled and performed. This is particularly evident in the use of concatenations, whereby stanzas are linked through the repetition of words or thoughts from the last line of one stanza to the first line of the next. Hadewijch breaks down this tool, eroding it to the point where concatenation is an exception rather than a rule, which renders it all the more appreciable when encountered. It appears in twenty-four of the forty-five stanziac poems, but it surfaces only in fragmentary form occasionally linking stanzas (Guest 1975: 92). The result for Hadewijch's readers was perhaps to leave those versed in the genre with a sense of unfulfilled expectation, or even to challenge them by demanding greater attention to the text. Certainly, her modification has the result of divorcing her production from any ease of repetition.

The fortieth poem of the collection is one of only two exceptions where the chain of stanziac concatenation is almost complete. Ironically, the one break in this poem comes between the two stanzas that describe the ecstatic moment of *minne*, as if to reinforce the fact that it is a moment recalled, the incomplete repetition performing the incomplete representation. Yet where the broken repetition between stanza's breaks the unity, repetition within the stanza reinforces description of the union:

> When he feels this sweet love, / He is wounded with her wounds. / When in wonder he perceives her wonders, / He ardently sucks the ground of love's veins, / Always thirsting after beginning afresh, / Until he has fruition of sweet love.

> Als hi ghevoelt die soete minne,

> Wort hi met haren wonden ghewont

> Als hi met wondere hare wondere kinnet

> Sughet hi met nide der aderen gront

> Altoes met dorste van nuwen beghinne

> Eer hi gebrucet der zueter minnen.

> (Hadewijch, *Strophische Gedichten*, 40, ll. 35–40; van Baest 1998: 269; van Mierlo 1942: 257)

Here the overthrowal of self and the overpowering of love is described through repetition. The self wounded with divine wounds indicates at once an opening of the self through which the wounded God might enter, evoking the language of Calvary and keno-

sis, the loving self-emptying and self-sacrifice of God now repeated in the love of the mystic self. Also in the stanza, alliteration allows Hadewijch to slide from 'wound' (*wonden*) to 'wonder' (*wondere*), when following from the opening made by the wound of love, wonder which defeats understanding opens one up to the reality of the wondrous. Again, erotic and eucharistic imagery is summoned in the thirsty sucking by the (p. 258) self at the source of love's veins. Despite her being in the company of many others who employ the courtly motif, not the least of whom are her fellow beguine travellers Mechthild von Magdeburg and Marguerite Porete, Hadewijch's overwhelming poetical virtuosity is on greatest display in passages such as this.

Angelus Silesius

One of the most unique examples of Baroque period mystical poetry is that of Angelus Silesius (1624–1677). Born Johann Scheffler to a Lutheran family, he was influenced by the thought of Jakob Böhme when studying in Holland. After becoming a physician, doctrinal differences coupled with the condemnation of his mystical visions led him to adopt the resurgent Roman Catholicism of the Counter-Reformation. Though he dedicated much time to the production of anti-Protestant polemic, his great achievement remains his mystical work, particularly as it finds expression in his *Der Cherubinischer Wandersmann* (1657), which he wrote in epigrammatic style, in the popular Alexandrine verse of the day. His adoption of this form repeats the pattern of vernacular mysticism already observed, where a secular form of literature is adapted to mystical ends.

The style is well suited to sagacious statements that render insights into their most essential form. *Der Cherubinischer Wandersmann* is made up of five books of some 1,676 Alexandrine couplets, some of which stand alone, others grouped together. The iambic couplets consist of four hemistiches, or half lines divided by a caesura:

> The Godhead is a fountain, from it comes everything / And it also runs backward, so it is also a sea.

> Die GOttheit ist ein Brunn, || auß jhr kombt alles her:

> Und laufft auch wider hin, || drumb ist sie auch ein Meer.

> (Angelus Silesius, *Cherubinischer Wandersmann*, III. 168; Gnädinger 1985: 137)

This couplet, which demonstrates Silesius' poetical style, equally establishes the central theme of the paradox of the unassailable distinction and indissoluble union between finite creature and infinite God. Silesius exploited the laconic style of the couplets to perform the conceptual and representative paradoxes arising out of the mystical coincidence between the finite and the infinite.

Der Cherubinischer Wandersmann employs the elliptical potentiality of the Alexandrine couplets with virtuosic skill to simultaneously subvert and produce meaning, exercising apophasis and cataphasis in distinct units of scarcely twenty words:

You are not in a place; the place, that is in you. / Throw it out, eternity is already here.

Nicht du bist in dem Orth; der Orth der ist in dir.

Wirfstu jin auß, so steht die Ewigkeit schon hier.

(Angelus Silesius, *Cherubinischer Wandersmann*, I. 185; Gnädinger 1985: 54)

(p. 259) Here place and no-place, time and eternity, are brought into an elliptical relation. Any careful reader coming to this couplet is challenged by its conceptual complexity, and forced to read over its lines more than once. This in turn sets off a hermeneutical vortex made possible through the brevity of the fragment. The more one considers the epigrammatic statement, the more one sees that each of the four hemistichs, each constituting a 'place' (*Orth*) within the statement, may themselves be interchanged with the other. This performative undermining of the idea of finite place that is challenged in the statements content opens up a seeming infinity of permutations (in fact there are twenty-four), collapsing place into no-place.

What Dante accomplishes by way of his cosmic journey, and Jacopone through a poetic lifespan, Silesius condenses into a series of aphoristic fulgurations. The mystical end of such vortices is the undoing of the understanding that separates the mystical self from its end in divine union. Silesius writes: 'Nothing brings the self above itself as does annihilation / The more destroyed you are, the more divinity you have' (Angelus Silesius, *Cherubinischer Wandersmann*, II. 140; Gnädinger 1985: 92). The form of the Baroque poet-mystic demands meditation and repetition on the part of his reader. Within the narrowest of spaces surveyed, he attempts to make present those flashes of recognition that allow the intellect to escape itself, and body forth, if fleetingly, the notion of unity with God. In his own gnomic way he echoes the insight of Hadewijch, expressing the situation of the mystic, who lives as a cherubic wanderer, in the tension between finite and infinite, between joy and pain, outlined in general terms: 'The soul that only seeks to be nothing but one with God / It lives in constant peace, and has yet constant agony' (Angelus Silesius, *Cherubinischer Wandersmann*, VI. 176; Gnädinger 1985: 273).

Mystical Poetry and the Future of Poetic Mysticism

Just as the emergence of Christian mysticism is bound up with reflection upon poetry, the argument may be made that the future of mysticism is equally intertwined with poetics. The first Christian mystics found in the poetry of scripture a lyrical and figurative language capable of bringing the believer closer to God. The vernacular mystical poets, some examples of whom have been considered here, used the esemplastic capacity of this language to engage and embody the inner spiritual life of the mystical journey. From our present-day position we find these poetic mystics noteworthy, both for their poetic virtuosity, and for the exceptional nature of their religious experience. However, here we must

take account of our own perspectival shift. Whilst virtuosic, and therefore unique in their expression, their transcendent experience, intense as it may have been, differed in degree but not in kind from that of the Christian communities of which they were a part. The introversion and exceptionalism that tends to be associated with the idea of mysticism today does not attend to the fact that mystical experience had (p. 260) its place within the religious life of the community, structured by the Church through its liturgy, scripture, and calendar. All of these provided a cadence to everyday life, wherein the *cognitio Dei experimentalis* (experiential knowledge of God) was part of an overarching transcendent framework of understanding (Largier 2009). Within this transcendent frame, life was never lived without a divine referent. The gradual emergence of an immanent frame, wherein it was possible to construct one's understanding of reality without any relation to the transcendent, substantively reduced the possibility for the everyday experiential knowledge of God. This concept of the immanent frame, which has gained great traction since its introduction by Charles Taylor, helps to explain both why in the present age aesthetics is all the more important as a language for mysticism, but also why the mystic is all the more isolated in speaking a language of transcendence (Taylor 2007).

In an age of immanence, mystical poetics shifts from being one of many forms of religious discourse to one of the few considered available for the expression of religious experience. The long historical decline of religious institutions, along with the authority they held and the communities they constituted, was accompanied by a societal evolution that saw separation of spirituality from religion, which had the effect of privatizing faith. Lacking institutions, traditions, and language, and often viewing its historical forms as problematic or restricting, mystical poetics presents itself within the immanent frame as a form of religious discourse already seemingly liberated from the constraints of institution, tradition, and restricted historical revelation. Its personal aesthetic form of expression presents the possibility of making subjective spirituality objectively utterable without a community, and the ability to make private experience public without appealing to authority. From the Renaissance and Reformation onward we see the status of poetry as a form of religious language increasingly exulted. It is in this context that Shakespeare writes of how the poet's pen 'bodies forth / The forms of things unknown' (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 5.1.15–16; Foakes 1984: 124), and Philip Sidney claims that God's glory 'in nothing he sheweth so much as in poetry' (Sidney 1962: 8). The Romantics similarly lauded the capacity of poetry to remake religion (Hampton 2019: 13–19). The world of poetry, like religion, writes Friedrich Schlegel, 'is infinite and inexhaustible' (Schlegel 1958–2002: ii. 285), and 'the Poetic Genius', writes William Blake, 'is the true Man' and the source of all religions (Blake 1982: 1).

More recently, with secularism itself, along with the immanent frame becoming an object of critical awareness, the possibility of reconsidering transcendence and mystical poetics in a post-secular age presents itself anew. This is considered in a poem by the Polish poet Adam Zagajewski (1945–), titled *Mistyka dla początkujących* (*Mysticism for Beginners*, 1997). The poem describes a situation in which experience, in this case of art and nature, and the words assigned to it, once again open themselves up, in the most elementary and incipient way, to the possibility of the experience of transcendence. In this moment the

poet realizes the possibility of forming a language capable of expressing human spirituality, not unlike when the Church Fathers looked upon the Hebrew scripture and found in it a way of expressing their own spiritual lives. The conclusion of Zagajewski's poem describes the return to a beginners' course, which in itself forms the prelude to a test that has been postponed:

(p. 261)

> mały słowik, który ćwiczył recytacjętuż przy autostradzie, i podróże, wszystkie podróże,to była tylko mistyka dla początkujących, wstępny kurs, prolegomenado egzaminu, który odłożony zostałna później.the little nightingale practicing / its speech beside the highway, / and any journey, and kind of trip, / are only mysticism for beginners, / the elementary course, prelude / to a test that's been postponed (Zagajewski, 'Mistyka dla początkujących,' ll. 21-27; Zagajewski 2002, 2004).

The traditional language of Christian mysticism, devised within a framework of transcendence, can only problematically be transferred into an age of immanence, without being somehow translated. Yet within the immanent frame aesthetics remains one of the few forms of functional communal spiritual discourse. On the one hand, this is because it, like mysticism, distances itself from the traditional and untranslated language of religion. On the other hand, it is also because the aesthetic resists reduction to mere subjective projection, despite the contemporary domination of immanent, post-metaphysical, forms of discourse. As such, poetry is possessed of the introductory capacity that Zagajewski describes. It is capable, by virtue of its form, within the confines of the immanent frame, of constituting an introductory course in mysticism for beginners. In poetry mysticism returns to its original endeavour of giving presence to absence, materiality to the immaterial, and lexicon to the non-lexical.

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Notes:

([1]) The Song of Songs is considered later in this chapter.

([2]) The question of distinguishing between 'real' and 'invented' records is not addressed here. Whilst some individuals presumably did record their own experiences through poetry, apart from the written record, there is no way to make this distinction, if indeed it is possible to make it. The contrast between Dante and Hadewijch is an excellent illustration of this. We can largely assume that Dante's first-person narration of mystical experience was 'invented' in the same way as we may suspect, but are unable to affirm, that Hadewijch's experience was 'real'.

([3]) Throughout poetry is quoted in its original language and translated literally. All translations are my own, unless otherwise noted.