

INTERTEXTUALITY: ON THE USE OF THE BIBLE IN MYSTICAL TEXTS

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ABSTRACT

This article discussed the use of the Bible in mystical texts by focusing on intertextuality as a literary approach which analyses the intersection of texts. It investigated how mystical texts, as phenotexts, relate to the Bible as archetext: firstly, the intertextual relations affect the surface of the text in a mono-causal way and secondly, they govern the production of meaning reciprocally. The article also discussed forms of intersection (quotations, collage, allusions and reproduction) before it analysed the three intertextual strategies producing meaning: participation, detachment and change or rearrangement. Finally, six functions and dimensions of meaning were delineated in the intertextual dynamic between the Bible and the mystical texts. In these the Bible serves as an authoritative framework for argumentation, as a guide and blueprint of the mystical way, as a vocabulary of mystical experience, as an initiation into the divine infinity, as the place of mystical transformation in love and as the articulation of transformation in glory.

INTRODUCTION

Reflection about the Bible in mystical texts is about entering the area of intertextuality. Intertextuality is understood as a literary approach focusing on the relations between texts. It views a text as an intersection of fragments, allusions or echoes of other texts. Intertextuality focuses on relations between the text from which the quotation, allusion, or echo is drawn (the pre-text or archetext) and the new setting, in which the pre-text is received (the phenotext). In this article the archetext is the Bible and the phenotext is the mystical text. Intertextuality in this article is consequently about the relationship between the Bible and the mystical text.

Intertextuality, understood as a literary approach, describes and analyses texts as intersections of texts. But the intertextual phenomenon as such is embedded in the broader phenomenon of reading and writing texts. With regard to reading, a text is never alone. The text we read has its place beside other texts, comments on other texts, is inscribed in other texts and calls to mind other texts (Allen 2000; Holthuis 1993; Klein & Fix 1997; Orr 2003). With regard to writing, the written text delineates itself against the background of other, earlier texts. Every new text is, in one way or another, the weaving over of a slumbering body of weaving that is again made current in the texture of this text (Lachmann 1982, 1990). Writing re-actualises the culture-creating function of the memory, which keeps present through time experience that is genetically intransmissible. To say it in a symbolic way, all texts are latently present in a book that has been forgotten, but that is partly re-actualised in the writing of it (Jabès 1989).

This study is focused on intertextuality as a textual phenomenon. A text is conceived of as an intersection of fragments, allusions and resonances of other texts. In this article intertextuality has to do with the intersection of the Bible as text (Alkier & Hays 2005) in mystical texts (Van Aalsum forthcoming). Given this focus, we have to distinguish between two levels of intertextuality: firstly, the intertextual relations organising the surface of the phenotext and secondly, the intertextual relations governing the production of meaning (Lachman 1990:17). On the first level, the relation is mono-causal: the phenotext is influenced by the archetext. This influence takes shape in different forms, as will be explained below. On the second level, however, which is dynamic, the relation is reciprocal. The reader is involved in a dialogical process of transformation: 'The active participation of the reader in the actualization process in order to exhaust the allusion's evocative potential as far as possible' is needed (Hebel 1991:140). In this dialogical process the phenotext obtains meaningful potential, but also unfolds new aspects of meaning in the archetext.

In line with these two levels of intertextuality, this study involves two steps. Firstly, the different forms of intersection at work in mystical texts, related to the Bible as their archetext, are explored. Secondly, the level of meaning is presented by determining what kinds of interpretations are at work in the mystical texts as they insert the Bible in their texture.

FORMS OF INTERSECTION

Before describing some forms of intertextuality in the interface of mystical articulations and the Bible, we should be aware of the richness of the relational network between an archetext and a phenotext: the archetext is *pars-pro-toto* present in the phenotext because a constitutive element from the former is taken up into the latter; the archetext is structurally present in the phenotext, as is evident from the analogous structure; the phenotext takes selections from several archetexts and assembles them into a new texture; an archetext is present, fragmentarily yet structurally, in the phenotext as a riddle to be decoded; and the archetext is processed in the phenotext to such an extent that a maximal shift in meaning is effected.

Now the different forms of intersection can be discussed.

Quotation

A quotation (Helbig 1996) is the transposition of a fragment of an archetext by inserting it in a new text. In our case it encompasses the integration of a Bible text within a mystical text. This 'quotation' can be either marked or unmarked.

A *marked quotation* intersects the mystical text explicitly, so that it signals the reader to expect a quotation. This can be illustrated by the following examples:

- In the first example, a quotation is introduced with a formula such as 'As the Lord says in the gospel' or 'As David says in the book of the Psalms' or 'As Job says'. The opening sentence of the *Imitation of Christ* is such a marked quotation: 'Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness' (Jn 8:12), followed by Thomas' words, '... says the Lord. These are the words of Christ' (*Imitation* I,1,1).
- A second example is found in the genre of the mystical homilies, for instance, the sermons of Bernard of Clairvaux, Eckhart, Thomas a Kempis. In this case the quotation (a verse that is at the centre of attention) is placed at the beginning of the homily, mostly quoted in Latin. Eckhart, for example, starts his homily on Martha and Mary in this way: 'I have first quoted this saying in Latin as it is written in the Gospel, and in German it means...' (Eckhart 1936: *Predigt* 2). Here, Eckhart 'quotes' the official text of the Bible (Vulgate) in Latin as the opening sentence of his homily.
- A third example is the manner of marking as used in the genre of mystical commentaries. In this form of marking, the quotations systematically follow the commented text from verse to verse and from unit to unit.

An *unmarked quotation* is the insertion of a Bible text within a mystical text in such a way that it is completely one with the receiving text, although it is at the same time apparent that it is a quotation, but without any formula or signal.

When John of the Cross in his *Living flame of love* speaks about the darkness of the soul and the flame of light which is God, he says:

When this flame, since its light is excessively brilliant, shines upon the soul, its light shines in the darkness of the soul, which is also excessive dark. The soul then feels her natural and vicious darkness, which is contrary to the supernatural light. And she fails to experience the supernatural light, because she does not have it within herself as she does her darkness – the darkness did not comprehend the light.

(John of the Cross, *Flame* A,1,18)

The informed reader immediately recognises the gospel of John: 'The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness did not comprehend the light' (Jn 1:5). This Bible fragment, split up into two pieces, is therefore woven into the mystical text.

Collage

In the case of quotations, Bible fragments are inserted into the receiving mystical text (Plett 1991). Sometimes, however, the pre-text interpolations increase in such frequency that the text is almost completely composed of quotations. Such a string of citations, created by montage, can be called a collage.

In his *Regula non bullata*, a short text of 186 words, Francis of Assisi describes 'the way of life of the gospel of Jesus Christ' (*Haec est vita evangelii Jesu Christi*). Half of the text, exactly 93 words, is a collage of six Bible texts introduced by the words: 'Our Lord Jesus Christ... who says'. After this word (*dicit*) an intertexture of five Bible texts (Lk 18:22; Mt 19:21; Mt 16:24; Lk 14:26; Mt 19:29 and par) follows, all pointing to one thing: following the life of Jesus (Bisschops 2008:140–152).

In *Markings* Dag Hammarskjöld (1966) paints in a quick sequence of short sentences what happened with Jesus and his disciples during the night before he died. This sequence of short sentences is clearly a collage. Hammarskjöld's text is cited here, with the Johannine verses quoted by Hammarskjöld (with slight changes of the Bible text) between brackets:

Well, then, the last evening. An adamant young man: Know ye what I have done to you? (Jn 13:12) – Now already I tell you, before it comes (Jn 13:19) – One of you shall betray me (Jn 13:21)

– Whither I go, thou canst not follow me (Jn 13:36) – Thou wilt lay down thy life for my sake! Truly! (Jn 13:38) – My peace I give unto you (Jn 14:27) – This may happen, so that the world knows that I love the father and do what he has commanded me. Arise, let us go hence (Jn 14:31).

(Hammarskjöld 1966:72)

Short sentences, taken from John 13 to 14, are brought together in this quotation, creating a new text and evoking the atmosphere during the evening meal before Jesus died.

Allusion

In the preceding forms of intertextuality the Bible fragments can be clearly identified in the mystical texts. In an allusion (Hebel 1991) matters are different. The reference to the Bible is implied through a slight, hidden or indirect hint, but it is still intelligible.

A *slight* indication is, for example, the 'hidden manna' in the first chapter of Thomas a Kempis' *Imitation of Christ* (I,1,4). The phrase alludes to the 'instruction of Christ', a reference to the book of Revelation (Rv 2:17) and, of course, to the desert journey of Israel (Ex 16:31).

A *hidden* allusion – but still intelligible to the informed reader – indicates a biblical *topos* or theme through one word or image. John of the Cross, for example, in his speaking of a 'mountain', refers to the biblical mountains – particularly Mount Horeb – as a mystical programme, further including allusions such as 'darkness,' 'cloud' of unknowing, detachment, transcendence, revelation. The word 'mountain' refers to the biblical mountains which are then understood as mystical mountains, including all aspects of the mystical way. This would include such names as Moriah, Bethel, Basan, Lebanon, Horeb, Carmel, Tabor and so forth (Waaïjman 2008:19–58).

An allusion is *indirect* when the object aimed at is not explicitly articulated. Cassian (1985), for example, speaks about the poverty of spirit, an allusion to a verse of the Beatitudes: 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven' (Mt 5:3). The kingdom of heaven refers to contemplation (*telos*) and the poverty in spirit is understood as the way of detachment (*skopos*). By referring to 'poverty in spirit' (the work goal) the end goal of contemplation is indirectly aimed at. This indirect character of an allusion can also be topical. For example, the reference 'Martha and Mary' points at a subject often discussed in mystical treatises, but indirectly it refers to a biblical narrative in Luke (Lk 10:38–42). In mystical texts we find a variety of indications of a topic referring indirectly to biblical *topoi*.

Reproduction

A reproduction brings an earlier text in existence again. This can be done in different ways: by copying, editing, translating, compiling and paraphrasing, as is illustrated by the following three examples.

The first example is provided by the manner in which Eckhart (1936) opens his famous homily on Martha and Mary. It was mentioned previously how Eckhart 'quotes' the Latin text of the Bible and then gives his translation in German:

I have first quoted this saying in Latin, as it is written in the Gospel and in German it means: 'Our lord Jesus Christ went up into a citadel and was received by a virgin who was a wife.' Now mark this word carefully. It must of necessity be a virgin, the person by whom Jesus was received ...

(Eckhart 1936: *Predigt* 2)

When we compare the Latin Bible text with the German translation we observe an important modification. The Latin text reads: 'Et ipse intravit in quoddam castellum; et mulier quaedam, Martha nomine, excepit illum in domum suam' (Lk 10:38). Eckhart translates the Latin 'mulier' with the binomium virgin-wife because he needs to distinguish between the 'virgin' as the

person who is completely free for God, every moment anew and the 'woman' as the image of the person who bears fruit, every moment anew.

The second example is a paraphrase, the free reproduction of a biblical passage in a mystical language game. This can be illustrated by John of the Cross' paraphrase of Psalm 137 in his poem *Super flumina Babilonis* (Waaajman 1991b). The poem follows the main line of the psalm in four stanzas, stressing the narrative elements and telling the story in the first person singular. The mystical text intensifies the tears of loneliness and the memory of love. The essence is that precisely in solitude and suffering love is burning within the mystic. This essential point is expressed in the second stanza: the mystic abandons the psalm and tells about his experience of love in exile ('there'). This will be explained in more detail in the second part of this article.

This collage of Johannine texts in Hammarskjöld's *Markings* (1966) is part of a broader picture. The mystic tells us what happened on that last evening before Jesus' death (Jn 13–14):

The one who was nearest to him relates how, on the last evening, he arose from supper, laid aside his garments and washed the feet of his friends and disciples ... And one of them had informed on him, and would probably soon give a sign to the police ... Well, then, the last evening ...

(Hammarskjöld 1966:72–73)

FUNCTION AND MEANING

In general and on an abstract level, we may discern three intertextual strategies which produce meaning: participation, which seeks to keep texts alive by repetition or imitation; detachment, which seeks to surpass, fend off, or destroy earlier texts; change and rearrangement, which plays with and uses unfamiliar texts (Lachmann 1990:38–40).

Within the traditions of the so-called Book religions, the intertextual strategy used by mystics is usually participative. The Bible is the daily food of Christian mystics. They read Scripture in meditation, study, prayer and liturgy. The Bible is also the framework of their argumentation and orientation. They celebrate the infinite depth of meaning recovered from the biblical text (De Lubac 1959). Reading and praying, they are touched by the voice speaking to them so that they are transformed in love.

This participative strategy implies that these mystics belong to a tradition of spiritual reading mediated, amongst others, by commentaries, homilies, prayer books and treatises. They do not read the Bible as isolated individuals or as readers seeking for an original meaning. They are embedded in a community, participating in the divine-human relationship mediated by their tradition. For them Holy Scripture is a dialogical reality. Within this spiritual context the Bible has its specific function and meaning.

Six functions and dimensions of meaning are presently delineated in the intertextual dynamic between the Bible and mystical writing. In these the Bible features as an authoritative framework for argumentation, as a guide and blueprint of the mystical way, as a vocabulary of mystical experience, as an initiation into the divine infinity, as the place of mystical transformation in love and as the articulation of transformation in glory.

Framework for argumentation

According to Juan Evangelista (cf. ms.12738, fol. 559 in the Biblioteca Nacional, Madrid), John of the Cross had no other book in his cell than the Bible, which he knew by heart. Hundreds of quotations and allusions in his works are the traces of a mysticism which is imbued with Holy Scripture.

One of the functions of the Bible in John's mystical discourse is its authority in discussing spiritual themes. For instance, the discussion about visions and locutions in *The ascent of Mount Carmel* is headed by these words: 'Visions and locutions, even though from God, can mislead us. Proofs from divine Scripture.' The argument is that there are two reasons why, although God's visions and locutions are true and certain in themselves, they are not always so for us: 'The first reason is because of our defective manner of understanding them, and the second because their basic causes are sometimes variable.' He adds, 'We shall give proof for both with scriptural texts' (II,19,1).

Regarding the first reason: revelations, prophecies and locutions embody ways, concepts and ideas which are remarkably different from the meaning we generally find in them. And the more certain and truthful they are, the less they seem so to us. We behold this frequently in Scripture. With a number of the ancients, many of God's prophecies and locutions did not turn out as they had expected, because they interpreted them with their own different and extremely literal method (II,19,1). A long list of proofs follows. The argument is clear: the Bible provides the trusted framework for mystical argumentation. This leads to the advice that souls should 'flee prudently from these supernatural occurrences, and to accustom them, as we pointed out, to purity of spirit in dark faith – the means toward union' (II,19,1).

The second reason is also supported by evidence from Scripture. The supernatural occurrences are not only difficult to interpret, they are also uncertain for us. The reason is that the occurrences not only reveal a divine order – unintelligible for our limited understanding, but they are also part of the contingent order of creatures. Again a long list of biblical examples follows, leading to the rhetorical question: 'Why then, should we be surprised if God's locutions and revelations do not materialize as expected?' (II,20,8). The causality in creation is uncertain and as a result the fulfilment of the promise is too. The advice, based on the biblical argumentation, is clear: 'One should seek certainty, therefore, not in understanding but in faith' (II,20,8).

In the same way John of the Cross 'proves', amongst others, the following:

- Why petitioning God through supernatural means is not allowed in the Law of Grace (the New Testament) though it is permitted in the Old Law (II,22).
- How it is possible to know the naked truth (II,26).
- Why the joy of temporal goods should be directed toward God (III,8).
- Why no image is likening God (II,12). How ambiguous the revelations of divine secrets are (II,27).

In all these cases the argumentation is the same: the Bible provides the authoritative framework in which the multiplicity of examples challenges the conviction that supernatural occurrences can be trusted. The examples at the same time remind the reader that only the dark night of faith, uniting the soul with God, is a guide to be trusted. The Bible therefore provides the mystical discourse with a framework of argumentation.

Guide and blueprint

For the mystics Holy Scripture is a guide and a map of the mystical way. The opening sentence of the *Imitation of Christ*, mentioned above, quoting John 8:12, for example, introduces Christ as the guide and the way. The Johannine words, 'whoever follows me will never walk in darkness' are explained as, 'These are the words of Christ, by which we are challenged to express his life and behavior as deeply, as we will be illumined truly and freed from all blindness of heart' (*Imitation* I,1,2). By 'meditating in the life of Jesus Christ' (*Imitation* I,1,3) and by striving to make our 'whole life conform with him' (*Imitation* I,1,6), Christ becomes the guide and the way of our spiritual transformation.

The paraphrase of Hammarskjöld in his *Markings* is an interesting example of 'meditating in the life of Jesus Christ'. This is understandable. During that period, Hammarskjöld was reading the *Imitation of Christ* intensively. From 1953 onwards he frequently and at critical moments quotes it. Paraphrasing what happened 'on that last evening', Hammarskjöld writes about Jesus as 'a young man, adamant in his commitment ... An adamant young man, alone as he confronted his final destiny' (Hammarskjöld 1966:72–73 – three times). In doing so, he actually speaks about his own spiritual journey, 'only recently' beginning 'to see more clearly, and to realise that the road of possibility might lead to the Cross' (Hammarskjöld 1966:72). By identifying himself with 'that young man', Hammarskjöld places his journey and his destiny within the life of Jesus.

John of the Cross says,

In discussing this dark night, therefore, I shall not rely on experience or science, for these can fail and deceive us. Although I shall not neglect whatever possible use I can make of them, my help in all that, with God's favour, I shall say, will be Sacred Scripture, at least in the most important matters, or those which are difficult to understand. Taking Scripture as our guide we do not err, since the Holy Spirit speaks through it.

(John of the Cross, *Ascent*, Prologue, 2)

The Bible is the guide of the mystic. At the same time, Scripture is a map and a blueprint. This insight belongs to the basic convictions of Christian spirituality. McGinn (2005) therefore rightly states,

One of the essential characteristics of Origen's form of mystical exegesis is the way it sees the biblical narrative as revealing the itinerary of the soul, and even of the classes of the souls, in their descent from and ascent to God.

(McGinn 2005:91)

This is the reason why Origen interprets the 42 stations of the departure of the people of Israel from Egypt as the stages of the spiritual ascent (Origen 1899). 'This understanding of the biblical text as signifying an itinerary of the soul, a succession of stages on a journey, had far reaching repercussions in Christian mystical exegesis' (McGinn 2005:92).

Cassian (1985) too quotes, in his *Conferences* (1,4–7), a text taken from the Sermon of the Mount: 'Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God' (Mt 5:8). This quotation functions in his mystical teachings as a blueprint of the mystical way of the desert monks. The verse of the Beatitudes articulates, in the eyes of Cassian, the basic structure of the spiritual journey: purification (the way leading to the work goal [skopos] of the purity of heart) and contemplation (the grace of God's vision by the mystic, the end goal [telos] of the mystical transformation).

A topical allusion is the theme of 'the mountain' symbolising the spiritual ascent. With this symbolic order in mind, John of the Cross comments on Genesis 35 (in the translation of the Vulgate):

When the patriarch Jakob desired to ascend Mount Bethel to build an altar for the offering of sacrifice to God, he first ordered his people to do three things: to destroy all strange gods; to purify themselves; and to change garments.

(John of the Cross, *Ascent* I,5,6)

With this short paraphrase of the biblical narrative (Gn 35:1–6), John of the Cross introduces his understanding of the mystical way:

Anyone desiring to climb to the summit of the mount in order to become an altar for the offering of a sacrifice of pure love and praise and reverence to God, must first accomplish these three tasks perfectly. First, he must cast out the strange gods, all alien affections and attachment. Second, through a habitual denial and repentance of these appetites – by the dark night of senses – he must purify himself of their residue. The third requisite for reaching the top of this mount is the change of garments. God, by means of the first two conditions, will substitute new vestments for the old.

The soul will be clothed in God, in a new understanding of God – through the removal of the understanding of the old man – and in a new love of God in God – once the will is stripped of all cravings and satisfactions of the old man.

(John of the Cross, *Ascent* I,5,7)

In this example we see how a biblical story – the climbing of Mount Bethel – provides the blueprint of the dark night in three steps: giving up egocentrism, purification and mystical transformation.

Ruusbroec's mystical treatise of the *Brulocht* is entirely built upon the Bible verse from the parable of the ten bridesmaids: 'Behold, the groom is there! Go out to meet him' (Mt 25:6). On all levels of this treatise the shouting at midnight is the leading principle: firstly, 'behold'; secondly, 'the groom is there'; and lastly, 'go out to meet him' (Swart 2006).

Finally, Gerard Zerbolt van Zutphen opens his *De reformatione virtutum animae* with a quotation from Luke: 'A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho' (Lk 10:30), leaving the condition of peace and harmony (Jerusalem) and falling down into chaos and disintegration (Jericho). The spiritual programme of Gerard Zerbolt van Zutphen is the way back from Jericho to Jerusalem, guided by Scripture meditation and conversation with soul friends.

Vocabulary of mystical experience

Scripture provides the basic vocabulary for the articulation of the mystical experience, as is evident in the poems *Spiritual canticle* and *Dark night of the soul* by John of the Cross. They are paraphrases of some parts of the Song of Songs, providing the basic language which guides the inner logic of John's commentaries. They are particularly helpful in describing the liminal situations of the two nights, that is, the sensory night and the spiritual night. Scripture is full of references to the sensory night. John says:

We could adduce numerous passages from Sacred Scripture, for since this sensory purgation is so customary, we find throughout, especially in the Psalms and Prophets, a great many references to it.

(John of the Cross, *Dark night* I,8,5)

John does not waste time citing them. More important, obviously, are the references to the night of the spirit. In this case the references are also numerous:

So numerous and burdensome are the pains of this night, and so many are the scriptural passages we could cite that we could have neither the time nor the energy to put it all in writing.

(John of the Cross, *Dark night* II,7,2)

In this case, however, John provides some references, particularly to Lamentations and Job. The most important help, however, that Scripture gives in this dark night is awareness:

And, without doubt, all that we can possibly say would fall short of expressing what this night [of the spirit] really is. Through the texts already quoted [Lamentations, Job and some other texts] we have some idea of it.

(John of the Cross, *Dark night* II,7,2)

This insight that the night of the spirit is ineffable and that we have only some idea of it, is given by Scripture itself. Only Scripture knows 'the language of God', because Scripture itself is the language of God, transcending every created language.

According to John (*Dark night* II,17,4), we have examples of this ineffability of divine language in Sacred Scripture. Jeremiah manifested his incapacity to describe it when, after God had spoken to him, he knew of nothing more to say than a, a, a (Jr 1:6). Moses also declared before God, present in the burning bush, his interior inability (the inability of both his imagination and his exterior senses) (Ex 4:10). He asserted that he was not only unable to speak of this but that he did not even dare consider it in his imagination, as is said in the Acts of the Apostles (Ac 7:32).

Scripture helps John to understand the ineffability of God's language to the soul, 'because it is beyond words' (*Dark Night* II,17,4). Scripture is a treasury of language helping us to articulate the night which unites God and the human being in faith. At the same time Scripture lets us understand the limits of language and the ineffability of contemplation. This is expressed quite impressively in the poem *Super flumina*. This poem, being a paraphrase of Psalm 137, describes the liminality of the dark night 'there' at the rivers of Babel. *There* is repeated twice in the first stanza: 'At the rivers which I found in Babel, *there* I sat down, weeping, *there* I watered the land.' *There* is the only word of the psalm which is repeated in the second stanza, the heart of the mystical poem:

There hurted me Love, she stole my heart ... I died in me for you, for you I rose from the dead. The memory of you gave life and has stolen it.

The painful memory of Love in the loss of it transforms Love in hope. The waters of suffering become waters of hopeful Love. The technique of paraphrasing translates the biblical text into a mystical poem. *There* means in exile, beyond human life, beyond life itself. Precisely *there*, in the deepest darkness of exile, in the realm of death, love was experienced. Here the language of the psalm falls short, but the Pauline language of death and life comes in: 'I died in myself for you and for you I rised.' Here, beyond the language of the psalm, we hear Saint Paul speaking about death and resurrection, as he says: 'After all, you have died! Your life is hidden now with Christ in God' (Col 3:3; cf. 1 Cor 15:51-58). Paul hopes – as John of the Cross does – 'to share in Christ's sufferings by being formed into the pattern of his death. Thus do I hope that I may arrive at resurrection from the dead' (Col 3:10-11).

Initiation into God's infinity

It may be helpful to explore precisely and in more detail the dynamic of liminality: the transition from human understanding into the divine darkness which is contemplation, touched by God's infinite presence. Scripture plays an essential role in this transition, which is an initiation into God.

A good example is the story told by Augustine in his *Confessions* about events in Ostia. Augustine describes an 'ecstasy' which he and his mother experienced, just before her death (*Confessions* 9,9,23-26). After their silent 'rapture', returned to 'the sound of our tongues', Augustine reflects on their experiences. Mother and son agree in their interpretation: their ecstasy was a process of complete silencing, beyond all language, imagination and thought in which God communicates himself by himself, without any sign. At the end of his reflection he asks, quoting from Matthew: 'Would not this be the reality of the saying: "Enter into the joy of the Lord"?' (*Confessions* 9,9,25). This means that Augustine understands ecstasy – a process of complete silencing and going beyond every sign – as entering in the eternal joy of the Lord, the transition into 'eternal life' (*Confessions* 9,9,23), the fulfilment of the Bible verse 'Enter into the joy of the Lord.' The process of 'passing through' all levels of created signs, passing 'beyond' all of them (*Confessions* 9,9,24) is understood as 'entering into' eternal joy. The biblical quotation functions as a key, opening the infinite space and time of God, the eternal life, beyond all finite forms of human inventiveness.

Another example is the very influential mystical treatise *De theologia mystica* of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. In this treatise (*Theologia mystica* I), 'the blessed Moses', the prototype of all mystics, is portrayed as the one who went up the mountain to God. This portrait is a paraphrase of the narrative of Exodus 19-20. Moses is commanded to purify himself and to separate himself from all which is un-sanctified. Then there is the sound of trumpet and light. Pressed forward to the summit of the divine ascent, he does, however, not attain the presence of God itself. He only attains 'the Place' where his presence dwells: a dark cloud (Ex 19:9), the cloud beyond the subject-object relation, 'freed from which is seen and which sees'. He plunges into the darkness of unknowing, whence all perfection of understanding is excluded and he is enwrapped in that

which is altogether intangible, wholly absorbed in that which is beyond all and in none else (whether himself or another); and through the inactivity of all his reasoning powers is united by his highest faculty to that which is wholly unknowable: therefore by knowing nothing he knows that which is beyond his knowledge.

A third example may be Eckhart's interpretation of the conclusion of John's Gospel: 'There was much else that Jesus did; if it was written down, everything, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written' (Jn 21:25). Eckhart (1936) understands this verse in the following way:

Such a mode of speaking, that is excessive, properly belongs to the divine Scripture. Everything divine, as such, is immense and not subject to measure ... The excellence of divine things does not allow them to be offered to us uncovered, but they are hidden beneath sensible figures.

(Eckhart 1936 n. 745)

The 'excessive' meaning of the Bible text is grounded in God's infinity touching the mind of the mystic. 'All images, even divine images, must be destroyed as the exegete pursues his task of annihilating the particularity of created nature' (McGinn 2005:99). Note, however, that the breakthrough of this 'excessive' meaning, fuelled by God's infinity and the opening of the mystic's mind are mediated by the quoted Bible verse (see Largier 2004).

An example of this manner of interpretation is found in the homily of Eckhart on Martha and Mary. The Biblical text says, 'Our Lord Jesus went up into a citadel (*ein bürglîn*)'. This citadel is the soul. Jesus therefore enters the soul. But this concrete citadel of the soul is, in the eyes of Eckhart, an infinite Presence, beyond all modes and properties.

Now pay attention! So one and simple is this citadel in the soul, elevated above all modes, of which I speak and which I mean, that that noble power I mentioned is not even for an instant worthy to cast a single glance into this citadel; nor is that other power I spoke of, in which God burns and glows with all His riches and all His joy, able to cast a single glance inside; so truly one and simple is this, so mode- and power-transcending is this solitary One, that neither power nor mode can gaze into it, nor even God Himself! In very truth and as God lives! God Himself never looks in there for one moment, in so far as He exists in modes and in properties of His persons. This should be well noted: this One alone lacks all mode and property. And therefore, for God to see inside it would cost Him all His divine names and personal properties: all these He must leave outside, should He ever look in there.

(Eckhart 1936: Predigt 2)

For Eckhart, a concrete Bible word, evoking a concrete image (*ein bürglîn*), gives entrance into an infinite space, in which the imageless and modeless One absolutely simply is.

The Bible seems to function in mystical texts where the articulation of the mystical experience is confronted with the limits of human experience and articulation. Precisely 'there' the concrete Bible text seems to widen the horizon or to facilitate the transition into the ineffability, opening up the area of infinity and eternity. It seems that this experience is articulated by the Torah mystic, Jesus Sirach.

And I, like a conduit from a river, like a watercourse running into a garden, I said, 'I am going to water my orchard, I intend to irrigate my flowerbeds. And see, my conduit has grown into a river, and my river has grown into a sea.

(Jesus Sirach 24:30-31)

It seems as if Jesus Sirach describes how Scripture functions in the mystical experience. On the one hand, Scripture guides the mystic to the concreteness of life: the mystic becomes a conduit arising from the river of the Bible, a watercourse running into the garden of his life, watering the orchard of his deeds, irrigating the flowerbeds of his virtues. On the other hand, this movement of concentration and concretisation is at the same time a process of widening: the conduit receives the infinity of the sea; the river of the Bible has grown into the sea, God's infinite eternity. This

process of widening – conduit, river, sea – is exactly the way Bible works in mystical texts, as illustrated here.

Transformation in love

Scripture not only invites the reader to enter God's infinity, it is also the dialogical space, the divine-human in-between (*Zwischen*) where God's self-communication is experienced. It is the space where God's presence, although coming from the outside and speaking through the words of the Bible, is experienced from within.

A striking example of this is the way Cassian speaks about mystical prayer (McGinn 2005:92–93) in his discussion of the Lord's Prayer. By praying this biblical text, he notes, the mind of the monk lifts up 'that ineffable prayer which rises above all human consciousness, with no voice sounding, no tongue moving, no words uttered.' In this moment of ecstasy the mystic experiences from within what it means for God to be his own Father:

All sensibility is gathered together and, as though from some very abundant source, the soul breaks forth richly, bursts out unspeakably to God, and it pours out so much more than the soul can either describe or remember when it returns again to itself.

(Cassian, *Conferences* 9.25)

In his tenth *Conference* he refers to the same kind of transformation. Discussing how one should pray the psalms, he says:

We penetrate so deeply into the thinking of the psalms that we sing them not as though they had been composed by the prophet but as if we ourselves had written them, as if this were our own private prayer uttered amidst the deepest compunction of heart.

(Cassian, *Conferences* 10.11)

The psalms are so deeply interiorised that they become the prayer from within, the breakthrough of the monk's soul, the unspeakable bursting out of the psalms from within.

A comparable process of transformation can be observed in the *Expositio super Canticum canticorum* by William of Saint-Thierry. In his commentary on the Song of Songs, he comments on the short passage: 'The voice of my lover, here he comes' (Song 2:8). The Vulgate renders it as, '*Vox dilecti mei; ecce iste venit.*' The commentary of William is built on two fields of tension found in this short passage.

There is, first of all, in it the distinction which is found in the binomium 'word-voice'. William understands the 'word' as a collection of letters and syllables, as a linguistic form. The 'voice', by contrast, is in no way a part of a system of referents, it is 'purely affection' and 'where it works it works only as it is,' it speaks through itself, it is self-communication, it is 'face' (*Expositio* 141). For that reason William mentions the voice of the lover and his face in the same breath: the bride longs 'for his voice, his face' (*Expositio* 147). One may say that the 'word' is the outer form of the Scripture – the text as we see and read it – while the 'voice' is the self-communication of God, which we receive through and beyond the word, by reading spiritually, by *lectio divina*. The word is there, outside me; the voice is here, where I am affected by it.

At this point the second field of tension becomes relevant: 'here-there' (*ecce-iste*). 'Here' (*ecce*) means: entered into the interiority of my being, at this side of my identity, where I am deeply touched. 'There' (*iste*) means: outside me, challenging my understanding, coming from that which is external to me. This explains William's commentary:

Thus, on hearing the voice of the Bridegroom who is coming, the bride says: 'Here!' Upon hearing the word of the one who is already present and speaking with her – as if pointing out the one present – she says: 'He there!'

(William of St Thierry: *Expositio* 149)

The commentary of William, explaining the Bible verse 'The voice of my lover, here he there comes', gives some insight into the Scripture understood as transformation in love. As long as

the soul meditates on the Word, the Lover is there: present as book, text and context, to be considered and as demonstrated presence outside me. However deeply this content enters the mind, it remains there. The voice, on the other hand, being the self-communication of the Lover, addresses the very heart of the bride. She can only sigh – as an immediate response – 'Here!'. This 'here' of the bride is the voice, touching the soul immediately in her centre. William says:

She sees him come when she experiences the work of his mercy in herself. Pray tell, is his mercy toward us anything other than his goodness which comes to us in everything? The bride contemplates the Bridegroom's coming to her with deeper and more personal insight into his love when in all sorts of ways she both effectively and affectively experiences his coming in her self.

(William of St Thierry: *Expositio* 149)

The voice of the Lover is the Self-communication which imprints itself in the soul. This is the reason why William, as we saw, mentions the Voice and the Face in one breath: the soul looks forward 'to his Voice, his Face' (*Expositio* 147). The Voice and the Face delineate themselves in the transformation they effect in the soul.

Therefore every bride has only this desire, she therefore yearns only for this one thing: that You will press her face to your own Face in an eternal kiss of love. This means that she becomes one spirit with you in oneness of will. The form of your love is vigorously pressed upon the form of her life with the intensity of a great love ... When all this has come upon your bride, your dearest and fairest friend, O Lord, the light of your face shines out in her devoted soul and her joy is led in good channels.

(William of St Thierry: *Expositio* 131)

This transformation in love is also the end goal of the *Imitation of Christ*, written by Thomas a Kempis. He opens the fourth book on mystical consolation with a quotation from Psalm 85: 'I will hear what the Lord God speaks in me' (Ps 85:9). His commentary clearly points to the interior of the soul, touched by the presence of the Lord, explaining precisely the last words of the quotation, 'in me ...'. He notes, 'Blessed the ears not listening to the outer sound of the voice, but hearing the truth teaching from within' (*Imitation* IV,1,4). Thomas is pointing at the transformation in love, as articulated in the quotation from Psalm 85: the word of God heard as spoken in me. He also remarks on this transformation in one of the opening lines of his *Imitation*: 'It happens, however, that many people frequently hear the Gospel but feel only a little bit of desire, for they do not have the spirit of Christ' (*Imitation* I,1,5). They hear the outer world of the Bible, but are not touched by it. Therefore, no desire has been provoked. Scripture remains a letter, lacking the spirit.

John of the Cross compares this interior presence of God's Word with the Ark of the Covenant containing nothing else than the Law and the rod of Moses. Referring to Deuteronomy 31:26 and Numbers 17:10, John says:

A person who has no other goal than the perfect observance of God's Law and carrying of the cross of Christ will be a true ark, and he will bear within himself the real manna (which signifies God) when he possesses perfectly, without anything else, this law and this rod.

(John of the Cross, *Ascent* I,5,8)

The Law and the Cross as its centre represent Scripture. The one who interiorised Scripture, without anything else, is like the Ark of the Covenant, bearing within himself the manna, which is God.

An example from the Jewish tradition is the translation of the Hebrew Bible into German by Buber and Rosenzweig (1936), the so-called *Verdeutschung der Schrift*. In this translation Buber and Rosenzweig follow as near as possible the semantic and etymological concreteness of the Hebrew words, aiming at a process of transformation which not only touches the cognitive level of the reader, but also the bodily and emotional layers of the reader. They strictly follow this procedure, motivated by their insights in biblical spirituality. They made, however, one exception, that is, the translation of the tetragrammaton

JHWH. Here they decided not to follow the etymological and semantic concreteness of the Name (deduced from *hajjah*, which means 'being there'). They followed their mystical intuition, as they had articulated in *The Star of Redemption* and *I and Thou*, both being mystical writings in the strictest sense of the word (Scholem 1974; Waaijman 1991a). They translated the Divine Name with personal pronouns such as ICH, DU, ER. By doing so the reader is initiated into the I-Thou relationship, as Buber and Rosenzweig (1936) understood it, more than 6000 times: a process of mystical transformation between the divine I (You, He) and the human I (You, He). The reading of the whole Bible, in this translation, can be experienced by the reader as one continuous initiation into the intimacy of the divine-human relationship.

Transformation in glory

One of the major themes in Christian mysticism is the transformation in glory, the ultimate transition in God's redemptive love. This eschatological 'change' is definitely a mystery, hidden from the human grasp. Nevertheless, in a dark night of hope, we receive some weak glimpses of what we are waiting for. In describing this moment of dark hope, mystics refer to Scripture, as can be illustrated by one particular example.

Augustine, introducing the 'ecstasy' in Ostia, quotes a sentence from Philippians 3:13 in an unmarked quotation: 'We were conversing alone very pleasantly and forgetting those things which are past, and reaching forward toward those things which are future' (*Confessions* 9,9,23). He furthermore explains precisely the conversation with his mother, by an allusion from 1 Corinthians 2:9: 'We were discussing together what is the nature of eternal life of the saints, which eye has not seen, nor ear heard, neither has entered into the heart of man' (*Confessions* 9,9,23). Discussing 'the nature of eternal life' which is completely beyond human grasp, a deep yearning was provoked, articulated by an allusion from Psalm 36:9: 'thirsting for those supernal streams of thy fountain, the fountain of life which is with thee' (*Confessions* 9,9,23). And then, by two strong allusions to 1 Corinthians 15:3–58, where Paul speaks about the resurrection of the dead, Augustine closes his reflection, 'But when shall such a thing be? Shall it not be when we all shall rise again, and shall it not be that all things will be changed?' (*Confessions* 9,9,25). Augustine keeps on questioning, which is an expression of longing. He asks for the time, the moment when that what he is longing for will happen. In answer he alludes to the end of Paul's discussion about the resurrection,

Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed – in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.

(1 Cor 15:51–52)

By alluding to the Letter to the Corinthians Augustine is pointing to the mystery of transformation in glory (cf. 1 Cor 15:43), which happens at the moment of 'being raised' in Christ, which is 'being changed' in eternal life, a transformation which 'all flesh' will overcome (cf. 1 Cor 15:39–49).

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