John Donne Journal
Vol. 9, No. 2 (1990)

The Problem of Mysticism

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Arthur L. Clements. *Poetry of Contemplation: John Donne, George Herbert, Henry Vaughan, and the Modern Period.* Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990. Pp. xviii + 306.

Even in times of faith, mysticism is a uniquely troubling and problematic phenomenon. As we know from their histories, most of the great acknowledged mystics like St. Teresa, St. John of the Cross, and St. Catherine of Siena regularly suffered doubt, rejection, persecution, and even imprisonment at the hands of the authorities of the very same Church that later canonized them. Those who claim to be mystics are likely to be either saints or charlatans—it is often hard to tell which—with small room for mediocrity or indifference. If such is true when faith is well defined, how much more difficult is it to define mysticism in an age when, as A. C. Clements notes, God is widely thought to be "dead," and when few agree by what rules we may distinguish truth from falsehood, good from evil, reality from illusion?—that is, if we can even agree that such concepts are meaningful.

The first sentences of Clements' book begin as they should: "The desire for union with God is the basic and vital center of religious life, and this desire is the essence of mysticism. Mystical or contemplative experience is the heart of religion in the sense that it characterizes the divine as being present in experience" (p. xi). Perhaps that word "desire" fudges the issue a little: true mysticism, if we are willing to allow that it exists at all, may begin with and be accompanied by desire, but it ends in the direct *experience* of union with God, a union in which God is the only true expert on what is, or is not, mystical. The great mystics are "authorities" only insofar as we are persuaded that God has visited them.

To begin with God is to violate the normal rules of modern literary discourse; not to begin with him on such a topic, however, is at least to violate the suppositions of such writers as Donne, Herbert, and Vaughan. Thus contemplation immediately presents us with problems not entailed, for example, by meditation, a form of devotion that employs the natural human powers of memory, will, reason, imagination, and the five senses (however much we may allow them to be augmented or rectified by grace), in a search for God through the world, religious texts, or the mind. Therefore, to study meditation requires only a moderate suspension of disbelief, but to study contemplation requires something more.

As is the case with other major belief-systems, Christianity, in all but its wildest fringe manifestations, has always distinguished between genuine and false kinds of "mysticism." One is inspired and controlled by God, the other by the devil or by human pride and error. Since they may, nonetheless, look exactly alike to an external witness, they are most reliably tested by examining their fruits and especially their conformity with doctrinal orthodoxy. If they manifest themselves charitably and in such a way as to confirm, reform, or unfold, but not contradict, the deposit of faith, they are presumed to be genuine; otherwise they are not. Early experts in discernment agreed that it is not enough for a mystic to go into trances, speak with tongues, even levitate in public: these are only the minor if spectacular side-effects—often dangerously misleading—of the essential experience.

To study mysticism in three seventeenth-century English poets requires the critic to make some immediate decisions. Do we regard "mysticism" as belonging to all the proclaimed world authorities equally—Zen Buddhists, Sufists, New-Age Gurus, contemporary feminist theologians, and so forth—or do we restrict ourselves to the prior Western Christian tradition? Some argument may be made for the latter, since all these poets belonged to that tradition. But then we run immediately into problems of orthodoxy: and, as we have seen, it is by orthodoxy that a true mystic is distinguished from a false.

Do we take for our model the well-defined tradition of mysticism in the Catholic Church as exemplified by such standard figures as Dionysius, Augustine, Bernard, Bonaventure, Walter Hilton, Julian of Norwich and (preeminently and immediately before the period in question) Teresa and John of the Cross? Such a paradigm would not exclude Protestants entirely, but it would clearly put them at a disadvantage: on the fringes, lacking good institutional support or reliable advice, perhaps (as Flannery O'Connor would suggest in a later context) representing vital yet distorted nuances of divine intervention.

Yet, if, to avoid these problems, we choose Protestantism as our norm, we run into still other problems. English Protestantism had its roots, after all, in the dissolution of the monasteries and the savage persecution of the contemplative orders, together with the resolute rejection of everything they stood for. In my opinion there were, eventually, a number of English Protestants of various persuasions and sects who enjoyed at least a degree of genuine mystical experience, but this observation almost has to be expressed as an opinion rather than a normative assumption, since neither the Anglican Church nor the various sects had well-established means for distinguishing productive mysticism from fanatic zeal or dangerous error.

Finally, we may not wish to write off even those aforementioned gurus, Sufists, and feminists too quickly, since to do so might be to admit only a tenuous connection between mysticism in the English seventeenth century and our experience in the present. If not normative, they are at least potentially useful as bases for comparison and contrast.

These remarks are by way of prolegomena to the observation that, unless the poet, the critic, and the critic's audience share a system of faith or possibly a very strong willingness to suspend disbelief, mysticism is likely to remain a matter for approximation, opinion, or empty comparison with a lowest common denominator of criteria culled from frequently incompatible "authories." There is much to recommend Clements' *Poetry of Contemplation*, but it is not immune from these vexing difficulties. Given the fact that there are very few useful books on this subject—including Clements' own earlier volume on Traherne, Stanley Stewart's on the enclosed garden, and R. A. Durr's on Vaughan—I would like to be able to recommend this new book unreservedly. (And all the more so since it so graciously cites my own work.) It is heartily to be recommended for its strong chapters on Herbert and Vaughan and its very suggestive treatment of Donne (the modern chapter does not concern us here), but it needs to be read with care because of the way it mingles traditions in a way more likely to satisfy a twentieth-century critic than a hypothetical seventeenth-century one.

Clements knows his authorities, and he has a heart to feel and sympathize with them—not an inconsiderable matter in this field. But, although he recognizes, he does not altogether avoid, the dangers of eclecticism. This cannot be said to be wrong—since as I have noted a modern critic is in a position where he must choose his own guidelines and assumptions—but it is sometimes misleading. The problem may be seen in a list with which the first chapter commences of normative mystics in the "Christian contemplative . . . tradition": "Richard of St. Victor, St. Bonaventura, Meister Eckhart, Jan Ruysbroeck, the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Walter Hilton, Julian of Norwich, St. John of the Cross, and Jacob Boehme" (p. 1). This list includes many canonized authorities but also some who are heterodox and, by some lights, suspect: Eckhart, Ruysbroeck, Boehme. And where are Dionysius, St. Augustine, St. Bernard, and St. Teresa? They are all cited elsewhere; but we begin with a list that (as only a knowing reader will realize) is problematic. Of course, some English Protestants thought Boehme more admirable than John of the Cross, less honored in England than Teresa. That does not obviate the difficulty posed by such a "normative" list, which mingles, as it were, apples and oranges, without clarifying the difference.

Not too far into the chapter W. H. Auden appears as a major authority. Here the whole project threatens to break down. The traditional threefold way—purgation, illumination, union—is joined to Auden's speculative three types of "vision": of Dame Kind, Eros, and Philia. What Auden has to say is interesting, but has little to do with the contemplative tradition.

In the space of about a page, Clements appeals to the definitive Christian "myth," which incorporates the Fall and Redemption, observes that "Just as a Buddhist must discover his Buddha nature, a Christian must become Christ or Christlike," then notes that the most "succinct" expression of self-discovery is a "Sanskrit formula . . . 'that art Thou' or 'you are It'" (pp. 13-14). But a Buddhist

does not become Buddha in just the same way that a Christian becomes Christ (itself misleading when put so briefly); the comparison obscures rather than elucidates the latter term, which is the important one for the poets in question. Without further discussion, we can only guess or approximate the meaning of the "Sanskrit formula." Yes, there are remarkable parallels among various forms of world mysticism—but also great differences. They deserve to be considered at length, if at all, not in brief, unanalyzed conjunctions.

As I have said, the chapters on Herbert and Vaughan are admirable. Although mysticism in Vaughan is already a familiar topic for discussion and debate, Clements adds some fine insights, especially in his subtle extended reading of "The Night." Since Herbert has seldom been viewed in a mystical context, the chapter on him is the book's chief accomplishment. Most notable is the suggestion that the "alternating states of affliction and joy, of spiritual conflict and perfect freedom, that obtain throughout Herbert's work" (p. 108) may more fruitfully be read as manifestations of advancing spiritual experience, of the typically alternating conditions of contemplative consolation and desolation (which mystics often describe), rather than as a kind of sinfully aimless and directionless dithering (as one might rather conclude from some recent "protestantizing" caricatures of his poetry).

The Donne chapter is more controversial. It argues that one must look for mysticism not in his Holy Sonnets and hymns but his love lyrics. There is much to recommend this thesis. In none of Donne's sacred poems do we find a speaker ready to leave the purgative way. Donne is a powerful, moving, convincingly authentic religious poet, but his usual stance is of a man mired in the sinful flesh, unable to shake off the old Adam, longing for a grace he has yet to taste. Only in his love poems does one find an experience of transcendence, of joy and eternity, of respite from the threats of death and time. That is why the best of the *Songs and Sonets* are by far the best of Donne's poems.

Still I think we must second Cleanth Brooks' observation, in *The Well Wrought Urn*, that Donne's lovers can never escape time entirely, but are obliged to resort to the same defensive maneuvers of parody, irony, and denial that characterize the modernist predicament. Clements' strategy is not to suggest that the more idealistic love poems are analogous to, or half-serious parodies of, mystical experience. Such an approach would be easily arguable, since there are, as he shows, many parallels between certain of the love poems and mystical treatises.

Rather, he says they are, simply, mystical. In support of this view he quotes from Dorothy Donnelly's "The Sexual Mystic": "*Eros* and *agape* are not separate loving, one sexual and the other spiritual; they are merely labels, now outdated, but once convenient for discerning the nuances of the thrust to wholeness which is manifested in our yearning for human or divine lover" (p. 60). Such new-wave, liberationist sentiments, popular now, were not unknown among the sectarians of seventeenth-century England. Rightly or wrongly, the Family of Love were often

accused of holding similar views. But there is no evidence that Donne ever seriously thought in such a way. The view contradicts more than a thousand years of orthodox opinion to the contrary. (Thus we come back to our original problem: human labels may grow outdated, but do God and reality follow the latest fashions?)

In sum, this is a valuable book on an important and badly understudied aspect of seventeenth-century poetry. It has much of value to offer the discriminating reader, especially on Herbert; but much, also, to confuse an unwary reader or distract a knowledgeable one. There is no great harm in citing Dorothy Donnelly—or for that matter Matthew Fox, the new-age authority with whom the book closes. After all, Fr. Fox is the Madame Blavatsky of our day. But the opinions of such writers do not square with those of St. John of the Cross—nor with Donne, Herbert or Vaughan. Perhaps we may think that the earlier writers *should* have thought in such currently popular terms; but they did not. It would be misleading to suggest that they did.

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