A Few Things That Lacan's Seminars And Essays Can Tell Us About Medieval Christian Mysticism

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There were many medieval Christians — in the monasteries, among the itinerant flagellants and hermits, &c — for whom the jouissance of the body was simply to be silenced. According to this view, as the seat of sexuality, the body should not speak at all but be repressed (although for reason that have to do with the character of unconscious desire, these conscious desires to silence the body were always veiling a counter-desire to experience jouissance through the act of silencing; that is they were not transparent desires but symptoms). In our own times, too, but in a very different context — one dominated by science — neoliberalism is again killing off desire of the subject but in a different way by replacing jouissance of each singular subject with a generalized jouissance controlled by markets, where the Other as master signifier tells you what and how to imaginarily enjoy; in our times, the signifiers are all manufactured for you so that the subject does not have to encounter the letters of their own unconscious except through this fabricated imaginary screen.

The situation was not like this, however, for the Christian mystics of the Middle Ages — or at least not totally like it. They did not seek to silence the jouissance of their bodies so much as allow it to emerge, provided it could be given the sense of being the effects of Divine Love. Divine Love then becomes the key to understanding medieval mysticism. But what is Divine Love? It does not tell us much to say Divine Love is the

allegorical form taken by the Holy Spirit. When one reads John of the Cross or Margery Porete one sees the extent to which Divine Love is something of an enigma. Being at once the thing that is most real, the thing the mystic is most certain of, and the thing that she is constantly asking: ‘is this it’?

In her book *The Mirror of Simple Souls* Margery Porete (d.1310) tells an allegory of Divine Love. She is the Lady who rules over Margery’s imaginary spiritual kingdom and who guides, reasons, cajoles, and chastises the other allegorical figures of this spiritual kingdom, the others of Margery’s divided subject — her Reason, Will, and even the little Church, &c. — and teaches them how to serve her (Divine Love) and attain mystical love. The whole narrative borrows conventions from courtly love. And like the figure of the lover in that genre, these others are often bumblers. How Lady Divine Love corrects and educates them is a delight to read. And if read in the right way appears as something of a divine comedy, what with all the others — Will, Reason, Desire, the little Church &c. — performing their roles as willing idiots not unlike all the imaginary figures of the doctors in Freud’s ‘Dream of Irma’s Injection’ or as untutored students like the eager foils in the Socratic dialogues of Plato. John of the Cross who certainly read Porete’s book even though it was banned by the Church does something similar in his book *Dark Nights of the Soul* which reads in one way as a guide to the perplexed neophyte mystic on what not to do, when to stop doing what they are doing, as they wander — as they most assuredly must— off the divine path to mystical love. To attain mystical love, John of the Cross says, requires persistence, faith, concentration, and working through resistances many times:

> after each of these periods of relief the soul suffers once again, more intensely and keenly than before. For, after that revelation just referred to has been made, and after the more outward imperfections of the soul have been purified, the fire of love once again attacks that which has yet to be consumed and purified more inwardly. The suffering of the soul now becomes more intimate, subtle and spiritual, in proportion as the fire refines away the finer, more intimate and more spiritual imperfections, and those which are most deeply rooted in its inmost parts.[1]

All of this is highly instructive and recalls Lacan's erudite diagnoses of all the confusion surrounding the desire of the analyst which is one of the key tropes of his Seminars. And like Lacan's discussions of the analyst's desire, both Margery Porete and John of the Cross show that the mystic must expect to find even greater error and resistance in the general public and clergy, who have only the most general and muddled notions of how to serve the allegorical figure of Divine Love and to travel the mystic's way.

What then is Divine Love for these advanced mystic? Margery makes plain in her amazing text that for her Divine Love is what we Lacanians would call the mystic's master signifier (S1) commanding and organizing the subject's access to the real and to the jouissance of the Other, which for her is the Holy Spirit. And both she and John of the Cross go to great lengths to show their readers that the art of the mystic is nothing other than the art of constantly resisting what they think they know (S2) and returning to the place of not knowing and nonsense where the master signifier (S1) awaits them.

[1] John of the Cross, *Dark Nights of the Soul,* (Kindle), 124.

Margery's allegorical text tells her readers something like: 'You think you know what Divine Love is and how to attain it. You say it is the Holy Spirit and you think you know how to call it to you and let it possess you. But you do not know what you are saying. The whole praxis and *savoir-faire* of mysticism requires you to forget what you think and know'. John of the Cross similarly says that the place he has come to when he has reached the aim of his mystical exercises is a place of non-knowledge and non-contradiction — exactly what Freud says the navel of the unconscious is — where he is both nothing and in the midst of plenitude, both in Being and Nothingness. The mystic Hadewijch of Anvers (1200-1248) describes being in a place of absolute freedom and a prison: 'du non-savoir." where: "Notre esprit ne peut comprendre ni nos mots traduire ce qu'il trouver en lui-même' at the end of her mystical journey.[2]

The half truth the mystic comes to always appears as an enigma or a hieroglyph — at once a plenitude of being and a place of lack. Thus when John of the Cross attains Divine Love, what he finds is that he is in 'no place,' in the midst of nothingness beyond space and time. John of the Cross finds that he has entered into and ecstatic relation with a hole in the Real — to the place of the unconscious. He concludes that when grace is finally attained, Divine Love:

> . . . absorbs the soul and engulfs it in its secret abyss, in such a way that the soul clearly sees that it has been carried far away from every creature and has become most remote therefrom; so that it considers itself as having been placed in a most profound and vast retreat, to which no human creature can attain, such as an immense desert, which nowhere has any boundary, a desert the more delectable,

[2] Hadewijch of Anvers, *La femme ardente*, poem 8, 82-3.

> pleasant, and lovely for its secrecy, vastness, and solitude. . . . And so greatly does this abyss of wisdom raise up and exalt the soul at this time, making it to penetrate the veins of the science of love, that it not only shows it how base are all properties of the creatures by comparison with this supreme knowledge and Divine feeling, but likewise it learns how base and defective, and, in some measure, how inapt, are all the terms and words which are used in this life to treat of Divine things, and how impossible it is, in any natural way or manner, however learnedly and sublimely they may be spoken of, to be able to know and perceive them as they are, save by the illumination of this mystical theology.[3]

This is also the place which Meister Eckhardt (1260-1328), struggling for proper metaphors, called: 'a depth without ground.'[4] Where, he believed, divine truth speaks *ex nihilo* from a void; saying in the **Granum Sinapis**, part VII:

> Leave place, leave time
>
> Avoid even image!
>
> Go without a way
>
> On the narrow path
>
> Then you will find the desert tracks.[5]

While Hadewijch of Brabant (1200-1248) simply urges others to go to the 'deepest essence of the soul': to 'a bottomless abyss in which God suffices to himself.'[6]

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[3] John of the Cross, *Darkness of the Soul*, 156.
[4] Ibid, 38.
[5] Meister Eckhardt quoted in McGill, **Meister Eckhardt and the Beguine Mystics**. 39.
[6] Hadewijch of Anverre, *The Complete Work*, quoted in Bernard McGinn, (ed), *Meister Eckhardt and the Beguines*,(New York, Continuum), 33.

Margery Porete will tell us that having reached eternity, her soul lies beyond words and knowing — that is: having attained the goal, what appears to her soul is a hole of nothingness that is also the plenitude of Being. Grasping for metaphors, she has the allegorical figure of the Soul declaim:

> Oh, Love, says this Soul, the meaning of what is said makes me nothing, and the nothingness of this alone has placed me into an abyss, below less than nothing without measure. And the knowledge of my nothingness, says the Soul, has given me the all, and the nothingness of this all, says the Soul, has taken litany and prayer from me, so that I pray for nothing.[7]

All the posts gone, she disappears into the void of divine nothingness and plenitude.

For the hyper-rationalist Thomas of Aquinas, who was somewhat in awe of the mystic's spirituality, these mystics: 'depart from their mind' (*alienatio mentis* or *excessus mentis*). While the 13th century c.e. bishop of Paris, William of Auvergne, who found these states perplexing and possibly heretical, distinguished between the metaphors of Divine Love found in the Benedictine monasteries, where the love poetry of David were often endlessly recounted as allegories of Divine Love, from 'mystical raptures' which he described as a form of 'love sickness'.

To translate this into Lacanese, for Margery Porete and John of the Cross, and other advanced mystics, the aim was not to command but follow the S1, whose nature can in any case not be fully known or experienced. And, as John of the Cross said above, the way to abandon the desire to command lay in performing a proper aphanisis of all the bumbling imaginary others and other confusing identifications in the ego. We can perhaps

[7] Margery Porete, *Mirror of the Simple Souls*, Chap. 51, (New York, Paulist Press), 150.

say this in a way that bridges the centuries with the formula: To serve Divine Love the mystic moves (the soul and body) from where it was (being commanded by all these confused little others) to a different place — to an other scene — so that: 'where it was, there the I shall come to be'. Thus, the hagiographer of the mystic Margret Ebner (1291 to 1351) has Margret cry out at the height of a vision that: "Such great desire and such sweet power so penetrated my heart and all of my members that I could not withdraw myself from the cross". And she goes on in this melodramatic fashion:

> Wherever I went I had a cross with me. In addition, I possessed a little book in which there was a picture of the Lord on the cross. I shoved it secretly against my bosom, open to that place, and wherever I went I pressed it to my heart with great joy and with measureless grace. When I wanted to sleep, I took the picture of the Crucified Lord in the little book and laid it under my face. Also, around my neck I wore a cross that hung down to my heart. In addition, I took a large cross whenever possible and laid it over my heart. I clung to it while lying down until I fell asleep in great grace. We had a large crucifix in choir. I had the greatest desire to kiss it and to press it close to my heart like the others. But it was too high up for me and was too large in size.[8]

To say that Divine Love is the master signifier (S1) also is to say that Divine Love becomes a metaphor of jouissance and unconscious desire raised to the height of Christian feeling; and in this sense, Divine Love becomes a veil for the coming into being of the letters of the unconscious through the signifying chains of Christian spirituality in such a way that something new comes into being for the mystic — there is a creation of

[8] Margret Ebner, (MW, 96; ME, 20– 21).

a new ‘mystical’ body; a mystical body which metaphorically raises the mystic’s jouissance to the heights of the Christian Law as it was articulated by Paul and Augustine, which says that knowing the Law allows the Christian to know sin (what we would call castration) and how to turn it towards the making of the spiritual body in-formed by the Holy Spirit.[9]

We can hear unconscious half-truths spoken through the veils of religious metaphors and metonyms when the mystic Hadewijch of Anvers perceives something ‘wonderful’ has transported her to another scene where: “. . . l’Unité qui l’absorbe, et la, une chose simple, lui es révélée qui ne peut l’être: pur et nu. . . . dans l’insaissable.”[10]

The hagiographer Thomas of Cantimpre (1201-1272) similarly describes a mystic named Christina who when seized by a vision would produce sounds which: “sounded between her throat and her breast a wondrous harmony that no other mortal human being could understand, nor could it be imitated by any artificial instrument”.

Thomas continues:

> Now she was very familiar with the nuns of St Catherine’s outside the town of Saint Trond. Sometimes while she was sitting with them, she would speak of Christ and suddenly and unexpectedly she would be ravished in the spirit and her body would whirl around like a hoop in a children’s game. She whirled around with such extreme violence that the individual limbs of her body could not be distinguished.

[9] Amy Hollywood, *Acute Melancholia*,(Kindle),60. The historian Amy Hollywood notes, after describing a number of mystical visions, that: “Stories like this support the claim by the historian Patricia Daily that during the Middle Ages ‘religion happens bodily,’ that is it concerned the play of the signifiers on, and though, the body as a site for the conversion from sin to salvation. But it also reveals the play of signifier and the passage that this makes possible from ‘spirit’ into the body and from body into ‘spirit’”.

[10] Hadewijch of Anvers, *Une femme ardente*, poem 1, (Paris, Seuil), 78.

> When she had whirled around for a long time in this manner, it seemed as if she became weakened by the violence of the rolling and her limbs grew quiet. Then she began to sing. That song of hers had only the pliancy and the tones of music. But the words of the melody, so to speak—if they could even be called words—sounded together incomprehensibly. No sound or breath came out of her mouth or nose during this time, but a harmony of the angelic voice resounded only from between her breast and throat.

That is, having completed the circuit of the drive from its source in the body around the ideal object back to the source in the body, she has made the full circuit of the moebius strip and come back to the drive in her body.

Soon moreover the voice which has taken over her spiritually and bodily moves to the nuns of St. Catherine who cannot resist its seductive appeal. Thus Thomas continues:

> While all this was happening, all her limbs were quiet and her eyes were closed as if she were sleeping. Then after a while, restored to herself somewhat, she rose up like one who was drunk—indeed she was drunk—and cried aloud, “Bring the nuns to me that together we might praise Jesus for the great liberality of his miracles.” Shortly thereafter the nuns of the convent came running from all sides (for they greatly rejoiced in Christina’s solace) and she began to sing the *Te Deum laudamus*. All the convent joined in as she finished her song. Afterwards, when she was fully restored to herself and learned from the others what she had done and how she had invited the community to praise Christ, she fled for shame and

embarrassment, and if anyone forcibly detained her, she languished with a great sorrow and declared herself stupid and foolish.[11]

The source commanding this desire for a new mystical body was the grand metaphor of the *imitatio Christi,* which was the name given to a spiritual practice that became widely popular from the eleventh century c.e. on of meditating on and forming an identification with the suffering of Jesus, and in finding in that suffering the keys to Divine Love. Thus to attain Divine Love, the medieval Christian anchorite and mystic Julian of Norwich (1342-1416) closed herself in a tiny unlit cell, deprived of everything but bread and water and a single lit candle signifying Divine Love and eternal salvation which she could see only through a slit in a wall in a manner that seems more severe than what the desert fathers, self-exiled in their Egyptian caves, practiced in the third and fourth centuries c.e.. In one vision Julian saw Jesus on the Cross:

> . . . The great drops of blood fell down from under the Garland like pellots, seeming as it had come out of the veins; and in the coming out they were brown-red, for the blood was full thick; and in the spreading-abroad they were bright-red; and when they came to the brows, then they vanished; notwithstanding, the bleeding continued till many things were seen and understood.

Similarly, in an imaginary scene recorded by her hagiographer, the mystic Mechthild of Madgeburg's (1207-1282) soul speaks to Jesus and they say to each other:

> Soul: Lord, you are constantly lovesick for me.
>
> Ah, allow me, my dear One, to pour balsalm upon you.
>
> God: Oh, One dear to my heart, where shall you find the balm?

[11]Hollywood, 60.

Soul: Oh Lord, I was going to tear the heart of my soul in two

and intended to put you into it.

There is a historical complication in this picture, however. Since the emergence of medieval mysticism in the eleventh century c.e. historically is connected to a conscious feminization of spirituality. We see this feminizing of spirituality in the rise of the cult of Mary as intercessor in the twelfth century c.e. in tandem with the rise of the *imitatio Christi*, as well as the introduction of conventions of courtly love into spirituality, as we saw above in Margery Porete's allegory of Lady Divine Love, and the sermons on 'Jesus as mother' given by Benedict and then repeated by other Benedictines, Franciscans, and Dominican in the thirteenth century c.e.,[12] where an imaginarily transposition occurs from the complex 'Son-Father' which was more prevalent in the later Roman era to the complex 'Son-Mother' in the Middle Ages. This transformation of complexes suggests a transposition in the imaginary effects of the Oedipal complex whereby the imaginary scene shifts from the father's having the phallus and the son gaining it only by losing it to a modified fundamental phantasy were the mother loses the phallus by giving it to the son. It is now Jesus as mother who castrates herself in a supreme act of love so that the son (here humankind) can be redeemed and regain possession of the phallus. An act the mystics then spiritually repeat on their own body metonymically through the practice of *imitatio Christi*, and which allows them to lose 'it 'and then regain the phallus qua mystical body in a gesture of Divine Love.

But things are not so simple as this suggests, as the fundamental phantasies and the sexuation of the mystics were probably not so Oedipal as all that. Instead, this

[12] Caroline Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the Middle Ages*, (Berkeley: The University of California Press), 1982.

modified Oedipal complex was probably taken 'ready at hand' from the Church as a screen veiling more fundamental phantasies whose source lies in the mystic's female sexuation (about which more below). But living in a Christian world, the immediate articulation of a sexuation that need not depend on the phallus and castration would be inconceivable; except that it was conceived of as a possibility. But not by the mystics themselves, but the inquisitors who fantasized that there were people in the world who were heretics and for whom the bar of original sin was imagined to be lifted.[13]

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We do not have to imagine that such scenes delighted Lacan, as he tells us so on multiple occasions, and most emphatically in Seminar XX *(Encore*) (1972-3)[14] when he links the jouissance of the mystics to the logic of female sexuation and advices his audience to go out and read Hadewijch of Anvers and other mystics who, he assures them, if read in a certain way, will provide them with some of the best things to read. He even goes on to say in that seminar that when they collect their list of readings on the mystics they should include his own *Ecrits.* Place it, he tells them, "right at the bottom of the page. . . . *the Ecrits of Jacques Lacan*, because they are of the same order." A hyperbole to be sure. Lacan was no Christian and no mystic. But he did say in *Television: a challenge to the establishment* (1974) that the analyst should be a kind of 'analytic saint' in his or her practice for the subject of science. But he meant by that that the analyst must 'play dead' or 'play the hand of the dummy' for the analysand he treated. By the end of the decade, however, he was saying something else: that the analysis must be

[13] R. I. Moore, *The War on Heresies*, (London: Profile Books), 2012. The groups who fell under this suspicion included some mystics, the Free Spirits, and the spiritual leaders of the Bogomils and Cathars.
[14] Lacan, *Seminar XX (*New York, Norton Books & Co.).

something akin to the work of art, an act of creation of new signifiers. Nevertheless, I think I have shown above why Lacan would have been drawn at certain times to these amazing figures who, within the limitation of Christian discourse, managed to find a way to let something of the unconscious speak 'between the lines' of Christian discourse and, in that manner, vent some of the conflicts in the unconscious and so allow some of the metonymic and metaphoric clashes about life and death and between the real and the semblants to emerge both consciously and through bodily jouissance.

For all the reasons we have been speaking about, Lacan did admire the mystics in the same way that he admired the troubadours who were their contemporaries and fictional creatures like Antigone, who let themselves be duped to some extent behind the backs of the dominant discourse of their age. Let us survey some of the things Lacan said spread about mysticism. There is of course his comments in *Television* and Seminar XX that I alluded to above. But Lacan's first comments on mysticism in the seminars appears in Seminar V (1957-58). And the last in seminar XXIV (1977-1979), in the seminar with the untranslatable, punning title of *L'INSU QUE SAIT DE L'UNE BEVUE S'AILE A MOURRE*. That is, he refers to mystics — to saint Teresa, Hadewijch of Brabant, Angelus Silesius, John of the Cross, and Saint Paul — for twenty-one years in his seminars on and off.

There is however a great divide separating the mystic and the *parletre*. As the mystic always sought to submit desire to an Other that was, in not wholly knowable, without out any lack. And who desired simply to bring the divided subject of the mystic into his full Being, as much as that was possible to a living creature. While for Lacan the *parletre*, the being speaking from the place of the unconscious, realizes that there is no

Other of the Other, that we are condemned by language to be desiring subjects whose desire has not end. One can never refind the object of primary repression, which itself is imaginary, except in an imaginary way because language is constantly open and able to create new signifiers and desires through the mechanisms of metonymy and metaphor. No object — even one that satisfies our needs and fulfills our demand for love — can satisfy desire. The best one can do, therefore, is to find sense in nonsense. Using word play to produce jouissance and name our 'desire to desire' and so find a: 'refuge against the traumatic truth of the unconscious'.[15] Perhaps this allows us to better understand what Lacan was saying in Seminar VI (1958-1959) when he says on March 6 of 1959 that: 'in these corners which are called mysticism, there is well inscribed as such the satisfaction of desire in the form of mysteries . . . represented for the believer in the tangible ladder of sufficiently vibrant terms like that of incarnation or redemption.'[16]

The ladder metaphor is interesting, and can be read in a two ways. And if read through the moebius topology, it can mean that in thinking she ascends a spiritual ladder to God, the mystic lets herself be duped. As she climbs the ladder of Christian signifiers to her salvation, she also is traveling along the surface of the moebius strip; and, in thinking she is climbing upwards out of the hole of her existence, she reaches the hole in the real again where she experiences new signifiers: "pushed elsewhere. . . . where the real itself is'.[17] In what other way can we understand what Lacan means in Seminar 18 of January 20, 1971 when he says that: 'What is not sayable, is precisely what is mystical'?

[15] Patrick Valas, (Facebook, 17 October, 2015).
[16] Eric Porge, *Jacques Lacan, un psychoanalyste,* (Paris, Eres). 235. This receiving the message in an inverted form is also what transitivism does, as, for example, when a baby falls and has no reaction until he sees his mother go 'ouch!'. That is he receives his message from the Other in an inverted form (that is, as her fantasy of what is going on in the baby).
[17] Lacan, *Seminar XXI*, 18 February 1973.

One last question remains to be examined: The question of what kind of jouissance are we talking about. For a long time Lacan agreed with Freud that there is only phallic jouissance defined by the impasse of castration. As such, in the games of love there was only the subject who *has* the phallus from the other and parades it around for everyone to admire and those who *are* the phallus for the others and who masquerades it, showing and veiling it to seduce the other to want to have it. Then, starting in Seminars XVIII and XIX and culminating in Seminar XX, Lacan criticizes this view; saying that there is another non-phallic jouissance whose logic is based on the fact that the subject enjoys without need of having the phallus or being the phallus for the others. For those who could enjoy this way, who do not have to veil jouissance in the phallic game, jouissance was more immediate and singular. And Lacan said it is this jouissance that determines how the best analysts and mystics enjoy.[18] In this sense, the ideal which the mystic aims at is, again, not what she imagines it to be — but emerges because she knows how to enjoy in this other way Lacan named female sexuation.

Can we say then that the ideal functions here as a *sinthome,* as the fourth ring that allows the Real, Imaginary, and Symbolic to hold together, remembering that the *sinthome* does not replace the symptom but allow it to work? I would say: yes! In this regard, we should remember that the *sinthome* is connected by Lacan to Saint Thomas (*sinthome)* for whom the fourth ring was 'God.' 'What does the Other desire of me (or want from me), 'asks the mystic?[19] 'Where is this Other's desire when it is somewhere

[18] Lacan, ''God and the Jouissance of ~~The~~ Woman – A Love Letter.' Lacan, November 21, 1972, *Seminar XX*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Co.). See also Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose (eds): *Feminine sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the école freudienne* (New York, Norton Books & Co.),137-148; 149-161.
[19] Lacan, *Seminar XI*, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Co.)

else'? That is Augustine; and it also is what lies at the base of the mystic's question. As well as: 'what must I do to enter into the Other's desire'? And this too was probably why Lacan was so interested in them.

We might suspect that many mystics were psychotics. And some mystics may have been like this. But many were not. We would be wise to recall that psychosis emerges when there is an early failure of the symbolic order to take root; and, in place of a social link, the psychotic has to build up a delusional reality out of their own signifiers. Mysticism however is not like that. As we have seen, the mystics were capable of forming social links and were adept users of the symbolic to help them explain to others what they could not experience without much trouble. One may be struck by the abundance of paranoia in their delusional realities and question their dependency on certainties; but many people do much the same without being psychotic; and everyone enters such realities in their dreams. The mystics then were those who, in an era before modern *science,* make a *sinthome* of their religion.

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