On Mysticism

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SIMON CRITCHLEY

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Plague Bill

Once upon a time, there was a plague. Fearing disease and death, people led a hermit-like existence, distanced from each other in their domestic cells, advancing masked against a contaminated and untrustworthy reality defined by pestilence, pain, and suffering. They were suddenly aware of living in a world of contagion, and possibly being contagious themselves. They followed a practice that the ancients called anachoreisis*, a retreat from the world, a withdrawal into solitude.*

Some of them, the richer ones, fled their cities for the apparent safety of the countryside. The poorer ones stayed put, hoping for the best while fearing the worst. Cut off from their compulsory commutes and their mind-numbing round of distraction from distraction by distraction, they heard silence, or something close to it, sometimes punctuated by birdsong. Whether they liked it or not, they all became anchorites or anchoresses. They became unwitting mystics.

There was a strange asceticism to the world of isolation and disease experienced by these people, which opened them up to extreme experiences of doubt, dereliction, dreams, hypochondria, and hallucination. Many of them felt a desperate desire for the touch of love, for a connection with something or someone outside or larger than the self, however that might be understood, possibly even as something divine.

Their intense and confused feelings seemed to have echoes with practices and beliefs considered outdated, superstitious, irrational and, frankly, embarrassing. It was as if something archaic – elemental, primeval, and long dead – awakened in the plague. Some of them began to wonder about the nature of these archaic feelings and how they might understand the mysticism that had revived, like some unbidden ghost.

The Abdication of Ecstasy

Why mysticism? Evelyn Underhill, a fascinating and slightly forgotten figure, who did so much to popularize mysticism in the early twentieth century, defines it as "experience in its most intense form." My offer to the reader in this book is simple: wouldn't you like to have a taste of this intensity? Wouldn't you like to be lifted up and out of yourself into a sheer feeling of aliveness? If so, it might be well worthwhile trying to learn what is meant by mysticism and how it can shift, elevate, and deepen the sense of our lives.

Mysticism is not primarily a theoretical issue. It is not just a question of an intellectual belief in the existence of God as some kind of metaphysical postulate which can be affirmed or disputed. Rather, mysticism is existential and practical. It is – and this can serve as a rough and ready definition – the cultivation of practices which allow you to free yourself of your standard habits, your usual fancies and imaginings and see what is there and stand with what is there *ecstatically*.

This is a book about trying to get outside oneself, to lose oneself, while knowing that the self is not something that can ever be fully lost. But one can try. What I am calling ecstasy is a way of surpassing the self, of being held out there outside the confines of your head and the feeling of delight, pleasure or glee that accompanies that

experience. It is something that perhaps we knew better in childhood, especially in the experience of play, but that we have abdicated in adolescence and our overlong adultescence. Adulthood is the abdication of ecstasy. We long to return to that childlike state, but we fail because we get too caught up in ourselves. We are ensnared by ourselves. We are riveted to ourselves. We're too stuck on us.

But there are areas of human experience that allow us to push outside the sticky self towards something larger, something vaster, something full of vibrancy and maybe a sheer, mad joy at the fact of life and the world. This pushing outside is what religious practice at its best does. It is what art at its noblest can open in us. It is what poetry can point us towards. It is also what can (if we are lucky) take place in our sexual lives and arguably what drives the desire for intoxication, of whatever kind. We can think of such experiences as forms of *surrender.* One gives up all desire for control, for dominion over oneself and others, and freely submits.

In such moments, and they are instances of extraordinary vulnerability and exposure, the self fades away into a larger and more capacious environment or space for being. Such surrender takes place particularly powerfully in the experience of music. Mysticism is about evoking and opening us up to such experiences, limitless experiences of aliveness and intensity.

Mysticism is a way of describing an existential ecstasy that is outside and more than the conscious self. It is about *releasement* and *detachment*, what it might mean to lead a released existence, a fluid openness, a cleared looseness, a limpid intensity, where both the concepts of mind and world or the soul and God dissolve into something altogether stranger and yet simpler: an experience of freedom which is not freedom of the will, but freedom from the will.

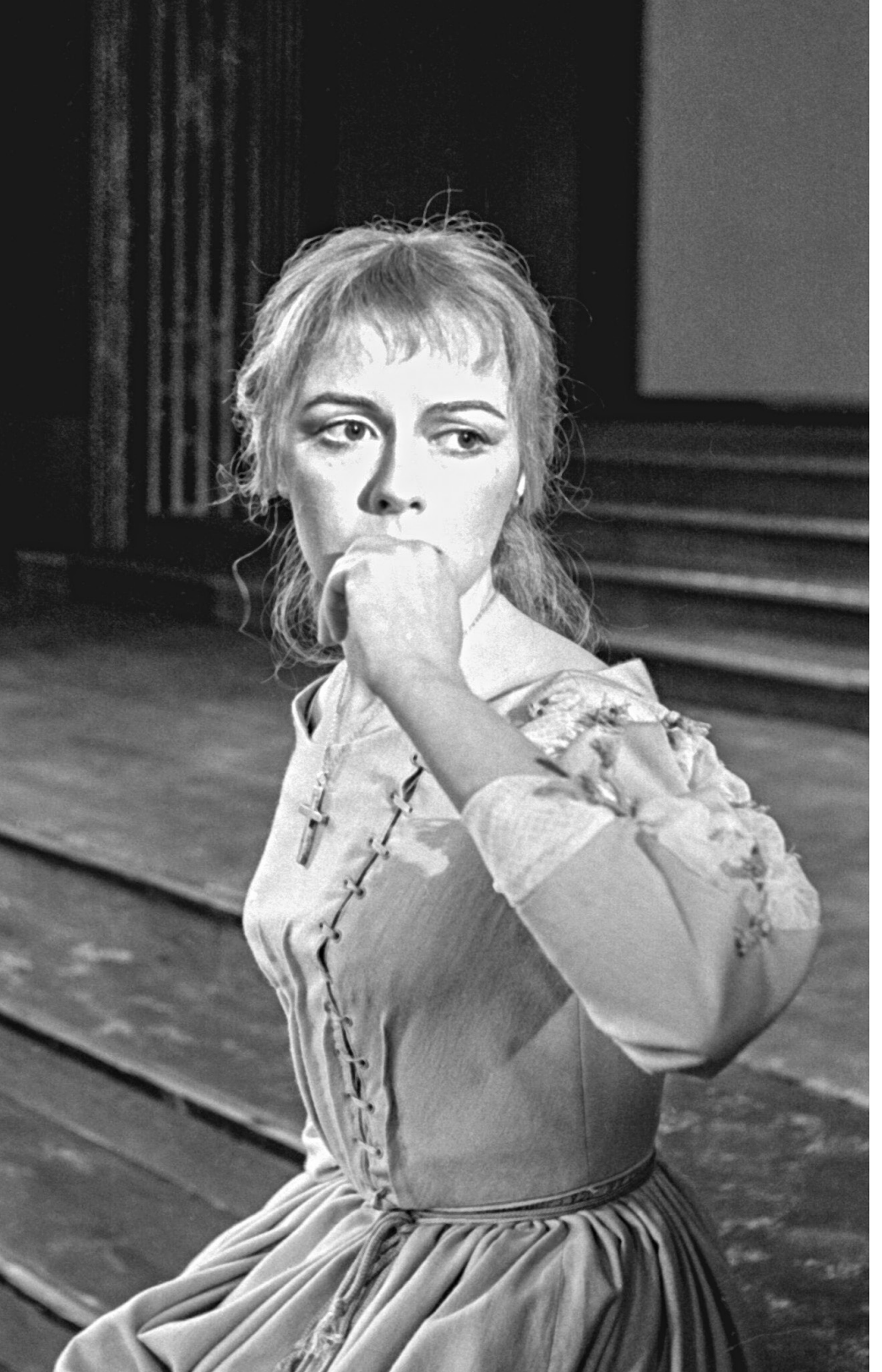
Breath is the original form of "spirit." The philosopher's "I think, therefore I am," might be more properly conceived as "I breathe and thus it is." Consciousness is a limited and unhelpfully restricted and dualistic way of conceiving what William James calls "the stream of life," a stream that embraces both the breath of our thoughts and the vast, slow-breathing cosmos that enfolds us.

Mysticism is about the possibility of ecstatic life. For the last couple of centuries, with obvious exceptions like Nietzsche and, more recently, Georges Bataille, philosophy has more or less successfully inoculated itself against the kind of experiences of ecstasy we find in the mystics. It is time to reintroduce the virus.

Ecstasy is what it feels like to be alive when we push away the sadness that clings to us. And sadness does cling to us. Reality presses in on us from all sides with a relentless force, a violence, which drains our energy and dissipates our capacity for belief and for joy. The world deafens us with its noise; our eyes sting from the ever-enlarging incoherence of information and disinformation and the constant presence of war. We all feel, we all live, within the poverty of contemporary experience. This is a leaden time, a heavy time, a time of dearth. As a result, we feel miserable, anxious, wretched, bored.

Against Hamlet, away with melancholy

So, again, why mysticism? To give us some relief from misery, from melancholy, from heaviness of soul, from the slough of despond, from mental leadenness. I begin from the feeling (to call it certainty would be too much) that we're all lost, we're all lonely, we all find it difficult to believe in anything, to commit to anything, to live in a way that feels truly alive. In short, we inhabit a world of woe.



Doubt tears away at us like rats gnawing under the floorboards in the house of being. It is like an existential eczema that we scratch at under our clothes. And this is not intellectual doubt. It is not the cool, skeptical, rational doubt of the philosopher in the study. It is visceral, existential doubt that leaves us feeling derelict and abandoned. This can be a doubt of others and the benevolence of their intentions, a doubt in the institutions on which we rely for our safety and well-being. And, most of all, the self-doubt that flows from the cruelty of self-regard and leads us ultimately to the question of whether to be or not to be. Doubt kindles our suspicious intelligence and at the same time extinguishes our capacity for love.

Take Hamlet, and for argument's sake let's say he's the most intelligent person we could ever imagine meeting or even being. He is a creature of doubt where all the grounds for certainty in the world and in himself have evaporated in verbal and physical violence, fear, paranoia, and murderous crime. Hamlet is the anti-mystic *par excellence*, who seeks to control everything with his solitary cascades of reasoning, with words, words, words. With his doubt, Hamlet kills in himself all love: for Ophelia, for his mother, for the world, and for himself. Man delights not him, no nor woman neither. And we, most Hamlet-like, spin downwards into a melancholy that sits in brood on us like an all-pervading toxic cloud. We find the world to be a sterile promontory, an unweeded garden full of things dead, rank, and rotting.

All is always woe, seen in a certain reassuring twilight. Misery never lets you down. Melancholy is a boon companion, reliable in how regularly it shows up in our lives. Nothing is more reassuring than giving in to our own heaviness, the weight of our being that drags us down and from which there seems to be no escape. As Hamlet's endlessly chattering soliloquies attest, there is even a

perverse consolation in feeling tragically riveted to oneself. It is often what passes in our culture for being smart, a vastly overrated quality in my opinion.

This book tries to describe a countermovement. A movement not from doubt to lovelessness, but from dereliction to delight, from woe to weal. Pushing ourselves aside, ascending above and outside ourselves, we will try to find something else, some kind of joy, some kind of liberation and elevation, a sense that, despite everything, all shall be well.

All shall be well

How can one say that all shall be well? This is the great proposition of the heroine of this book, the English medieval mystic Julian of Norwich (circa 1342–1416), with whom we shall spend a good amount of time. But isn't this crazy? How might all be well in a world of woe? How might we say and think and indeed live the idea that all is well?

Now, Julian knew woe. She knew sickness to the bone, mortal sickness, the sickness unto death. She even wished for and welcomed that sickness. And yet she also pushed against it and sought to push herself aside. It is this pushing aside that we will track carefully in this book under the name of what Simone Weil calls *decreation*. This is an undoing of the creature in us which seeks to open us to what precedes the self. This is how Julian thinks of the divine. Her intensely affective relation to Christ is lived out as a stripping away of the self. The power of Julian's deeply innovative, experiential theology is to allow a healing tonic against melancholy, especially philosophical melancholy and Hamletized self-loathing.

We have too much self. We are too full of ourselves. We always have too much us in us. Julian wants us to push ourselves aside and see that although we are in so much pain, woe, and unrest, we can be at great rest if we have patience, if we wait, if we attend to that which exceeds us and our creaturely strivings. This excess is the experience of ecstatic love. And this is a much harder lesson than misery. It requires giving ourselves up, as much as possible, giving ourselves over to that which is larger than the self, outside the self: a pliable ground of love that is prior to the will.

If we cleave to that clearing of love, if we persist with it with some small quota of the kind of kindness, modesty, and sobriety that Julian shows, then all may be well. Furthermore, in a key adverb that Julian frequently repeats, this movement from woe to well might happen *suddenly*. In the twinkling of an eye, we might be lifted up, rescued, healed.

Fine, you might say, as long as you believe in God, as Julian does. And perhaps that is right. Perhaps the vision of love provided by Julian is easier to understand if it is shaped by a divinity. Yet, what I will try and show in this book is how mysticism lives on as aesthetic experience, in the world of enchantment opened in art, poetry and – especially – music.

We are the music

For T. S. Eliot, the writing of poetry is an intolerable struggle with words and meanings, where words won't match with meanings and meanings belie the words that seek to express them. Words slide, meanings slide. But the aim of his poetry is to point towards a stillness, a still point in the turning world, an experience of incarnation

where time and timelessness intersect. This point, which is only expressible in the language of negation, antithesis, and paradox that Eliot borrows from mysticism, lies outside words and therefore outside poetry. It is a condition which is closer to music, a music which is fire and life and dance.

So I end the book with music, though I listened to music throughout its writing. We know that the modern world is a violently disenchanted swirl shaped by the speculative flux of money that presses in on all sides. Yet, when we listen to the music that we love, the world seems reanimated, bursting with sense, utterly alive. The only proof of animism I know is music. When we listen, it is as if the world falls under the spell of a kind of natural magic. In music, the cosmos feels divinely infused.

By "music" here, I simply mean the music that you love, popular music, unpopular music, the music that made you feel most alive when you first heard it and which you cherish for a lifetime. And there is more sweet music we can hear if we keep our ears open, music which allows access to many more lifetimes than we have at our disposal. Music can grip us with the energy of a religious conversion. Once it is heard, one never experiences the world in quite the same way.

There is a mysticism in the experience of music, a godless mysticism if you like, which operates in the realm of the senses and which resonates within us and beyond us. Sensate ecstasy. My intuition – it is nothing more than that – is that music, common, shared, everyday music, low or high or somewhere in between, is able, at its best, to describe how we feel and to allow us to feel something more.

Music is able to summon feeling, which can be a joy, but can also be a background fear, sadness or yearning, things deeper than cognition or concepts or consciousness. We might think of this as

participation in what Julian calls "kindly substance," an empathy which is beyond words but perhaps their precondition. Music – and this is its miracle, which is why life without music would be a mistake, as Nietzsche insisted – can somehow hold that emotion and hold us there for that moment. And, as Eliot writes, we are the music for as long as the music lasts.

Such music might be grand and public. It might be staged and operatic. It might be formal and constrained. It might be improvised and loose. It might involve wild collective dancing. It might be just you dancing your legs down to the knees alone in your bedroom. Or it might be quieter, more subtle, implicit, and quotidian, like listening to music at home on your own or with someone you love. It might be listening to birdsong, or the hum of traffic. The point is that in all these instances music is devotional practice, complete with its saints, its rituals, its communions, its pilgrimages, and its holy relics. Perhaps the closest we get to feeling and communicating with an animated universe is in the experience of music.

It is impossible to be an atheist when listening to the music that one loves.

What are writers for?

The pact that I would like to make with the reader of this book is to see if we can transform our misery, woe, and doubt with a wealth of words and sounds that might permit us to push back against the violent pressure of reality and allow a richness of life and a possible transfiguration of self and world. This is the possibility of ecstasy not as an altered state, but as this state intensified, elevated, deepened, released.

From the outside, a released existence might look exactly like our ordinary, everyday life. Nothing would change. And yet everything would change. If thinking could be detached and freed from the tyranny of the will and its endless strivings, then we would finally be open to that space where we live, move and have our being: the world.

It is worth asking, I think, why does one write? Is it simply some desire for minor notoriety or climbing onto some new rung on the academic ladder? Such ambitions – ludicrous and narcissistic as they are – cannot be excluded. George Orwell is right when he says that "all writers are vain, selfish and lazy" and "writing a book is a horrible, exhausting struggle." But writing's grounding wish lies elsewhere.

To write is to aspire towards, even to hope for, the mystery of a clearing that is other than the self, the vast windowless sunlit room of living experience. To write is to participate in the struggle to efface oneself. The problem is that the self keeps getting in the way. We look for a clearing, but as we go through dense woods and undergrowth, we keep getting snagged in branches, smeared with dirt, and dragged back into the darkening landscape of doubt, the self-doubt that haunts and hunts the writer at every step.

This is why writers need to employ subterfuge, to trick themselves into being someone or something other than themselves, ventriloquizing other voices, other possibilities of self, other affluences of things, birds, beasts, and whole environments. We will see this struggle play itself out in various voices in this book, especially in the discussions of the American writer Annie Dillard, and by following the twisting thought-lines that shape T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*.

For Dillard, the only aspiration of the artist is to light up the world. "When the candle is burning," she writes, "who looks at the wick?" The "wick" here is the artist, whose only purpose is to burst

into flame, to produce illumination. When the candle goes out, no one needs it. To write is to try and set yourself on fire, to seek to immolate yourself. The name, the identity, the interiority, the subjectivity of the writer or the artist is of absolutely no interest. One writes without a face. As Dillard puts it, in her wonderfully extreme way, either a writer's life goes up in flames in the work, or it does not. And if it does not, then the work is a failure. But if it does burst into fire, then it is the flame that we look at. The work and not the wick. The art and not the artist.

To entertain this line of thought is to see that art can allow us to regain the ecstasy we have abdicated. To write is to get oneself out of the way as much as possible, in order to see the things themselves and not just our ideas about things, our own reflection staring back at us. It is to allow the possibility that in the experience of art there is an experience of the sacred where things come alive and we come alive in the process of observing, attending, watching, listening, or reading.

This may sound too lofty, grandiloquent, or just plain naive. I hope not. Without wrapping myself up in self-protective, Hamlet-like irony, I want to affirm that the sensory, corporeal experiences available in poetry, prose, and music are ways of translating and extending mystical practice, all the way to ecstasy, transport, and vision.

At such ecstatic moments, for as long as they last – and they can and must be continually repeated, renewed, and re-enacted on the stage of our lives – we are freed from the prison of melancholy and doubt. We are at peace and at rest. Suddenly.

This book will be a journey towards this moment of suddenness, the event of ecstasy. I would like to invite the reader to undertake it with me. There is no point going there alone.

Brief Lives of Sixteen Mystics

WHAT FOLLOWS is a short inventory which can serve as an introduction to the mystics who are either discussed in detail in the book or important to it. They are not all the mystics. They are not even all the important medieval Christian mystics. But they are *my* mystics.

Dionysius (circa 500)

> *The mysteries of theology are veiled in the dazzling obscurity of the secret silence, outshining all brilliance with the intensity of their darkness.*

- Originator of apophatic or negative theology
- His works exerted a huge influence, especially in the Middle Ages
- He did not exist

In his tireless perambulations through the power centers of the Greco-Roman world, Saint Paul had little success with the philosophically smart, stiff-necked Athenians. According to the notoriously unreliable fiction called Acts of the Apostles, Paul's teaching on the Resurrection met with bewilderment. Only two persons are

named as becoming followers of Christ: a woman called Damaris and a man called Dionysius. What better way to construct an elaborate literary conceit than to pretend that the same Dionysius wrote a series of treatises which preceded those of great thinkers like Plotinus (circa 204/5–70) and Proclus (412–485). The truth is that "Dionysius," or the "Pseudo-Dionysius," is the name put on a series of texts that constitute a forgery of great genius, what Fernando Pessoa would have called a "heteronym." In the writing of Dionysius, the dazzling brilliance of the Neo-Platonism of late antiquity merges with Christianity and becomes properly mystical for the first time.

Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153)

> *Love suffices in itself; it pleases in itself and for its own sake. It is its own merit and reward. Love does not need any cause beyond itself, nor any fruit – its fruit is its use. I love because I love; I love so that I may love. Love is a great thing. If it reverts to its own principle, if it returns to its origin, if it flows back into its source, it always draws from it the power to flow forth continuously.*

- The immensely influential, reforming, driving force behind the rise of the Cistercian Order, which went on to exert considerable political power
- Canonized twenty-one years after his death
- The patron saint of Burgundy, beekeepers, candlemakers, and Gibraltar

Bernard of Clairvaux wrote eighty-six sermons on the Song of Songs over the course of almost twenty years. Taking his time, he only reached verse 4 of chapter 3. He used a metaphor of three places to

sketch an itinerary through three levels of reading the biblical text: the garden is the historical meaning, the storerooms the moral teachings, and finally the bedroom, which represents divine contemplation – the place where the lovers meet in mystical union. Saint Bernard made affective experience authoritative through scriptural interpretation. This opened the door to the flood of visions and raptures in female and male medieval mysticism.

Christina of Markyate (circa 1096–1155)

> *Thy handmaid Christina was pre-eminent, who the nearer she approached Thee in true love, the more clearly was she able to penetrate the hidden things of Thy wisdom with her pure heart.*

- Escaped a forced marriage cross-dressed as a man and became an anchoress
- Hertfordshire's finest mystic

The Life of Christina of Markyate was written by a monk at Saint Albans Abbey in the twelfth century. It is a wonderfully vivid and detailed account of her life and religious calling. Christina took her vows at Saint Albans in 1131 and became Prioress of Markyate Priory after she founded a small community of nuns in 1145. She was clearly a mystic of deep conviction, a highly competent institutional organizer and nobody's fool. Her family was ruthless, ambitious, and nasty. She had to refuse the rapacious sexual advances of her aunt's lover, Bishop Ranulf Flambard, the powerful Bishop of Durham. As revenge, she was forced into marriage with a young nobleman called Beorhtred. After refusing his repeated attempts to consummate the union, she escaped dressed as a man and went into hiding

under the protection of Roger, a hermit whose cell was in Markyate, Hertfordshire (not far from where I grew up). After two years, her marriage was formally annulled by the Archbishop of York and she was able to come out of hiding. She changed her name from Theodora to Christina and became a beloved prioress.

Christina the Astonishing (1150–1224)

Oh, Christ, what are you doing to me? Why do you torment me like this?

- A spiritual athlete, noted for the extremity of her devotions
- A beguine, from the same diocese of Liège in modern-day Belgium as the important mystics Mary of Oignies (1177–1213) and Elizabeth of Spalbeek (1248–1316)
- Subject of the Nick Cave song, "Christina the Astonishing"

At her own funeral mass at the age of twenty-one, Christina suddenly revived. Her body rose into the air and levitated to the ceiling until the mass was over. Christina felt such loathing for humanity that she fled into the wilderness and lived from milk from her own breasts. She threw herself into burning-hot ovens, ate only garbage and immersed herself in River Meuse while it was frozen. For two days, she even hanged herself from the gallows. She was astonishing.

Hadewijch of Antwerp (1200–1260)

I desired to consummate my Lover completely and to confess and to savour to the fullest extent – to fulfil his humanity blissfully

> *with mine and to experience mine therein, and to be strong and perfect so that I in turn would satisfy him perfectly: to be purely and exclusively and completely virtuous in every virtue. And to that end, I wished, inside me, that he would satisfy me with his Godhead in one spirit and he be all he is without restraint.*

- Writer of exquisite visions, poems, and songs about love *(Minne)*
- Named as one of the "Four Female Evangelists," along with Angela of Foligno, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and Marguerite Porete

While much of Hadewijch's life remains a total mystery, it is thought that she came from a noble family and was highly educated. Her writings demonstrate an intimate knowledge of literature, poetry, and theological treatises written in several languages, including Latin and French. She quoted freely from scripture and Saint Augustine and wrote poetry modelled on the songs of the French troubadours, as well as letters of spiritual counsel to other beguines. (Beguines were women who led a semi-enclosed religious life and enjoyed relative freedom. Their male counterparts were called beghards, from which the word *beggar* is thought to derive.) Hadewijch's *Book of Visions*, written in Middle Dutch, is one of the earliest collections of visionary narratives. As with other beguines and women mystics of the thirteenth century, much of her devotion focuses on the Eucharist, especially on the physical reception of Christ. Her account entangles Eucharistic visions with erotic encounters with Jesus, ending in a deep union "without distinction."

Mechthild of Magdeburg (circa 1208–1282)

The voice of the Father sings: "I am an overflowing spring that no one can block," and the Son continues, "I am constantly recurring richness that no one can ever contain except the boundlessness that always flowed out and shall ever flow from God." The Holy spirit hymns, "I am an insuperable power of truth," before the whole Trinity concludes: "I am so strong in my undividedness that no one can ever divide me or shatter me in all my eternity."

- First visited by the Holy Spirit at the age of twelve
- Her vivid accounts of the afterworld are thought to have influenced Dante's *Divine Comedy* and his character, Matelda

After Mechthild received her first vision from the Holy Spirit at just twelve years old, she left her home and moved in with a community of beguines where she spent most of her life. At first, and for almost thirty years, she did not speak of her experiences. Around the age of forty, under the guidance of Dominican friars, she began recording her revelations. Over the next several years, she collected these revelations into seven books of the compendium she called *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*. Written in the Low German of northern Germany, her original text did not survive. Happily, the Latin and Middle High German translations did.

Angela of Foligno (circa 1250–1309)

As what I have spoken of withdraws and stays with me, I see the God-man. He draws my soul with great gentleness and he sometimes says to me: "You are I and I am you." I see, then, those

eyes and that face so gracious and attractive as he leans to embrace me. In short, what proceeds from those eyes and that face is what I said that I saw in that previous darkness which comes from within, and which delights me so that I can say nothing about it. When I am in the God-man my soul is alive.

- Her complex mystical itinerary has nineteen initial steps and seven supplementary steps which lead a bodily identity with Christ
- Canonized by Pope Francis in 2013, she is the patron saint of "those afflicted by sexual temptation" and widows
- Her final words, which she repeated several times, were "Oh unknown nothingness"

Born into the spiritual cauldron of Umbria in Italy in the decades after Saint Francis's radical teaching on the primacy of the poor and the abolition of private property, Angela is the most wonderfully extreme of mystics. She appears to have led a conventional bourgeois life until – after the death of her mother, husband, and several sons in quick succession – she takes a vow of chastity and burns in a fire of desire, beset with demons. Although she was illiterate and spoke a local, Umbrian dialect, *The Book of the Blessed Angela of Foligno* was recorded and transcribed by Brother Arnaldo of the Friars Minor. It is fair to say that Arnaldo and Angela had a complex relationship, and he seems to have been sometimes embarrassed by the extremity of her actions. The book is divided into two parts: "The Memorial," which tells the story of her conversion, penance, and the stages of her spiritual journey, and "The Instructions," including letters addressed to her disciples. Her experiences have a terrifying, violent intensity. She spends an awful lot of time screaming. Where

Dionysius is the progenitor of a theology of darkness and negation, Angela practices a *corporeal apophaticism*, literally tearing away at herself to bring about a bodily darkness. To our eyes, reading Angela is like watching a horror movie. Her visions culminate in her crawling into the darkness of the side wound of Christ.

Marguerite Porete (1250–1310)

> *One must crush oneself, hacking and hewing away at oneself to widen the place in which Love will want to be.*

- Considered one of the most important figures in the so-called heresy of the Free Spirit
- Referred to as a *pseudo-mulier*, literally a "fake woman"
- The first known case of an inquisitorial procedure ending with the burning of both a book and the accused author

Marguerite Porete's *The Mirror of Simple and Annihilated Souls* was burned twice as a warning before she was burned alive along with it at the Place de Grève in Paris. It is written as a dialogue in the style of Boethius between the main characters of Reason, Love, and the Soul. There are also influences from the French tradition of courtly love and romance. Porete's mixture of prose and poetry runs across 140 chapters, the longest of which contains her seven-stage itinerary, of which only the fourth stage is union with God, and the seventh can be realized only after death. Porete stands apart from most medieval mystics in that she does not appeal to visionary experience, nor does she pay much attention to the physicality of Christ. She also does not give much credence to the Scriptures, insisting that Love's teachings surpass the word of both the "Holy Church" and the

"Lesser Church" of reason. In trial documents, she was declared to be "stubborn, contumacious, and rebellious" for continually refusing to recant her views. Despite persistent efforts to extinguish her words, the original French manuscript was rediscovered in 1946 by Dr. Romana Guarnieri. It now survives in six versions in four languages and thirteen manuscripts. Anne Carson wrote the libretto for an opera about Porete.

Meister Eckhart (1260–1328)

> *I pray God to rid me of God, for my essential being is above God insofar as we comprehend God as the principle of creatures. If I myself were not, God would not be either. That God is God, of this I am a cause. If I were not, God would not be God. There is, however, no need to understand this. For in this breakthrough it is bestowed upon me that I and God are one.*

- His memory was publicly damned by the pope in 1329, a year after his death
- One of only two men to hold the post of Master of Theology at University of Paris on two occasions. The other was Saint Thomas Aquinas
- A significant influence on German philosophers like Hegel and Heidegger

It is not just the content of Eckhart's radical teaching of releasement and detachment that got him into trouble with his local archbishop and then, subsequently, Pope John XXII. It was also his location in the Rhineland cities of Cologne and Strasbourg, where the fear of heresy was particularly strong in the early decades of the fourteenth

century. This was especially connected to the liberation theology of the Free Spirit where the poor – as Christ had repeatedly insisted – threatened to inherit the earth. The Catholic hierarchy smelled trouble. But it is also the form of Eckhart's preaching that was feared. He spoke to the uneducated in their own language – German – and his enigmatic message was immediately immensely popular. His direct influence can be felt in two other, widely read, radical German Dominicans: John Tauler (1300–1361) and Henry Suso. Was Eckhart a heretic? He rebuts matters simply: "I am able to be in error, but I cannot be a heretic, for the first belongs to the intellect, and the second to the will."

Henry Suso (circa 1295–1366)

> *He had a taste for fruit, but God did not want to allow this. Large pieces of fruit he divided into four parts. Three parts he ate in the name of the Holy Trinity, the fourth part in the love with which the heavenly Mother gave her tender child Jesus an apple to eat.*

- Unusually, the name Suso is a matronymic, not a patronymic
- Identifies himself and Christ as feminine

The Latin edition of Suso's *The Clock of Wisdom* seems to date from 1335 and was hugely popular. More copies of the manuscript survive than of any other book of medieval spirituality, apart from Thomas à Kempis's *Imitation of Christ.* But it is the writings in Middle High German which are most astonishing and original. *The Life of the Servant* is the most accessible of Suso's German writings. It is a dazzling experiment in auto-hagiography. The book was written by Suso's "spiritual daughter," his disciple and novice, Elsbeth Stagel. With

Suso, we experience an inversion of the standard female/male, mystic/scribe relationship. Everything flows. Everything is malleable.

Richard Rolle (circa 1300–1349)

> *I felt within me a merry and unknown heat . . . I was expert it was not from a creature but from my Maker, as it grew hotter and more glad.*

- Dropped out of graduate studies at Oxford to become "the romantic and impassioned hermit" (as Evelyn Underhill calls him)
- Prolific and widely read writer in Latin and Middle English

Richard Hermit of Hampole (although he was more of a freelance, wandering hermit) is the first, most controversial and widely influential hermit of the fourteenth century, the "golden age of English mysticism." Building from the Song of Songs, Richard Rolle describes the fire of love in terms of heat, sweetness and song – *fervor, dulcor et canor*. The effect of song, sound, and music, especially the Song of Songs, induces a sweetness of love that is felt through physical heat and compared to jewels and gems like topaz. In one of his best-known Latin works, *Incendium Amoris* (*The Fire of Love*), he provides an account of his mystical experiences, which he describes as being of three kinds: a physical warmth in his body, a sense of wonderful sweetness, and a heavenly music that accompanied him as he chanted the Psalms. The book, which was widely read in the Middle Ages, sets out the four purgative stages that one had to go through to become closer to God. His writing is highly lyrical, winsome, and sensual.

Julian of Norwich (circa 1342–1416)

But I did not see sin, for I believe that it has no kind of substance, no share in being, nor can it be recognized except by the pains that it causes.

- The first Englishwoman who we know with certainty wrote a book in English
- Her name is unknown; "Julian" is that of the church in Norwich to which her anchorhold was attached.
- The heroine of this book

In 1373, aged thirty, Julian wishes for a mortal sickness so severe that it would enable her to feel what Christ felt during the crucifixion. Her wish is granted. At the point of death, when her priest is administering last rites, she sees a crucifix bleeding. This is how a series of intense, detailed and vividly colored revelations begins, which lasts for only eleven or twelve hours. At some later point, she becomes an anchoress. This means dying to the world. The anchorhold is the grave. Norwich was the second most populous city in England in this period and was ravaged by the black death, which killed untold numbers. She spends the rest of her long life in urban seclusion, trying to work out the meaning of what she saw in her revelations. Julian gives us a powerful theology of salvation which ultimately has no place for sin, hell, and eternal damnation. She quietly undermines the philosophical foundations of Western, Latin Christianity.


Got von hymel
lassen dez he ich
alle male

Margery Kempe (1373–1438)

> *Then many people were amazed at her, asking her what was wrong with her; to which she, like a creature all wounded with love, and in whom reason had failed, cried with a loud voice: "The Passion of Christ slays me."*

- Known as the Madwoman of God or England's Leading Weeping Mystic due to her constant and often incredibly loud weeping in public
- Author of the first autobiography in English, which was effectively lost until discovered by chance in 1934

Around the age of forty, after having fourteen children with her husband, John, she persuaded him – not unreasonably, perhaps – to take a vow of chastity. Then Margery travelled on pilgrimages. And Lord, did she travel! From her well-to-do home in King's Lynn in Norfolk to the Holy Land, via Venice, Bologna, and Rome, to Santiago de Compostela and even to Danzig (or Gdansk) via Bergen in Norway and back through the Netherlands. And everywhere she went, she wept. Tears were her devotion. They were the testimony of her mystic marriage to Christ. And this wasn't quiet sobbing. Margery describes herself as crying so loudly in church – even roaring – that she could be heard outside. Such noisy devotion doesn't seem to have made her popular with her fellow pilgrims. Although illiterate, Margery claimed that she heard the texts of Richard Rolle, Walter Hilton (circa 1340/45–96), and Bridget of Sweden (circa 1303–73) read aloud. In 1413, she met and spent several days receiving the counsel of Julian of Norwich. Margery always describes herself in the third person as "the creature." Her book survived only in scraps and fragments until a strange occurrence

in a family house near Chesterfield in Derbyshire in 1934. Colonel W. Butler Bowden was looking for ping-pong bats in a messy cupboard and was about to throw out a pile of moldering books to tidy up. Happily, a friend advised him to bring in an expert. Hope Emily Allen from the British Library identified the only surviving complete manuscript of Margery's book.

Teresa of Ávila (1515–1582)

> *I saw in his hand a long spear of gold, and at the point there seemed to be a little fire. He appeared to me to be thrusting it at times into my heart, and to pierce my very entrails; when he drew it out, he seemed to draw them out also, and to leave me all on fire with a great love of God. The pain was so great, that it made me moan; and yet so surpassing was the sweetness of this excessive pain, that I could not wish to be rid of it.*

- The first woman to be declared "doctor of the Church"
- Canonized forty years after her death
- Subject of Gian Lorenzo Bernini's *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* sculpture in Rome

Teresa's autobiography, known as the *Vida,* which documents her mystical experience was profoundly influential during her lifetime. Her other books, *The Way of Perfection* and *The Interior Castle*, are among the most important works of Christian mysticism, and particularly influential in the Spanish- and French-speaking worlds. Teresa presents *The Way of Perfection* from 1566 as a "living book" to teach her Carmelite sisters how prayer and meditation can allow them to perfect their spiritual practice. Perfection's path is a spiritual

itinerary where the soul is compared to a castle composed of seven courts or chambers. Teresa's vision of the soul is like a diamond in the shape of a castle containing seven mansions. The journey through these mansions culminates in union with God. Teresa was also prone to frequent levitation after communion, a matter which caused her great embarrassment. Teresa's literary and organizational work had an enormous effect, not the least through followers like Juan de Yepes y Álvarez, better known as John of the Cross (1542–91). Teresa and John were the engines of radical movement of religious reform in Spain, known as the *alumbrados*, the illuminated ones. John suffered terrible persecutions at the hands of fellow Carmelites opposed to Teresa's reforms.

Marie of the Incarnation (1599–1672)

> *For it seems that the waters of tribulation through which the soul has passed by so many spiritual deprivations have extinguished the fire which gently consumed its noblest part so that, deprived of all its powers, God alone was its only enjoyment.*

- Had her mystical encounter with Christ at the age of seven
- Founded the first girls' school in New France, in what would become Canada
- Canonized by John Paul II in 1980

Born Marie Guyart in Tours, France, she was widowed with a son at the age of nineteen. Inspired by the autobiography of Teresa of Ávila, she had a series of intense visions of Christ which were consummated in a highly erotic union that used elements of the Song of Songs. Her autobiography documents a mystical itinerary of

thirteen stages which, with great intimacy, describe the interior state of the soul's progress towards God. After entering the Ursuline Order in 1633, she landed in Quebec City in 1639, which was a tiny outpost of 300 inhabitants. Indomitable and highly entrepreneurial, Marie founded a convent and a school which was devoted to the education and conversion of indigenous girls. She also learned many of the indigenous languages and translated catechisms and dictionaries.

Madame Guyon (1648–1717)

We must remember that God is all mouth.

- Began a commentary on the entire Bible
- Wrote an interpretation of the Song of Songs in a day and a half
- Accused, imprisoned, and tried for the heresy of quietism

For Guyon, the aim of Christianity is a state of mystical annihilation of the soul which is achieved by the submission of pure love. In her reading of the Song of Songs, this love is described as the marriage of the annihilated soul with God, which is attained with a melting kiss. Guyon led an extraordinary life, widowed with five children after a loveless marriage. Because of the popularity of her writings and opinions, she was arrested, tried, and held at the Bastille. But she had powerful friends in the French court. In the wake of the Reformation, Guyon's mysticism posed a serious problem for the Catholic Church, which labelled it the heresy of quietism in the 1680s. If the Christian can achieve annihilation of the soul through love alone, then there is no need for the sacraments of the Church, good works, and the standard practices required of decent

churchgoing types. If I can find inward stillness through constant prayer, then I am simply indifferent to ecclesiastical or political authority. Through its abstention from conformity or from action, this is a revolutionary position.