

*Paradoxical Pleasure:  
Transcendence through 'Sensual Mysticism'*

Certain categories of 'mystical experience' have the power to challenge and ultimately nuance our traditional understandings of that term. Nature mysticism and mystical states triggered by sublime sensuality cast doubts on the generally accepted axiom that mysticism is an inherently religious phenomenon. These forms force us to broaden our perspective on the possible range of mystical phenomena, with the result that either some of those phenomena fall outside the definitional realm of 'religion', or else we are compelled to broaden our definition of religion itself to encompass and account for the evidence.

I. NATURE MYSTICISM

'Nature-mysticism' is so called because it connotes a quality of experience and a type of consciousness that seem to be the same as those we have generally learned to call mystical. The nature mystic, like other mystics, experiences states such as unity-awareness, ego-transcendence, blessedness, added meaning and value in life, and selfless love. She also frequently experiences consciousness of an over-arching principle of reality.<sup>1</sup> What is curious, and what distinguishes the nature mystic, is that such experiences are *not* taken to be experiences of a deity or superhuman being. Note: by 'principle of reality' I am here referring to a concept of a universal (and in some sense conscious) ground of being, which serves as the foundation for a consistent and stable reality, as well as the experience and perception of that reality. Such a principle, as James says, is perceived to be 'primal and enveloping and deeply true' (James 34). The over-arching principle of reality for a nature mystic, then, is simply 'Nature' or 'the Universe' or 'Life'. The capital letters are meant to indicate that these entities are to some extent deified. For

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf. my definition of mysticism: "an individual's direct experience of communion with a perceived transcendent principle ('MORE'), the methods used to reach that experience, and the knowledge such an experience brings to the experienter."

example, the British nature mystic Richard Jefferies (1848-87) seems to personify nature, describing “the great earth speaking to me...the air touched me and gave me something of itself. I spoke to the sea...I desired to have its strength, its mystery and glory.” (Happold 386) However, he does not speak of a deity in this context, and seems to be not so much a pantheist, one who sees divinity in nature because God is manifest in or through nature, as one who deifies nature *per se*. He might have felt at home in the early Indo-European religions, whose polytheism was specifically a veneration of the forces of nature, at first only vaguely personified.<sup>2</sup> As it was, Jefferies “could not find within the religious thought-patterns with which he was familiar satisfactory answers to the questions which his mystical consciousness posed for him.” (Happold 384) Surely such a mystic stretches the boundaries of most definitions of mysticism that see it as a specifically religious phenomenon.

The great American playwright Eugene O’Neill (1888-1953) finished his final play in 1941. An autobiographical work, *Long Day’s Journey into Night* was finally published and produced posthumously fifteen years later. The character of Edmund Tyrone represents O’Neill himself, and it is through Edmund’s moving and poetic monologue in the final scene that O’Neill tells us of several experiences as a seaman, early in life, that fall into the category of nature mysticism.

[I] lay on the bowsprit, facing astern, with the water foaming into spume under me, the masts with every sail white in the moonlight, towering high above me. I became drunk with the beauty and singing rhythm of it, and for a moment I lost myself—actually lost my life. I was set free! I dissolved in the sea, became white sails and flying spray, became beauty and rhythm, became moonlight and the ship and the high dim-starred sky! I belonged, without past or future, within something greater than my own life, or the life of Man, to Life itself! (O’Neill, *Long Day’s*, 153)

In his article on ‘peak experiences’, Abraham Maslow began to articulate a methodology with which to analyse such an experience. Peak experiences are ‘transcendent’ or mystical experiences that display several of a number of characteristic marks that are described in the article. Edmund’s experience includes elements of beauty and goodness, ego-transcendence, heavenly ecstasy, unity or unitive consciousness, atemporality, and being cognisant of a ‘higher

---

<sup>2</sup> That is, in early Indian, Persian, Greek, and Celtic polytheistic religions.

law': all marks of the peak experience in Maslow's essay. (Maslow 172-77) Edmund does not provide a strong religious context for his experience. He articulates his experience as belonging to 'Life itself'—he feels that he has somehow intuitively sensed deeper truths inherent in the universe itself, truths whose derivation or ontology is not necessarily a theological one. He does follow the above quoted passage with the line "To God, if you want to put it that way"— but it is clear that he does not want to put it that way.

In concert with the high frequency in both secular and religious types of people that Maslow claims for the peak experience, this question of context raises issues of whether the mystical experience itself is intrinsically or necessarily religious. A psychological theory suggests itself: that the capacity to have such an experience is inborn in the human animal, and that the religious contexts in which such experiences are usually found are perhaps no more than the most readily available interpretive frameworks. These frameworks have been utilised by mystics throughout the centuries to describe an experience for which more mundane language is not well suited. To put it another way, perhaps individuals throughout time have always had these experiences, and the religiously monolithic cultures of premodernity only offered one way to speak about them—through religious language. In this model, the rise in nature mysticism in the last two centuries does not indicate the increase of a new or rare kind of mystical experience. Such evidence can be explained by the religious and intellectual plurality of the post-Enlightenment West, where for the first time, non-religious consciousness was even a possibility.

The acceptance of such a theory would clearly indicate the primacy of experience over doctrine, as well as pointing out the constructed nature of that doctrine. This theory might be an equaliser by suggesting that religious systems of thought are potentially equally valid means of explaining and articulating a complex experience that stems from a more primal level of human consciousness than that of language.

Returning to our text in light of this theory, we find that Edmund is able to explain his mystical experience without referring to God, though he is well aware that his father would or could not do so. Edmund's generation, that of the more cosmopolitan 20<sup>th</sup> century, has acquired a 'plausibility structure', that is, a social framework of understanding that presupposes the possibility of alternate explanations for such experiences, outside the domain of religion. This suggests, once again, that the experiences might not be inherently religious (by Spiro's definition), and further that experiential descriptions grounded in religious language might in fact constitute partially arbitrary post-experiential constructions. This constitutes a possible challenge to Katz, when we observe that Edmund (O'Neill) was raised in an Irish Catholic family, surrounded by the cultural presupposition of God, and yet he did not immediately invoke the deity as the source of his experience. Rather, he chose the less socially legitimate interpretation, contrary to the prediction of Katz's theory. He felt, like Jefferies, connected to 'Life itself'.

Jefferies spoke of 'praying' through the very manifestations of nature:

I prayed by the sweet thyme, whose little flowers I touched with my hand; by the slender grass; by the crumble of dry chalky earth I took up and let fall through my fingers...prone on the sward in token of deep reverence, thus I prayed that I might touch to the unutterable existence infinitely higher than deity. (Happold 387)

On the flip side of the same line of thinking, Jefferies' connection of his experience to 'an existence higher than deity' seems to me logically arbitrary. Another person, experiencing the same "emotion of the soul beyond all definition" but possessing a more sublime and exalted vision of deity than did Jefferies would surely unhesitatingly attribute an identical experience to God's grace.

In Steven Katz's article *Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism*, he argues that the set of adjectival terms assembled by Stace to describe the common core mystical experience are misleading because their degree of vagueness allows them to be applied to multiple distinct referents. Maslow's article solves this problem to some extent by delineating a much larger set of markers for the peak experience. Even if, say, eleven out of the twenty-two were deemed

necessary to have a peak/mystical experience, these markers would still adumbrate an experience with a fairly specific affective and cognitive character. This clearer description allows the mystical experience to be more effectively identified and studied cross-culturally, both within and without religious contexts.

## II. SENSUAL MYSTICISM

Another seemingly paradoxical form of mystical experience is that triggered by sensual stimulation of a sublime kind. In this sense nature-mysticism could almost be considered a subset of sensual mysticism (insofar as it too is sensual), but here I am specifically referring to those sensual experiences crafted by human artifice: art, music, food, and so on.

Many are the religious traditions whose more ascetic manifestations stress an abstinence from sensuality and excess. For example, in the Indian tradition, Patañjali (c. 250CE) recommended ‘withdrawing the senses from their objects’ and turning the attention within so completely that Eliade was compelled to describe the process as becoming like a vegetable. (Eliade 66-7) Many people, Europeans as well as Indians, thus associate religious piety with restraint, and mistrust of the senses, due to their ability to lead one astray.<sup>3</sup>

However, another strand of speculation on religious praxis is also prevalent, if necessarily secretive, in many parts of the world. That is, the view that through sensual stimulation itself a mystical state of consciousness can be achieved. For example, in mediaeval India, this view arose in the form of Tantra philosophy and practice. Tantric ritual included the use of forbidden substances such as wine, meat, fish, parched grain, and sexual intercourse as a means of transcendence. Paradoxically, through the ritual use of these stimulants, the senses are said to disengage from engrossment with outer objects, and “the deeper, the larger, the subliminal ranges of consciousness are opened up, making it easier for the [practitioner] to get a hold in the inner

---

<sup>3</sup> Also corroborated by Prof. Anne Merideth’s address at the Religious Diversity Celebration, 6 December 1999.

recesses and work for the culture and purification of the being.” (Pandit 47) This methodology was and is highly controversial; but, the *Kulīrnava Tantra* stressed, “What is called sin becomes a merit if it is done for a higher purpose”. (Pandit 48) This is exactly what the two sisters discover in Karen Blixen’s classic story, *Babette’s Feast*.

Karen Blixen (1885-1962), who wrote under the *nom de plume* of Isak Dinesen, was a poetic storyteller in the Romantic tradition. Concerned far more with the existential questions that religion usually addresses than with the realism of other authors of her time, Blixen wrote in an almost mythical style that presented characters as archetypes rather than “psychologically defined individuals as in modern literature”. “As types her characters can also become symbols,” comments Danish scholar Else Cederborg. This is apparent in *Babette’s Feast*.

In this archetypal context, the sisters Martine and Philippa represent the conservative, rational forces of traditional religion, juxtaposed to the figure of Babette, who stands for the natural, mystical energies of the human soul, reconfigured by the power of the artist. The art (or food) fueled by such energies has the power to transmit the sublime experience of psychic integration, the unification of the divided self, as we see in the story. Again, I take one of the morals of *Babette’s Feast* to be that, in religious sensualism, what is called sin becomes merit if done for a higher purpose. When first contemplating the decadence that awaits them at the French feast, Martine sees the affair as a sinful indulgence so strongly that she envisions it as a witches’ sabbath. She warns the dinner guests, who resolve to “cleanse [their] tongues of all taste and purify them of all delight or disgust of the senses, keeping and preserving them for the higher things”. (41) Unwittingly, the guests thus enter the dinner ritual with the proper ‘Tantric’ attitude. The *Kulīrnava Tantra* states,

Not intoxication, not disorderly functioning of the senses, but a withdrawal from external, petty preoccupations and a relaxation into the folds of a lighter and larger consciousness that sees and feels less constrictedly, more universally, is the immediate result of the correct ritual of wine. (Pandit 48-9)

This is exactly what occurs at the dinner party. The guests are served with the most sublime cuisine, and the rarest and most subtle of wines. They all but ignore the food, which allows it to work its magic upon them all the more unconsciously. Indeed, when earlier Martine had asked Babette if the bottles contained wine, the response was “Wine, Madame! No, Madame. It is a Clos Vougeot 1846!” (39-40) For Babette, to call such a godlike drink wine was to misidentify it. Her response added to the mystery of the feast, and allowed the guests to partake in that was normally repugnant to them. Thus, eating and drink ambrosia and nectar, the guests slowly but surely entered into a mystical state.

The dinner party, and indeed the entire story, culminates in General Loewenhielm’s speech and its denouement. The general is “a mouthpiece for a message meant to be brought forth” and, inspired, speaks spontaneously on the subject of grace, unfolding realisations that have only now crystallised for him through the mystical experience at the dinner table. Following the speech, the guests truly enter into the receptive mode of unity consciousness and blessed exaltation that may be said to characterise the mystical experience.

They only knew that the rooms had been filled with a heavenly light, as if a number of small halos had blended into one glorious radiance. Taciturn old people received the gift of tongues; ears that for years had been almost deaf were opened to it. Time itself had merged into eternity. Long after midnight the windows of the house shone like gold, and golden song flowed out into the winter air. (53)

Reconciliations are achieved, divisions bridged and unified, consciousnesses are expanded, and the words of the Kulī mava Tantra (in the quotes above on the results of sensual mysticism properly practised) are corroborated in full measure by this scene.

Such a result cannot be accomplished by the intake of ordinary food and drink. In this story we are presented with the paradigm of mystic as *artist* (or perhaps vice versa). As Cederborg writes, Blixen “considers that both in his being and in his creative power the artist is directly related to God.” The artist is one who distils the essence of her experience and represents it in a concentrated form, capable, under the right circumstances, of directly transmitting her experience to the enjoyer of the art. Whether the medium is a Zen painting to

be meditated upon or food to be imbibed is immaterial. Babette states, “A great artist, Mesdames, is never poor. We have something...of which other people know nothing. ...When I did my very best I could make [people] perfectly happy.” (58-9)

## CONCLUSIONS

Abraham Maslow writes that the peak experience is distributed “in principle throughout the whole of life” (170). This represents a “religionizing of all that is secular” as much as it does a secularising of that which is religious. As I wrote at the beginning of the essay, we must decide whether some mystical experiences fall outside the bounds of religion, or whether those bounds should be widened. In my own spiritual community, a peak experience such as Maslow describes is referred to as ‘an experience of the Self’. It is said that whenever one experiences sublime peace, blissful quietude, or ecstatic joy, whether through a beautiful sunset, great company, food or meditation, the true source of that experience is the  $\square$  tman, the innermost self. This is based in the assertion by the Tantric sage Abhinavagupta that

The supremely pure Universal Consciousness, called...God, by some...throbs constantly in the mind of its own free accord. The same Being, as Para $\square$  akti (supreme power) *rises as joy in the various sense-experiences.* (Muktananda 6, emphasis mine)

In true Tantric spirit, the perception is that all mystical experience, sensual or otherwise, is religious in the sense that it all proceeds from the divine (as indeed, does everything else). Thus we are presented with a radical ‘religionizing’ of all that is secular. As Maslow observes, “Religion becomes then not one social institution among others, but rather *a state of mind* achievable in almost any activity of life, *if this activity is raised to a suitable level of perfection.*” (170, emphasis mine) The artist is one who strives to raise his activity to perfection. “Through all the world,” says Babette, “there goes one long cry from the heart of the artist: Give me leave to do my utmost!” (59) It is through intense and meditative focus, loving dedication, and surrender to the power of the muse (i.e. the unconscious potentiality of the psyche) that the artist can enter into the mystical



state, and subsequently channel that very state into the art which has the power to move us the most. We can read of the musician who ‘feels the music playing itself’ and enters into ecstatic, effortless expression; the athlete who enters ‘the Zone’ and feels she can do no wrong, that everything is unfolding perfectly; and the sexual union in which transcendence is reached through a spontaneous surrender to the moment and merging of two identities into one.<sup>4</sup>

We conclude, then, that both nature mysticism and sensual mysticism are catalysed by outer stimuli of extreme beauty and profundity, but that the ultimate source of the experience itself lies within the deepest potentialities of human consciousness. Otherwise, it could be argued, why do not the same stimuli always produce the same experience? The set and setting, *both internally and externally*, must be so ordered as to allow the profound state of human consciousness that we call mystical to unfold. The source of the experience is the same in both *prima facie* religious contexts and apparently non-religious contexts as well. The only difference between the two is in the cause *attributed* to the experience by the subject.

Thus we see that the definition of religious experience proposed by Wayne Proudfoot, that we identify an experience as religious only when the subject identifies it as such, is inadequate. A much more subtle and nuanced understanding of the ontology of the experience in question is called for, to arrive at a scientific conclusion that allows us to identify an experience as religious regardless of how the subject identifies it. The experience should be identified by its very nature, not by the subject’s opinion of it. Then its source, its effects, its cognitive implications, how those implications are modified by context, all can be studied by thoroughly and accurately.

This paper has been a little step in that direction.

*fin*

---

<sup>4</sup> For the first experience, thanks to conversation with violinist Kartik Śrinivas; for the second, to snowboarder Isaac P. Hayes; for the third, to the ‘Supersex’ article, *New Woman* magazine. ☺

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

(both works cited and works consulted)

- Anonymous. "Eugene O'Neill – American playwright", on the *Lucid Café* website:  
<http://www2.lucidcafe.com/lucidcafe/library/95oct/egoneill.html> .
- Cederborg, Else. "Isak Dinesen – Karen Blixen – A Storyteller", on the *Royal Danish Embassy* website, <http://www.denmarkemb.org/blixen.htm> .
- Dinesen, Isak [Karen Blixen]. "Babette's Feast" in *Anecdotes of Destiny and Ehbregard*. New York: Random House, 1993.
- Eliade, Mircea. *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969.
- Happold, F.C. *Mysticism: a Study and an Anthology*. London: Penguin Books, 1970.
- James, William. *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. New York: Penguin Books, 1982.
- Katz, Steven T. "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism" in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, Steven T. Katz, ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1978, pp. 22-74.
- Maslow, Abraham H. "Religious Aspects of Peak-Experiences" in *Personality and Religion*, William A. Sadler, ed. New York: Harper & Row, 1970, pp. 168-179.
- Muktānanda, Swami. "Guru-Prasannata", in *Shree Gurudev-Vani*, vol. 7. Ganeshpuri, India: Shree Gurudev Ashram, July 1970.
- O'Neill, Eugene. *Long Day's Journey into Night*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989.
- . "Autobiography of Eugene Gladstone O'Neill", on the *Nobel Foundation* website, <http://www.nobel.se/laureates/literature-1936-1-autobio.html> .
- Pandit, M.P. and Arthur Avalon. *Kuṅṅava Tantra*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1965.
- Proudfoot, Wayne. *Religious Experience*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985.
- Spiro, Melford E. "Religion: Problems of Definition and Explanation" in *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, Michael Banton, ed. London: Tavistock Publications, 1966, pp. 85-126.