

MYSTICAL ECSTASY AND HYSTERICAL DREAM-STATES

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THE mystics are the source and stay of all religions. The psycho-analytical study of mysticism is therefore an important aid to an understanding of the normal and the morbid religious experience. The mystic ecstasy manifests in an extreme form the unconscious forces that lie behind all religious life. The strange form and the enormous extent of the mystical writings are a great obstacle to the non-mystical investigator. It is therefore a matter for gratitude that this work has been undertaken by a competent psychologist who has published his result for all to use. I refer to the valuable "Essai sur l'Introversion Mystique, Etude Psychologique de Pseudo-Denys L'Areopagite et de quelques autres Cas de Mysticisme" by Ferdinand Morel, doctor in philosophy of Geneva University. After briefly summarizing Dr. Morel's conclusions I propose to show how his psychoanalytic theory of mysticism is supported by the psychoanalytic practice of Dr. Abraham and others.

Under the symbolic differences of eastern and western mystics Dr. Morel finds a universal tendency to introversion and regression. Like the Indian mystics, Pseudo-Dionysius, for example, has in an extreme form the desire for peaceful phantasy and escape from reality. The spiritual world is valued by this typical speculative mystic according to the degree of introversion attained. Men are on the lowest level. Angels are a stage higher than men, but they still show some interest in human affairs. After angels come celestial beings rising step by step till, at the top, the thrones are filled with ecstatic ardor for God. Dr. Morel discovers that the more the libido regresses from the external world, the less frequent become the material symbols in the mystic's writings. When the stage of ecstasy has been reached these symbols of objects or ideas are almost entirely replaced by the functional symbols of psycho-physical movement and desire.

It is important to notice that the regressive tendency and the lack of interest in reality, the homosexuality and phobia of the opposite sex, the masochism and timidity often appear in the mystic's early years: and, in Dr. Morel's opinion, these inborn tendencies of the mystics have been developed by an education and environment which

happened to favor the original libido trends and hinder a free development of a normal sexual life.

Nothing less than a return to the intra-uterine condition can satisfy the desire of Dionysius to bury himself in a state of not-being. Consequently he interprets baptism to mean a rebirth from the mother's womb. The initiation of a monk, he highly esteems as the way to solitude; and solitude, as we shall see below, is ever desired by the auto-erotic and the narcissist. Mystic ignorance is praised because it leads to the desired pleasure found in the functional consciousness of ecstasy when the outside world is entirely shut out. Dionysius has no desire for an absolute unconsciousness. The light is ever his ultimate aim. The darkness, the ignorance, is but a threshold, a zone of psychic oscillation between the two worlds, a state in which the subject-object relation has not been entirely passed by the libido. For St. John of the Cross the mystic night of the soul is like the darkness before the dawn. "Before being supernaturally transformed, the soul without doubt needs to annihilate itself in the darkness, and to escape from the limits of its natural and reasonable life of the senses." Likewise the will not to know is but a means to the pleasure of "une élévation voluptueuse à la source surintellectuelle de L' amour divin." When the mystic allows himself to be conducted across this threshold he suddenly comes into the ecstatic light. The centripetal aim is achieved, the mystical union beyond all expression is won, the ecstasy is enjoyed for an instant. The fixity of a moment empty of all change gives the mystic the illusion of eternity; he feels himself *sub specie aeternitatis*.

Dr. Morel finds the ecstatic experience to be bi-polar. God is a projected image of the narcissistic libido; a fixed pole round which the desire moves until it attains ecstatic unity and momentary rest. The Indian desire for Nirvana likewise implies a regression to the mother. The very position of the body in the Indian prescription for the production of ecstasy imitates the intra-uterine state. According to Tauler, the mystic has a longing for the created to regress into the un-created, for "die Entrückung und der neugewonnene Zustand." And we shall find the same word 'Entrückung' used of an analogous psychic state by Dr. Abraham following Dr. Bleuler. Eckhart expresses the deification of the ecstatic ego thus. "God and the soul are so unified that no creature, not even the angels can discover any difference between them."

Bernard of Clairvaux is an example of a more orthodox, because

less regressive type of mystic. He was so dominated by his Oedipus complex that he developed an excessive cult of "Notre Dame" and puzzled over the difficulty of being at once a man and also "in utero matris." A phobia of all other women and a homo-erotic relation to Jesus followed. Bernard's masochistic identification with Mary appears in his exclamation a propos of the wound of Christ which pierced Mary's heart: "I should count myself happy if I sometimes felt myself pierced by the sword's point in order that I also could cry: I am wounded by love." Bernard experienced certain brief sleeplike states which he describes as "vigil vitalisque sopor—rara hora et parva mora—O si durasset!" Bernard attained a primitive stage of object love and his desire for both male and female objects of worship expressed the oscillations of his strong bi-sexual trends. In Suso the anxiety which is so constant a symptom of auto-erotic activity is specially prominent.

Mystical women lack the male mystic's power of entirely emptying the material consciousness and also the desire for annihilation in the mother. Therefore they never reach the extreme regressive stage of the Yogis and Dionysius. Female mystical erotism is marked by a precise and anthropomorphic character and by frankly organic enjoyment of God in contrast to a more abstract vision of God sought by male mystics.

It is the typical course of the ecstatic state, as seen for example in Dionysius, that interests us here; the turning away from reality, the gradual ascent to another world through obscurity to a sudden and momentary thrill of emotional unity. Dr. Morel makes clear the sexual nature of the whole experience, which implies a regression to an infantile manner of erotic satisfaction. And he remarks that the tendency to peripheral occlusion is not without analogy to the state preceding sleep, in which Freud has noticed momentary manifestations of narcissism. Accepting the dictum that the neurosis is the negative of the perversion, Dr. Morel thinks the mystics may have made their ascetical renunciation as the only way of avoiding both a sexual perversion and a more developed form of neurosis or psychosis.

The hysterical nature of the mystical states of ecstasy has gained a striking confirmation from the recent psycho-analytic study of hysteria. Perhaps the most relevant is that of Dr. Karl Abraham in cases of hysterical dream-states in the *Jahrbuch für Psychoanalytische und Psycho-Pathologische Forschungen*, 1910. Dr. Abraham has

found that in each case there was originally a strong tendency to day dreaming, and that the hysterical dream-state was preceded by a stage of phantasy and exaltation. The primary day-dream passed into a second state of dreamy Entrückung or ecstatic feeling of rapture in which the familiar environment seemed unreal, and strangely changed. The patients themselves felt as if they were "in a dream." The third stage was an emptying of consciousness: a checking of the course of thought. At the conclusion of the state of emptiness occurred a fourth stage, marked by feelings and phantasies of anxiety and depression. The experience was described by these patients as pleasant until the last stage appeared.

One man suffering from severe hysteria had such an anxiety about leaving the house that he became unfitted for business and social life. Whenever he was made to feel his own inferiority or incapacity, he regularly reacted by falling into a dream state. His agoraphobia reminds us of the same affect noticed by Dr. Morel in the life of the mystics. The patient described his dream-state as at first an ever increasing "Enthusiasmus." This imperceptibly passed over into the second stage of complete introversion; a shutting out of all external impressions. "In the phantasy," he declared, "one loses the ground under one's feet." Even his own body now seemed strange and unreal. The third stage immediately followed with its complete cessation of thought which led to the fourth state of extreme anxiety and weakness. Sometimes he tried to come down "as from a cloud" before the unpleasant end was reached. The word "cloud" is noteworthy: it points to the feeling of a clouding of consciousness which corresponds to the dark shadows of night and to the nescience through which the mystics pass to the ecstatic light.

The hysterical patients who had masturbated in childhood, waged a continual war in later years against this habit. Finally a compromise was found in the form of the periodic dream-states briefly described above. As the day-dreaming had been the prelude of their masturbation, so now it forms the first stage of the substitutionary dream-state. The second stage of rapture and isolation corresponds to the growing erotic excitement; and the emptying of consciousness symbolized the height of the orgasm at the moment of ejaculation. The anxiety and weakness that follows make the correspondence perfect. The feeling of isolation goes back to the masturbator's boyish desire to be alone with his phantasies. The disappearance of thoughts corresponds to the more or less complete loss

of consciousness which is specially apt to occur at the height of his sexual excitement. Some of these hysterical cases, moreover, show a bisexual fixation of libido which is parallel to the frequent mystical identification with both Jesus and Mary. And the passive attitude of the patient to both libido projections has its counterpart in the religious dependence of men like St. Bernard. To the neurotic fancy of the hysterical patient, merely to walk alone out of the home meant giving up his heterosexual incestuous relation and falling into his homosexual temptation. So he called up anxiety to replace desire, and fancies of grandeur to give self-respect. Here we are reminded of the limitless self-centredness of mystics who did not hesitate to identify themselves with God, i. e. with the projection of their beloved ego. Dr. Abraham noticed that the dream-states of his patients satisfied the impulses to aggression and exhibitionism: Dr. Morel noticed the possessive and jealously exclusive love of the mystics and their desire for spiritual nakedness at the time of their ecstatic vision of God. And the double hysterical desire to remain a child and to die is fully expressed in the mystic symbolism. One patient could induce his dream-state by a strong act of will not to think of anything in the external world, just as the mystics induced their ecstasy by "amor nescire" and "docta ignorantia." And the hysteric describes as if he were a mystic the short stage of pleasure like an eternity accompanied by a feeling of introversion and alteration. One of Dr. Sadger's patients described the feeling that preceded his hysterical loss of consciousness thus: "the feeling of going back in the swing" (which had excited him as a child and was doubtless linked to the previous joy of being rocked by his mother) "is just the same as the falling asleep in the absent-state which always seems to me to be the highest form of joy." He then expresses the wish of St. Bernard for an eternity of the brief moment of ecstatic "sleep"—"if only one could fall asleep in this way for an eternity!" By drinking alcohol this patient could induce the trance state in order to indulge therein his homo-sexual desire to be nursed and cared for by his comrades. Likewise the mystics, by taking a narcotic in the form of a mental discipline which narrowed the attention to a point, could satisfy their similar unconscious desires.

Dr. Pfister relates the case of a girl whose religious experience was a cloak for her auto-erotic activity. "One day" she told the analyst "I was pondering on the text, 'There is no fear in love but perfect love driveth out fear.' I said to myself, 'Let everything go;

yield yourself only to the father.' Half unconsciously I did the evil deed. I was not ashamed. I went right to sleep. I found myself in the twilight state. During this mental state, it is again like the time when I did the forbidden thing; at that time I was as if in another world." (The Psychoanalytic Method, p. 131). A total loss of material consciousness is impossible in the prolonged twilight-states, which are therefore hidden from the censor by the subsequent total amnesia.

The states described above give essentially the same unconscious satisfaction to mystics and hysterics alike—a symbolically mediated identification with the mother, a narcissistic and homosexual activity. Hence both mystics and hysterics often fail to express adequately the meaning of their rapture, the obscuration of external reality and the expulsion of thought by their affective state. An exception was Dr. Sadger's hysterical patient who during the analysis remarked upon the strange looks in a monk's eyes, which appeared absentminded, far away from this world and pre-occupied by a phantasy which the hysteric felt to be caused by the same sexual need as produced his own absent-states.

The mystics, we conclude, are a sub-class of hysterics. The mystic ecstasy corresponds to the four stages of the dream-states—the primary tendency to phantasy, the consequent will not to know the world, the progress through the dark night of the soul to the ineffable depths of light and the exhaustion that follows the ecstasy. We must therefore posit in the mystics as well as in the hysterics a primary auto-erotic or narcissistic activity, a secondary repression, and a final return of the repressed activity in the sublimated or spiritualised form of a religious experience or a mystic ecstasy. It also follows that the mystics' claim to sexual abstinence is only justified in so far as it is true that they have no desire for, but rather a phobia of normal sexual intercourse. For the undeveloped or regressive libido of neurotics, the mystic symbols open the way to an indulgence which is exquisitely satisfying to the self and also highly esteemed by the faithful who regard the state of ecstasy as the distinguishing mark of a saint.