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Metaphors as Knowledge in Mystical Writings

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Abstract: Writers anchored in the Christian mystical tradition generally present their spiritual experience as loaded with cognitive content bearing on things divine. The nature of this mystical knowledge, the way they receive it, and its effect on their existence can be fruitfully approached only by elucidating the way their language and discourse make use of metaphors. Accordingly, starting with references to the early modern period, this article investigates a set of classical mystical metaphors so as to gain insight into the unique mode of metaphorical cognition, highlight the epistemological status proper to mystical experience, and distinguish the latter from other theological cognitive modes. Metaphors borrowed from daily life endow the mystical experience—of which the object is described as being beyond senses and reason—with a perceptible, comprehensible, and communicable configuration. At the same time, metaphors should not be regarded as being merely an approximate expression of an ineffable experience. Through the "gestalt" or structure of a metaphor, mystical experience locates itself and develops in spacetime, thus laying out the path of the spiritual journey. The way various metaphors naturally associate allows the expression, intensity, and self-understanding of spiritual experience to "grow" from one image to another. Thanks to the metaphorical operation, mystics are able to describe their journey and give spiritual direction, providing disciples and readers with concrete directions for reforming and renewing their lives. Furthermore, the connection that metaphor establishes between everyday routines and things divine allows for a two-way exchange of meanings: the objects or events met in daily life are "sanctified" as they become metaphors that convey spiritual understanding and allow an ever-growing number of people to "seek and find God in all things".

Keywords: John of the Cross; metaphor; mystical experience; mystical knowledge; purification; Teresa of Avila

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1. Introduction

Spiritual literature and mystical works abound in metaphors and symbols. The poetic language they privilege differs from that of theology, which is primarily based on concepts and reasoning. Although mystical writers also draw on preexisting doctrines and concepts, the works they produce are customarily considered to constitute subjective accounts, which are contrasted with attempts at assessing and establishing a body of objective knowledge. Especially in the modern period, metaphorical language and symbolic thinking were (and often remain) sharply contrasted with scientific rationality.[1] For thinkers following in the footsteps of Hobbes, Locke, and others, making use of metaphors testifies to a lack of "real thinking": when expressed through metaphors, religious experience would possess no epistemological significance. Mystics, however, have unanimously affirmed that their experience was leading them towards a knowledge of things divine that is located beyond both reason and the senses. For them, the use of metaphors is justified by the limitations proper to concepts and logic when facing ultimate reality. Accordingly, mystical authors have not been merely crafting a language specific to their objectives; they also discussed the means of expression (metaphors, among them, playing a leading role) that they needed to mobilize. This was especially the case for the Christian mystical writers of the early modern period, to whom I will refer in the first instance while investigating at times the

textual network they weave with writers located in different contexts.[2] If, as suggested by Charles M. Stang, mystical writing is to be approached "as a spiritual exercise in the service of soliciting an encounter with the mystery of God" (Stang 2012, p. 257), then such "exercise" necessarily contains a reflexive return upon its conditions and results.

During the course of the 20th century, linguistics and philosophy have jointly worked towards a deeper understanding of the way "metaphor" and "knowledge" interact. As Lakoff and Johnson made clear in their classic study (*Metaphors We Live By*, 1980), metaphors, concepts, experiences, and human action are associated through a web of complex, multi-dimensional relationships. In fact, our conceptual system, our thinking process, and our behavioral patterns are, to a large extent, constructed, understood, and shaped through metaphors. For example, our understanding of what an "argument" is about cannot be separated from the metaphor of "war" to which it refers. Metaphors arise from clear, intuitive, and concrete experiences, and they endow abstract concepts with intelligible connotations. On a first level, metaphor is based on existing similarities between things. On a second level, it creates new similarities through a *gestalt* of perceptions and meanings. Much of our experience is metaphorical in nature; we use metaphors to define reality, and we act upon metaphors. From this perspective, the use of metaphors in mystical writings is not an index of obscurity or imagination gone wild. On the contrary, it is the stock of metaphors, symbols, analogies, and fables shared by mystical authors that makes it possible to reach a kind of understanding of what "mystical knowledge" may be about.[3]

I will first assess the oft-repeated assertion made by mystics: spiritual experiences allow them to acquire knowledge about God. Such knowledge does not come from rational speculation. It is given to them; it is direct in its nature and its mode of acquisition, and it is sometimes associated with a "spiritual vision". While going beyond or behind sensitive perception, a concrete image is needed for highlighting the knowledge such experience brings to the mystic, the conditions under which mystical knowledge is granted, and the effects it has upon the soul. Thus, the nature, means, and effects of mystical knowledge are expressed and united into one fitting metaphor.

In a second part, I will stress the fact that, in mystical writings, metaphors are not akin to an approximate expression of transcendental experience. Rather, they organize and structure the experience at stake. Going one step further, the mystic herself does not really "know" what she has been experiencing until she finds the words and the image to express it. "[An] event is always an event of language, and [. . .] the adventure is inseparable from the speech that tells it" (Agamben 2018, p. 69). In this sense, metaphors arise in simultaneity with both experience and knowledge: there is no cognition without metaphor; metaphor also allows experience to recognize and understand itself *as experience*. Although mystical experience is said to be characterized by "immediacy" and "passivity", mystics do, in a sense, actively "construct" their experience through the mediation brought by metaphors. As we will see, this makes possible an "experience of the absence", particularly in the history of Christian spirituality, even if the nature of this particular "experience" remains controverted.

In the third part, I will ponder over the following: in mystical texts, metaphors create a narrative space-time where spiritual experience becomes an adventure, a journey (climbing in the dark, exploring a castle, entering the state of marriage, etc.). Metaphors allow the mystic to determine the journey's starting point and its various stages until the accomplishment of one's spiritual development. Organized around a suitable metaphor, the cognitive process unfolds along with the transformation of the pilgrim.

Finally, as will be discussed in the fourth part, the use of metaphors opens up a two-way communication between the everyday world and the "sacred world", enabling the pilgrim "to seek and find God in everything", as the well-known sentence by Ignatius of Loyola summarizes such a quest (see *Constitutions of the Society of Jesus* III. 288, in Ignatius of Loyola 1996, p. 124; see also De Koninck 2007). Using A as a metaphor for B does not only bring in analogical knowledge of B; it also makes A and B become mirrors of each other and reflect each other in all aspects. Building upon this observation, one is entitled to say that

metaphor functions as a meeting point between the sacred world and the secular world, and further, between the writer and the reader. Mystics not only make use of metaphors in their writings; they also increase the depth and array of their experience by thinking and acting on the basis of metaphorical patterns.

2. Metaphors and Mystical Knowledge

Teresa of Avila speaks of the knowledge of the Trinity she received in a mystical vision and that other souls can receive likewise in the following way:

> "The Most Blessed Trinity, all three Persons, through an intellectual vision, is revealed to it. . .[And] through an admirable knowledge the soul understands as a most profound truth that all three Persons are one substance and one power and one knowledge and one God alone. It knows in such a way that what we hold by faith, it understands, we can say, through sight—although the sight is not with the bodily eyes or with the eyes of the soul". (*Interior Castle* 7.1.6–7, in Payne [2017] 2023, p. 456)

Teresa states that she *experienced*, through *intellectual vision*, that the three divine persons were communicating with her and dwelling in her soul, an experience through which she came to cognize the "most profound truth" of the Trinity. Her vision did not bring to her new propositional knowledge; rather, it infused in her, in an entirely new way, the mysteries brought by revelation. What she had only grasped by faith thus became what she was now comprehending through clear and definite knowledge. When attempting to give an account of this way of knowing, she resorts to Augustine's categorization of biblical visions as corporeal, spiritual (or imaginative), and intellectual (truth presented in the mind in an immediate way). This triple paradigm dominated the understanding of visions throughout the Middle Ages and early modern times, and Teresa of Avila had learned of it (McGinn 2017, pp. 139–40, with reference to Saint Augustine, *Literal commentary on Genesis*, 12). Expressions such as "spiritual vision" and "intellectual vision" constitute a kind of oxymoron: the adjective suggests that no sensory seeing happens in the course of the experience, that no mediation through image is needed, while the word "sight" or "vision" signals (mediated) reception of knowledge. As we know, "seeing" is almost a synonym for "understanding"; in other words, it constitutes a "dead metaphor" (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, p. 55) since we almost forget its metaphorical nature when making use of it. "Light" works in the same way when referring to the cognitive faculty ("the light of natural reason") or to the domain of truth and knowledge" (cf. Psalm 36.9: "in your light we see light").

2.1. Spiritual Senses: An Epistemic Metaphorical Framework

Origen was the first to articulate the concept of "spiritual senses". "Seeing" constitutes only one of the perceptions at stake. Throughout the history of Christian spirituality, descriptions of the experiences of "hearing", "touching", and "tasting" God are common. Some of them record extraordinary experiences (though whether these experiences are related to bodily sensations is not always clear, especially among some of the women mystics of the Middle Ages), while others are metaphors deliberately constructed. For example, Guigo II (Guigues II le Chartreux), when expounding on the progress made by the practitioners of the *lectio divina*, deliberately develops the comparison between "taste" and "contemplation" (Egan 1976, pp. 111–12). However, Origen's spiritual senses should not be viewed as a set of "soul functions" parallel to the bodily senses; spiritual seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching are all metaphors for how we might know and grasp spiritual realities (cf. Howells 2020). Richard of St. Victor speaks of spiritual "seeing" or intellectual contemplation as an analogy based on sensory perceptions (Howells 2020; van Liere 2018). Although "spiritual seeing" involves purely spiritual operations and an object of cognition that, likewise, is purely spiritual, the operation is nevertheless *immediate*, *self-evident*, and *definite*, just as is the case for sensory perception, while reasoning goes through an abstract and indirect process (Copleston 1962, p. 193). What matters here is

that the introduction of "spiritual senses" as a category of its own distinguishes mystical experience from the realm of psychological emotions and allows us to map the former into a cognitive process.

2.2. Metaphor in Action

Within the realm of the five spiritual senses, visual metaphors are probably the most frequent. This is partly due to the influence exercised by the classical metaphorical tradition centered upon "light" and "truth". Another factor might lie in the fact that the elements composing an image can be easily described, analyzed, and expanded. John of the Cross consciously uses the metaphor of a window illuminated by sunlight to illustrate the union of the soul with God:

> "A ray of sunlight shining on a smudgy window is unable to illumine that window completely and transform it into its own light. It could do this if the window were cleaned and polished. The less the film and stain are wiped away, the less the window will be illumined; and the cleaner the window is, the brighter will be its illumination. The extent of illumination is not dependent on the ray of sunlight but on the window. If the window is totally clean and pure, the sunlight will so transform and illumine it that to all appearances the window will be identical with the ray of sunlight and shine just as the sun's ray. Although obviously the nature of the window is distinct from that of the sun's ray (even if the two seem identical), we can assert that the window is the ray or light of the sun by participation. The soul on which the divine light of God's being is ever shining, or better, in which it is ever dwelling by nature, is like this window, as we have affirmed." (*The Ascent of Mount Carmel* 2.5.6 in Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991, pp. 164–65).

This image describes the soul as it receives light (truth/God) and is filled with it. The object of cognition is no longer external to the subject; rather, it enters and transforms her soul. To that effect, the subject needs to perform on herself the twin operations of "cleaning" and "polishing", a daily labor, the evocation of which will flow naturally from the original image. The very fact of associating into a whole mutually related experience expands the scope and depth of spiritual understanding.

The present case well illustrates what is at stake: since Origen and the Desert Fathers, the "purification" of the soul has been seen as a prerequisite for interpreting the Bible and explaining its mysteries. The word "purification" itself is a metaphor, which will call for further specifications: washing with water, refining with fire, or practicing file carving are all different actions leading to purification. Some of them are perceived as softer than others, and some are violent and painful. These evocations trigger further associations; they lead the reader to imagine how the soul can be examined and exercised in order to foster virtue and help the subject become a recipient of divine knowledge and grace. Faithful to such tradition, John of the Cross repeatedly mentions that mystical knowledge of God (unlike ordinary knowledge, which requires the mediation of the senses) is transmitted directly to the soul. John of the Cross does not describe his visions the way Teresa did for hers, but he resorts to metaphors to express their immediacy. The soul, or the highest part of it, must appear "naked" before God; it must "deprive" itself of everything that wraps around the spirit. Because the soul is used to living in a world that is constructed by the senses, like if it were in a dungeon, it remains alienated from supernatural mysteries (*Ascent*. 1.3.3; *Ascent* 2.17.3, in Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991, pp. 122, 206). The realignment of the soul corresponds to its "purification" and "simplification". In this specific thread of metaphors, prejudices, concepts, fantasies, emotions, and sensory desires are "externalized", described as being the clothes of the soul or yet as the prison barriers that surround them. They need to be stripped off and removed until nothing needs to be taken away anymore.

2.3. Metaphors on Fire

Expanding the scope and degree of intricacy of a given metaphorical set constitutes another device through which the effect that mystical knowledge exercises upon the soul can be expressed. Let us continue to reflect upon the example offered by John of the Cross: the light reflected on the glass window is inseparable from the window itself. The substance of the window still exists, but, from the outside, one can no longer "see" the difference between the two. Windows become light by participating in it. Another traditional metaphor, also beloved by John of the Cross, evokes divine love/divine truth in the form of fire. It comes with a stress on the transformative effect of the latter:

> "We ought to note that this purgative and loving knowledge (or divine light) we are speaking of, has the same effect on a soul that fire has on a log of wood. The soul is purged and prepared for union with the divine light, just as the wood is prepared for transformation into the fire. Fire, when applied to wood, first dehumidifies it, dispelling all moisture and making it give off any water it contains. Then it gradually turns the wood black, makes it dark and ugly, and even causes it to emit a bad odor. By drying out the wood, the fire brings to light and expels all those ugly and dark accidents that are contrary to fire. Finally, by heating and enkindling it from without, the fire transforms the wood into itself and makes it as beautiful as it is itself..." (*Night* 2.10.1, in Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991, pp. 416–17)

In the Greco–Latin world, the metaphorical meaning attached to fire was first developed by Heraclitus. Within the Christian tradition, the use of the fire metaphor can be traced back to the Greek Fathers and to their observation of the process of iron smelting: iron plunged in fire gradually becomes as hot and as red as fire, but, at first, it maintains its nature. Relying upon this image, St. Maximus tried to explain the relationship existing between the two natures of Christ: in every act of Christ, humanity and divinity are clearly different, and yet they are inseparable, like a sword put in the fire, which hacks as iron and simultaneously burns as fire. Gradually, this metaphor was applied to the relationship between the human will and the will of God as the exercitant entered the spiritual struggle (Lossky 1957, p. 146). Similar statements were often made by the Franciscans and by Spanish mystics, both deeply influenced by Augustinism. Hugh of Saint Victor vividly describes how the flame "takes hold of the wood", and, when fanned by a stronger draft, begins to ignite the wood, raising thick black clouds of smoke that make the flame almost invisible; then, bit by bit, all the moisture in the wood is driven out, the smoke and steam disappear, and there remains only light and a blazing flame. When the flame embraces the whole of the wood, the latter becomes exactly like the former. All the crackling has disappeared. There is no longer any difference between fire and wood, and all is silent, just as the soul is totally transformed into the fire of love and feels that God is truly all in all (see A Benedictine Monk of Stanbrook Abbey 1954, p. 29). From a slightly different perspective but using similar images, Eckhart, when speaking of the soul being "ignited in the love of the Holy Spirit", also describes how the fire ignites and decomposes the wood, removes its roughness and coldness, makes it different from what it was and more and more akin to the fire. . .until the fire gives the wood its own unique nature and being, and thus makes everything the same fire (Eckhart 2004; Duclow 1983).

As we have seen, the metaphor of the fusion of fire and iron/wood was first used to better grasp the concept of the two natures of Christ, which is loaded with logical difficulties. The concept becomes "embodied", existing in the world of our lived experience and not suspended in dialectical abstraction anymore. Transiting in time, the same metaphor is used to describe the process and purpose of spiritual exertion. Supported by a strong visual image, concepts such as "deification" or "mystical union" are no longer empty words; they become intelligible, at least partially. We "see" how the process that these words designate can possibly take place. Furthermore, when the metaphor used for speaking of the human component no longer relies on iron but shifts to wood, the fragility and perishability of

the soul are highlighted. Step by step, from the objective and detached observation of the sword in the fire to a more vivid description of the action of the fire and of the union of fire and wood through the painful transformation of the wood in the fire, there occurs a shift in cognitive emphasis as well as a shift in spiritual climate.

3. Embodying the Absence

3.1. Experience and Interpretation

Assessing the extent to which metaphors can express mystical experience and load it with epistemic significance requires us to ascertain the nature of the relationship existing between experience and interpretation. Whenever William James' account of the characteristics of mystical experience (ineffability, noetic quality, transiency, and passivity) is followed (see James [1902] 2008), authors frequently privilege the categories of ineffability and passivity in order to highlight the transcendental source of said experience. The question that necessarily arises depends on how these two characteristics relate to the cognitive quality of the experience being described. Post-Kantian discussions on knowledge need to account for the way the cognitive process relies on constructions actively operated by the mind. According to the way mystical authors describe them; mystical experiences are a *given* insofar as they are mediated neither by reason nor by the senses. However, to be aware of an *experience* (and not just of a sensory stimulus) requires an understanding and grasp of what has been happening—an understanding that allows for a clear and conscious statement: "I experienced/I underwent such or such experience". Said otherwise, the mind needs to give a "form" to what it receives, a form that can be grasped by reason and the senses. Otherwise, we are confronted with an indescribable "primary matter". As underlined by Steven Katz, every experience is an interpreted experience. Experience is fraught with interpretation as soon as something is experienced. From the start, experiencing something means interpreting it (Katz 1978; see also Howells 2020).

The former statement differs from James' claim that mysticism has a core of "pure experience" prior to interpretation, independent of the period, culture, religion, and language of the mystic. This "common core thesis" has been supported and attacked from different perspectives (see Gäb 2021). As a matter of fact, in the context of this article, the question of whether or not there exists some kind of "raw mental content" preexisting the metaphorical operation needs to be relativized. When paying close attention to the way mystical experience is presented, we find that, beyond basic metaphorical expressions, the stress is actually on *silence*—not only the silence of language and thinking, but also the silence of sensibility and imagination. Here, again, we are meeting with a paradox: although it is possible to say that all mystical discourses eventually return to silence, they cannot be reduced to "mere silence". When the mind "passively" receives something (is infused with something), it still must resort to an intelligible utterance (a metaphor, an image), which will enable it to "possess" and "deliver" what has been experienced. The verb "to infuse" metaphorically describes the process through which passivity goes along with appropriation and, later on, communication of the experience: an "inexpressible" experience will be substantiated through the process of reception and assimilation and will thus become cognized and communicated. Therefore, even if there is a "core mystical experience", a raw mental content infused into the mind, such core content still needs to be "formed" by a metaphor so the experience may be truly realized.

3.2. Experience of Absence and Absence of Experience

The fact that mystical experience is communicated through metaphors emanating from daily life does not identify mystical experience with everyday experience. On the contrary, the pivotal "experience of absence" emphasized by the mystics is made possible by means of down-to-earth metaphors. Following the path of apophatic theology, mysticism has always been critical of those trying to grasp God through sensory and, more precisely, "sensual" experiences—the latter different in nature from the ones delivered by the ordinariness of everyday life. The "divine darkness" of Gregory of Nyssa, the "desert [*wuste*]" and the

"ground" of Eckhart, the "dark night" of John of the Cross, or yet the frequent references to the "wounds of love" throughout the mystical tradition, all of them embody a lived contradiction: the most intense embodiment of the experience of God lies "in the negation of experience and in the negation of the negation so that everything is denied and nothing is abandoned, so that all things lead to a God who is beyond what they lead to, by means of ways, which are the active practice of the denial of ways' (Turner 1995, p. 272). This is the ground upon which Denys Turner offers a pointed critique of William James, who, in his perspective, develops a pragmatic view of mysticism joined to a strong empirical orientation. Turner distinguishes the "experience of [God's] absence" (which experientialists such as James are looking for) from the "absence of experience" at the core of what is expressed by Pseudo-Dionysius, Eckhart, John of the Cross, and others. The "experience" that apophatic theology talks about is a kind of "no-experience", an experiential vacuum, i.e., a break in humankind's experience of God, rather than an attempt at grasping God as "experienced", even in his absence. Mysticism is "a failure of experience", which paradoxically reveals that our humanity is united to God *prior to experience*. The mystical union, which the mystics express in terms of annihilation, darkness, wounds, etc., is essentially a union of grace that transcends any experience (Turner 1995; Howells 2020).

As strong as the insights just summarized may be, let us note that the perspective offered by Turner is also criticized for its one-sidedness. When looking at the history of mysticism from a holistic perspective and pondering over the accounts delivered by mystics such as Ignatius of Loyola, Teresa of Avila, and others, it is impossible to discard the fact that "experiencing God" is a statement that also receives positive content throughout the mainstream of Western spiritual literature (McGinn 1997).

3.3. The Setting of the Placeless

This is where our focus on the cognitive use of metaphors may clarify the issue at stake: the central metaphors mobilized by the mystical tradition always perform a double task. They express two experiences—or, equivalently, two absences—at the same time: the "experience of God's absence" and the "absence of experience". Let me give an example: on the one hand, an expression such as "dark night (*noche oscura*)" suggests a deprivation of feeling, or otherwise, a breakup in experience; on the other hand, the same expressions also display a strong visual picture, felt, "seen" or imagined by readers. Likewise, the word "desert" signals emptiness. While suggesting the detachment or removal of everything, it also creates a place, a setting, which we can make use of. Precisely because they strive to avoid reducing the experience of the Divine to the sensory level, the mystics make frequent use of rhetorical contradictions so as to create breaks or fissures within the imagery they use, thus expressing how the seeker "experiences" and "realizes" what apophatic theology speaks (and does not speak) about.

Let me further mention "the greatest darkness", which "illuminates the sightless intellects" (Pseudo-Dionysius, *Mystical Theology* 1), or yet "silent music, [the] sounding [murmuring] solitude" in John of the Cross's *Canticle* (Stanza 14). This kind of contradictory splicing evokes in the reader's mind a seemingly perceptible and intelligible experience and simultaneously introduces in the reader's perception a gap that makes her feel that she is unable to fully grasp what she has been approaching. Eckhart employs the metaphors of "ground [*grunt*]" and "abyss [*abgrunt*]" as the basis of his mystical theology. These two metaphors explain each other while standing in opposition: the limitless and uncreated "ground" in the human soul is the same as the boundless "ground" of God, with Eckhart pointing towards an "inexpressible placeless place" (see Mieth 2012 for references and contextualization), where God and the soul are united mystically through detachment. At the same time, the essence of the soul is also an abyss, entirely empty, deprived of images, into which only God pours himself endlessly. The abyss of the soul is also the abyss of God. The "identity" to be found between the soul and God refers to both the ground and the abyss (Radler 2020).

One must allow that, in the Church Fathers or in Eckhart, going the "apophatic way" did not imply undergoing any empirical experience. In contrast, in the sixteenth century's spiritual literature, mystical statements are clearly loaded with an empirical dimension, even if the latter does not exhaust their intent and meaning. As mentioned above, John of the Cross does not merely evoke the "darkness of the intellect" the way Pseudo-Dionysius does. When evoking "the emptiness of the memory" or "the nakedness of the will", he clothes the negative in a number of experiential images: being rejected, deprived, purged, emptied, naked, etc. Somehow, "being "deprived of experience" is made into a new experience. At the same time, as John of the Cross constantly reminds us while describing the journey of the "fourfold night of the soul", each time that detachment or deprivation coalesces into a fixed experience, we may need to enter again into a process of deprivation—to learn anew to become deprived.

4. Metaphorical Spacetimes

Metaphors provide mystical experience in an intelligible and, concurrently, self-deconstructing (or self-transcending) form, the latter originating from the way metaphor accommodates self-contradiction in the formulation it takes. Going one step further, the cognitive function of metaphor consists in that it enables mystical experience—essentially "timeless"—to acquire a specific structure in space and time. Not only do metaphors allow for mystical experience to be realized, appropriated, and communicated, but they also create a place that we can "inhabit" shape a road, and explicit a process. Said otherwise, the knowledge brought about by mystical experience is not only propositional; it is also a kind of practical knowledge, thanks to which the seeker himself will be transformed.

4.1. Teresa of Avila: Progressing towards the Inner Room

The "Interior Castle" of Teresa of Avila provides us with one of the most refined and structured metaphors that spiritual literature contains.

> "I began to think of the soul as if it were a *castle*[4] made of a single diamond or of very clear crystal [. . .] *Let us now imagine* that this castle, as I have said, contains many mansions, some above, others below, others at each side; and in the centre and midst of them all is the chiefest mansion where the most secret things pass between God and the soul." (*Interior Castle*, First Mansions, chp. 1, in Peers 1946, pp. 201–2)

The image of the castle is generally supposed to have emerged spontaneously from Teresa's unconscious, while related images, such as the "four waters" that water the garden of the soul, are believed to have been constructed consciously (Minnema 2012; on the formation and transformation of the castle imagery, see also Coelho 1987)[5]. In any case, basing herself on the structure of a typical castle in Spain in the 16th century, Teresa was able to organize the continuously intensified experience of her life, so that her visions, locutions, raptures, and ecstasies, which she experienced as obscure and disordered in her early years, could be set in a systematic description. The castle defines a starting point and an orderly journey towards the innermost center. Teresa also invites her readers to imagine and to walk with her, as they do with the founding metaphor. Facilitated by spatial orientation (from the first mansion to the seventh one), the steps along spiritual progress can be clearly demarcated: experiences, virtues, and challenges can be neatly grouped into the various mansions. Teresa does admit that as the experience deepens, making distinctions becomes a more and more difficult task, and the differentiation between the last three mansions is less clear than is the case for the others. Whatever the case may be, the work of spiritual direction that Teresa accomplished here through her authorship would have been inconceivable without the metaphorical tool provided by the castle analogy.

The "soul-garden" metaphor (which Teresa made use of in her *Life*) and the castle imagery are of a similar nature in that they both depict a space dedicated to inner activities, allowing the concept of interiority to be made clear and perceptible. The imagery of the

soul as a "closed garden" (*hortus conclusus*) originates in *Song of Songs* 4:12. The symbol has a rich history and, in the context proper to Teresa, evokes the daily labor of watering the monastery's garden; the different stages of prayer are distinguished by metaphors referring to different methods of labor (Lottman 2010; McGinn 2017, p. 146). Both the garden and the castle are closed spaces. They speak of an existence lived in seclusion and of a desire to be alone with God/Christ. But the imagery of the castle portrays in a clearer fashion an itinerary of introversion and "the most secret intercourse" that takes place between God and the soul (*Castle* First Mansions, chp. 1; Minnema 2012). In the garden, there is "water from heaven", while canals and wells are not clearly positioned. In contrast, in the immense inner castle, only the "bridegroom's room" located at the hidden center is emitting light, and it calls those who dwell in outer mansions to greater perfection (*Castle*, Seventh Mansion, chp. 4). Water, the source of life, the light of the origins, and the tree of life have all been "transplanted" into the soul center. Although Teresa admits that there are many different paths in the castle and that different people may circulate through different mansions, all these ways lead to the same center. Those who have entered the Reformed Carmelites have abandoned the external world, and they must learn how to open up spaces and paths within themselves. To that effect, the metaphors that Teresa of Avila mobilizes undoubtedly provide them with indispensable tools.

4.2. John of the Cross: Journeying by Night

John of the Cross also makes use of metaphors that construct a temporal and spatial itinerary. His core metaphor—night—is immediately reminiscent of the "divine darkness" glossed over by Gregory of Nyssa and the Pseudo-Dionysius. (Regarding the extent to which John of the Cross' "night" may have originated from the "darkness" metaphor in the Church Fathers, see Louth 2007, pp. 174–77). However, in contrast with the spatial imagery of the castle, the word "night" primarily expresses a change in time, and the advancement of the fourfold night makes the beginning, middle, and end of the pilgrimage all shrouded in different stages of night (*Ascent* 1.2–3, in Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991, pp. 120–23). The soul takes the figure of a night traveler, and the difficulties, challenges, and opportunities that a traveler may encounter in the night can be naturally compared to the process of spiritual development, making the metaphor of "darkness" move from a static and ontological level to a dynamic, psychological, and experiential dimension.

There is a difference between our two mystics: the first decisive action of the spiritual journey that Teresa underwent was to *enter*. The outside of the castle is full of filth and danger, and the decisive step is to step into the castle. The outer wall of the castle is a symbol of security, dividing the inside from the outside. In contrast, John of the Cross's first action is to *depart*, leaving the cabin that symbolizes self-centeredness and worldly attachments. The walls of the house refer to worldly desires. "I went out unseen, /my house being now all stilled" (*Night*. Stanza 1, in Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991, p. 113). The journey within Teresa's castle continues to converge toward the center, thus testifying to the deepening of the prayer of recollection (*recogimiento*): the bridegroom attracts the soul in such a way that the desire felt by the latter may become more and more intense and her contemplation more and more concentrated, till she is free from everything except himself. As to the process of exploration evoked in *La noche oscura*, it overlaps with the spatially-oriented process described in the *Ascent of Mont Carmel*. In the night, the soul constantly undergoes deprivation; her luggage becomes lighter and lighter, and the road into the deepest night identifies with possessing and desiring "nothing". Only when the soul is completely anchored in "nothing" (*nada*) can she possess "all" (*todo*)—reaching, in the same movement, the top of the mountain (*Ascent* 1.13.11; Howells 2023).

The use by Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross of different spacetime metaphors may reflect differences in their psychological makeup (Minnema 2012). At the same time, these two different journeys respond to each other insofar as they both culminate in "spiritual marriage". Teresa sets the presence of Christ (the bridegroom) at the very center of the castle, while John of the Cross' beloved one (*El amado*) waits in the garden like the lover in the

Song of Songs. At the same time, *El amado* is configured to "the mountains, lonely wooded valleys, strange islands" (*Canticle*, Stanzas 14–15, in Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991, p. 473) that appear in a distant landscape. Interpersonal exchanges and internalized pilgrimage become one: the intimate lover who is waiting in the inner room and the stranger, located in the distance, are intertwined into the figure of the same bridegroom. With the interweaving of such metaphors, two mystical traditions—neo-Platonic and Christ-centered—reinforce each other's impact on the consciousness of both the author and readers, doing so in an intuitive and holistic fashion.

5. Weaving and Interweaving Metaphors

We come to the last stage in our investigation of the cognitive function fulfilled by metaphors in spiritual writings: their usage brings into contact the everyday world, on the one hand, and the sacred (or mystical) world, on the other hand, allowing for the surge of a two-way communication channel. Mystical literature creates a world of symbols (here, we do not draw sharp distinctions between symbols and signs, metaphors and similes). This metaphorical universe functions as a set of tools through which transcendental realities can be explored—at least to a certain extent—and self-transformation endeavored. Every mystic has recourse to her or his favorite core metaphors. Some metaphors reflect the distinct psychological characteristics of these mystics or bear the imprint of their times and cultures. Other core metaphors have been passed down throughout history, and they have been increasingly recognized as symbols of a widely shared experience (widely shared, at least within the Christian world and sometimes also outside its frontiers). Among this set, the literality of some metaphors, considered signifiers, has undergone subtle changes, and the meaning of the signified has been expanded. For example, the word "darkness", which first symbolizes the unknowable nature of God, has given way to "dark night", which applies to the spiritual dynamic in its entirety. Alternatively, some metaphors keep the signifier unchanged, but their signified has changed. For example, for the Church Fathers, the word "desert" was referring to a concrete place of encounter with God, a place destined for such an encounter by its emptiness and also by its distance from the hustle and bustle. This concrete spatial anchorage has gradually evolved into a twofold mystical imagery: on the level of transcendence, it refers to the pure, indifferent, and infinite divine nature, to "divine nothingness"; on the level of immanence, the "desert" metaphor prompts people to enter into an operation of self-emptying, seeking in this way the "inner desert". Additionally, the inner desert itself is represented in the model of the divine desert. The equivalence between transcendent and immanent images allows the mystics to describe how human nature may enter into union with God (McGinn 1994).

5.1. A Process of Growth and Interaction

The above highlights a twofold principle of intelligibility: (a) metaphors are constantly "growing" throughout the interaction between experience and language. (b) Different metaphors are related to each other by virtue of their similarities or contrasts, so that the realities they refer to are connected and fused with each other, opening up a wider, new field of mystical experience. The essential emptiness and infinity of the "desert" invite people to embark on a journey, to "leave home". The infinite horizontal extension of the desert echoes the infinite vertical extension that is evoked by two other metaphors—the mountain and the abyss. In turn, these two last metaphors have seen their meaning extended. The mountain setting introduces a specific Biblical narrative: it is first and foremost the place where the prophet is called to leave the crowd and meet God. In conformity with such a narrative thread, in the writings of Gregory of Nyssa and Dionysius, the processes of ascension and purification merge into one as they clear the road that leads to the summit of divine darkness. When it comes to John of the Cross, the narratives of Mount Sinai and Mount Carmel are similarly united, while the road this time leads to "nothing" at the peak. The mountain at its highest and the abyss at its deepest seem to occupy two opposite spatial positions, but in terms of their "darkness" or "emptiness", their way of referring is

identical. Saint Bernard of Clairvaux had made an extended use of the verse "Abyss calls upon abyss" (Psalm 42:8) in order to convey the following teaching: the divine abyss of God calls upon sinners, and this divine calling finds an echo in the abyss of the human heart. William of St. Thierry had spoken of the unfathomable depth of the abyss in order to describe the depth of the divine embrace: in this life, the soul sinks deeper and deeper into the embrace of the Holy Spirit (McGinn 2017, p. 216). In the case of Hadewijch, the abyss metaphor is endowed with an even more mystical and experiential significance: in love, God and Nan become a "mutual abyss". The abyss of God leads to man, and the abyss of man leads to God. Thus, most paradoxically, it is the depth, the "bottomless" of the abyss, that makes the abyss a passage, a road (Hadewijch 1980, p. 86; see also Leclercq et al. 1961, p. 435). For Hadewijch, the image of the abyss even awakens associations with "hell", here related to divine love: "Hell is the seventh name/of this love wherein I suffer./For there is nothing that love does not engulf and damn/As hell turns everything to ruin..." (Quoted in McGinn 2017, p. 204) This metaphor pushes the paradox and pain of divine love to the extreme. Though this usage of the abyss metaphor did not become widely shared, we cannot help but perceive its filiation in the way John of the Cross speaks of the agony of abandonment in the dark night of the spirit.

5.2. The Arrow and the Needle

Another common metaphor that refers to mystical suffering is "wound." Our authors typically evoke the experience of being stabbed or punctured, implying at the same time that, through such an operation, God (Divine Love) enters the soul. Thus, wound, as a metaphor for God's most intimate presence, forms an opposite with another kind of suffering: the experience of alienation, of being abandoned by God in the midst of the dark night. Teresa has recorded her mystical experience of being wounded by an angel's arrow, vividly representing how intense and violent Divine Love can be in action. Teresa presents her vision as a mystical gift. Still, we can also draw an analogy with another well-known metaphor, which, conversely, is deliberately constructed and very down-to-earth. When François de Sales describes God's work in the soul, he compares God's action of endowing the soul with virtues to the work of a needlewoman who endeavors to embroider flowers of various colors on a piece of pure white satin. The embroiderer lays the silk, gold, and silver, but the needle is never left in the satin, it merely makes the silk, gold, and silver pass. As the needle passes through the satin, beautiful flowers progressively take shape (*Traité de l'amour de Dieu*, 11.16 in François de Sales 1616, pp. 691–92). Hence, when God embroiders virtues into the soul, he first passes through it with "the needle of fear", causing it to feel like a prick. In this metaphor, "sting" is only the precursor of love; it manifests itself through the fear of being damned, a fear that will eventually be dispersed by the tender and sweet divine love. This metaphor is evidently softened and routinized by François de Sales, though the fear he mentions undoubtedly echoes the strong terror he was experiencing in his youth when thinking that he was possibly meant to be condemned to hell, obsessed as he was then by the idea of predestination (Bremond 1916, p. 85). Through the metaphor of embroidery, intentionally constructed, François de Sales educates his readers on the suffering involved in the process of spiritual progress while putting his own personal experience into context.

What needs to be noted in this last example is that the wound felt by the soul is no longer a highly intense, rare, and extraordinary experience (as is the case in Teresa's account), which could only be obtained at the peak of the spiritual journey. Rather, it has become the expression of the realities proper to everyday labor. François de Sales thus makes it easier for his lay readers to relate the difficulties and pains encountered in ordinary life to their spiritual and even mystical journey. The arrow has become a needle, but it is the same God who, in both cases, pierces the soul.

6. Conclusions

There are several ways of understanding and modeling the operations that allow for the cognition of things divine (starting with the model that denies the very possibility of grounding such cognition). Still, these models are interrelated and interdependent by the very fact that they share the commonalities of human language (Vermander 2023). Among these various modes, the knowledge brought by metaphor is not of the kind that is rationally deduced or induced, nor is it limited to providing "objective knowledge" expressed analogically. It does not correspond to the reception of external revelation "by faith alone." And it should not be too rapidly equated with "knowledge of the unknowable" obtained by the apophatic way. Rather, it belongs to the realm of experiential knowledge. It is to be seen as a form of practical knowledge that is acquired through personal engagement and communion with God. When Jean Gerson sought to establish "mystical theology" as an "experimental science" that elucidates a type of knowledge arising from inner experience, he drew upon Pseudo-Dionysius' distinction between the symbolic, speculative, and mystical theologies, showing that mystical theology is grounded upon the operations that take place in the innermost, that is to say, in the hearts of the devout souls, while symbolic and speculative theologies are grounded "externally" (*extrinsecus*) (Vermander 2023, p. 436).

The analysis I have developed on the way mystical metaphors operate may relativize Gerson's distinction between the "inside" and the "outside". Some of the metaphors favored by mystics come from direct, immediate visions; others are derived from the rational construction of daily experience; and still others may have been first unconsciously captured by the mind, taking shape in the consciousness together with the arising of a mystical experience. Metaphors themselves operate across boundaries between experience, rationality, revelation, and even the unconscious. In fact, the "inside" and the "outside" are themselves spatial metaphors related to the activity of the mind, which shows again how metaphors shape concepts and experiences. Today, working within the *episteme* proper to our time and challenging further the distinction between the inside and the outside, we could ask ourselves whether a Mobius ring or a Klein bottle would not provide us with new and more adequate metaphors when attempting to give an account of the relationship between God and the soul.

Metaphors ascribe a language/action perspective to the ineffable and the transcendent. Conversely, they confer sacred value on "ordinary" realities, inviting us to "contemplate" them. A scene, an object, or an action that is anchored into everyday realities and yet is used as a mystical metaphor is, in some sense, "consecrated." "The visible is the sacrament of the invisible" (Valentin 2001, p. 36). To borrow from Eliade's idea of religious symbolism, a symbol or metaphor causes the immediate reality to "bloom" (Eliade 1991, especially chp. 5). The verb denotes a reality that does not change in nature but that, no longer closed upon itself, opens up to another world. From the perspective of metaphor theory, metaphor is not limited to pointing out similarities between the ready-made attributes of two ready-made objects. Thanks to the structure that they confer on associations previously deprived of any, metaphors create new meanings, new similarities, and thereby define a new reality. When we connect two objects or realities through the mediation of a metaphor, our understanding of each other increases. The metaphorical association has enhanced and deepened the meaning found in each of them. The same is true for non-religious mystical experiences or, to put it another way, poetic experiences. Let us see how Georg Trakl juxtaposes "the nighting pond" with "the starry sky". The "nighting pond" is commonly considered a poetic metaphor for the "starry sky." However, Heidegger comments that the night sky, "in the truth of its nature", is the pond: what we usually call "night" becomes pale and empty when deprived of the associations in which the word is inserted, starting with the one of a pond (Heidegger 1971; Harries 1976; T. Clark 1986). Similarly, for the mystics, using "wound" as a metaphor for the action of divine love triggers a cognitive content that may be unfolded as follows: "wounding" in its essence corresponds to the effect of an act of love; the essence of love includes vulnerability; and love in act pierces, transforms, and renews the one who is loved. The same goes for "castle" as a metaphor for the structure of the

mind and for "night" when it comes to the spiritual journey. The metaphorical operation constructs a new reality, one that unites the sacred and the profane and fuses contemplation and action. In such a new reality, the mystic acts and lives "metaphorically", i.e., her inner experience is elucidated through her observation of the outer, and her outer life is radiated by her inner transformation. "Seeking and finding God in all things" means thinking and acting metaphorically, allowing metaphors to transform the way our consciousness relates to reality.

Today, we no longer live in castles, and the nights in our metropolises are certainly not shrouded in obscurity. As traditional metaphors leave real life behind, we feel that the world has been "demystified". And yet, the possibility of experiencing transcendence remains sustained by our ability to live symbolically. The creative reworking of traditional analogies and the crafting of unexpected associations and oppositions coming from the earthly realities that surround us foster new metaphors through which our inner space connects with an ever-changing external world. Ultimately, our desire to create new metaphors as well as our capacity to load with new meaning the ones we have inherited transmute our life journey into the space where an encounter with the mystery that we call God may take place.

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Notes

[1] For example, both for epistemological and political reasons, Hobbes assigned to himself the task of eliminating at its roots the use of metaphorical language, from which "monsters" had always arisen—even though figurative speech was constitutive of his own political science, as the eminently analogical title *Leviathan* already makes clear (see Stillman 1995). For Locke, passing sound judgment is an epistemic operation that first requires disassembling our spontaneous representations, "a way of proceeding quite contrary to Metaphors and Allusions" (*Essay on Human Understanding* II.xi.2, see S. H. Clark 1998, p. 243).

[2] This article privileges references to Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, and, to a lesser extent, Ignatius of Loyola and François de Sales. It tries to locate these authors in a genealogy that includes neoplatonician writers, Greek and Latin Church Fathers, as well as medieval mysticism. I also make passing references to Islamic mysticism. I am aware of the diversity of traditions and life settings covered by the term "mysticism". In her introduction to the *Cambridge Companion of Christian Mysticism* Amy Hollywood insists upon the necessity of relating mystical writings to the communal practices through which they took shape and that explain their variety. At the same time, Hollywood suggests a guiding principle that perfectly conforms to the perspective elected by the present article: "Early, medieval, and early modern Christian mysticism can best be understood as a series of ongoing experiential, communal, and textual commentaries on and debates about the possibilities and limitations of encounters between God and humanity as they occur within history, the time and place of the human as it is disrupted by the eternal God." (Hollywood 2012, p. 7) What could be called the "epistemological concern" of mystical writings helps us to interconnect texts that are otherwise strongly distinguished by their times and settings.

[3] I do not engage here in a discussion on "symbols", "symbolism", or "myth" in the comparative perspective initiated notably by Joseph Campbell. When it comes to this author, the nature and extent of the "knowledge" that myth and mythology would help us to attain remain ill-defined. In addition, metaphors and symbols do not always translate into myths. Teresa of Avila constructs a *metaphor* and not a *myth* of the inner castle. Still, Campbell's perspective has not been without influence on our topic: the title of the book by Lakoff and Johnson (*Metaphors We Live By*, 1980) directly refers to the best-seller of Campbell, *Myths to Live By* (Campbell 1972).

[4] Italics are mine.

[5] Luce López-Baralt has related the castle imagery in Teresa of Avila to a number of Sufi medieval texts (López-Baralt 2000, esp. pp. 75–85). Though suggestive, these reapprochments are to be considered with caution: "Seven-sectioned castles had appeared in some Sufi mystical works, but it is doubtful Teresa could have had knowledge of these, and her development of the image is quite her own. [. . .] The prioress's literary skill is evident in the flexible way she develops this master symbol." (McGinn 2017, p. 182). It remains true that the "soul-garden" and "water management" metaphors, shared by Teresa and John of the Cross, also

have Sufi antecedents. This may be due less to direct textual influences than to the culture and life setting created by the Arab presence in Spain.

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