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MYSTICAL WRITINGS AS LITERATURE¹

ABSTRACT. The common assumption that mystical writings may be something more than mere literature is perhaps the reason why textual analyses of such writings are rare. Focusing on archetypal images and themes as well as some recurring, distinctive rhetorical figures in mystical literature, this paper attempts to define the common ground it shares with secular literature, more specifically with lyric poetry.

Let me begin by saying that I didn’t have the slightest idea of the level of difficulty I would encounter when I chose my topic for this conference. The fundamental, preliminary question to be addressed here has the appearance of a simple one, but it is in fact a rather thorny and complex question: we have to decide whether mystical writings can be included in the vast body of human production that goes under the name of literature and, if it can, with what literary genre should we associate it. A fair amount of wisdom, literary sensibility, and sheer common sense is needed here to come up with acceptable definitions of the two key terms, “mystical writings” and “literature” (to say nothing of “literary genres”: if one asks, in fact, what are the distinctive features of a type of writing generally qualified as “mystical”, there would be a large number of diverse answers, as many, if not more, as one would get by asking for a definition of “literature”).

Leaving the dispute to those who like to dispute, flying low, with a little ingenuity and a lot of good will, we could simply remove this first double road block by virtue of exemplary references, that is, by taking as mystical writings (or, more precisely, as our reference body of mystical


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writings) the writings of *Scrittrici mistiche italiane* [Italian Mystical Female Writers], as well as of Maria Maddalena de’ Pazzi, Angela da Foligno, and Chiara di Assisi, all edited by Giovanni Pozzi; and by assuming, for literature, the authoritative definition of Northrop Frye.

For Frye, literature constitutes a world that is not identical to the world we live in, but parallel to it. Specifically, literature is a human construct that presents the world not as it is, but as it could be. The hypothetical nature of this world is what makes the poet a liar, Frye says, indicating, in some languages at least, the etymological association of the terms, “liar” and “poet,” an association of terms in perfect agreement with Torquato Tasso’s notion of the “verisimile” (not the truth, but a “lie” of the poet, which is more true than the factual events narrated in the epic, because it brings to the fore the most important symbolic value of the events themselves: “verisimile”, then, as the uttering of the poet who tells the truth that counts with a factual lie).

This notion of literature posits another apparently insurmountable block for us when we’ll try to apply it to mystical writings. That is so because the first, undisputed quality of the mystical word is the absolute sincerity with which it is uttered, and recorded in writing as the exact (at least in the intention of the writer) description of a human condition in a particular place, in a particular time. Notice that I didn’t say “spiritual”, or “psychological” condition since both terms may appear to be biased. We could comfortably say, however, that mystical writings are “reports”, or “descriptions” of the deepest feelings of a person, or of the interior life of a person (assuming everybody knows what that really is). With the only exception – as far as I know – of the seventeenth-century Italian writer, Torquato Accetto, in his *Dissimulatione bonesta*, of 1641, one does not make a practice, or a virtue, of lying to oneself. And the focus of mystical writings, even in the cases in which the confessions or diaries are not spontaneous but imposed upon the writers, has always been the self, the desire to look deeply into the self, and to describe it in words. To recap: writers of literature are “liars”, and mystical writers are sincere.

This appears to be another major preliminary block, but there is a possibility of removing it. Literature is, as Frye says, what is perceived as literature. He offers, to clarify, the example of Gibbon’s *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* as a work written as a history book, supposedly to tell its readers of what really happened that made the Roman empire decline and fall. But when, for the numerous factual errors and recognized biases that altered the historical truth, the book was abandoned as
a reference book of history, it was read as literature for its creative aspects that go beyond the “mere” chronicle of historical events. Another example, that reinforces Frye’s point, can be observed in the Italian milieu. When Francesco De Sanctis’ nineteenth-century monumental work ceased to be a manual (or, rather, *the* manual) of the history of Italian literature, it was read not as history anymore, but as literature: a rhetorical “promotion” that was certainly not envisioned by the author.

Should we then say, with Paul Valery, recalled by Frye in this regard, that the author is only the physical agent of production of a book, since the book appears to be written by the collective, creative, intellectual energy that is the essence of a book itself? This is a good question that helps us here in clarifying the issue of what is and what is not literature, although it is not really necessary for the recognition of mystical writings for which we shall make some propositions of our own, as we proceed further.

We have established, in any case, that some writings are, could be, or could become literature regardless of the intention of the author, or of the rhetoric (or of the rhetorical destination) of the text. Mystical writings, then, could at the very least be *read* as literature. This is as far as we had to come to initiate our analysis. But before we see where the implications of such a position could take us, we need to make another preliminary point, specifically on the motivation of a study of this kind. If there is some pride in the work of the critic, it is here, in contexts like the one that we are trying to establish, I think, that it should come to the fore: because it is the critic’s merit (and responsibility) to notice, report and expand on the motives that determine literary trends and other patterns of communal preferences. A study of this kind is undoubtedly connected to the more than historically legitimate and sociologically justifiable intellectual curiosity that we can perceive today in every expression of creative culture for all those phenomena with something mysterious in them, with some aspects of the irrational, or of the sacred, or, in any case, of the metaphorical expressions of the divine. It is not a matter that can be simply dismissed as a fashionable trend (and even as a “trend”, it should indeed attract serious sociological attention). Rather, the phenomenon should be approached as a reliable indication of a radical change that has happened under our own eyes, in our own times, in the perception of reality. The range of possible examples of this is as wide as the field of human activities in which change is not only appreciated, but also pursued as a necessity. One could speak here, on account of his notoriety and “scent” of cultural fashions, of Umberto Eco’s in-
terest in “irrationality”, “hype rationality” or, simply, “alternatives” to the lineal rationality inherited from the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, considered to be the foundation of modern culture, and society. A more popular example of the trend, and perhaps a more convincing one, is offered by the preference demonstrated in motion pictures and television for subjects dealing with the distant, the non-rational, the unknown and, last but not least, the extraterrestrial. From Eco to the “X Files”, from Postmodernity to McLuhan, everything points to changes that make our chosen topic a relevant topic of social criticism.

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We have finally reached page one of our unencumbered work on mystical writings and literature. And, of course, we are eager to open our toolbox of critical devices to test their validity and usefulness. These devices, especially for people who have learned from Frye the rudiments of textual analysis, are particularly effective in rhetorical as well as archetypal criticism. In terms of rhetoric, mystical writings are expressed primarily in confessions, memorials, diaries, and letters: all related to forms of fiction showing a great deal of introspection in which the ideal relation between writer and reader (a rapport that Frye calls “radical of presentation”) is a personal one, a one-to-one relation based on openness and confidence on one side, and understanding and support on the other. This kind of mystical writings (I refrain from the use of the term “genre” at this point, but we’ll see that it will become a useful possibility later) is often juxtaposed to another kind of writings, a more official, hieratic, even canonical kind of writings that includes the poems of St. John of the Cross, the Life of St. Francis of Assisi, his Fioretti, The Imitation of Christ and, in general, books for meditation with selections from the Old and New Testament. At this point, I think, we can make a broad distinction between two kinds of writings of sacred themes, corresponding to the two kinds of writings we find in the rejuvenated (by Frye) Poetics of Aristotle, lyric and epic poetry, once the dramatic genre is put aside because of its obvious, non pertinent peculiarities here.

We have then the possible association of mystical writings with lyric poetry. Unlike the sacred “epic” that focuses on stories and myths, giving relevance to the elements of time, the mystical writings we are interested in (expressed primarily in confessions, memorials, diaries, and letters) focus on images and visions, with more relevance assigned to the elements of space. Let’s try to complete this comparison between epic-
scriptural writings and lyric-mystical writings. This should bring us to a useful position to observe the phenomenon of mystical writings as sacred love poetry, with all the advantages, for critical purposes, that could come from an association with well investigated fields and genres of literature.

If it is true that images from the Bible constitute the basis of a good number of mystical writings, it is also true the majority of references are to the most lyrical of all books of the Bible, that is, to the *Song of Songs*. This confirms that we are on the right track in assimilating, for the purpose of textual analysis, mystical writings to lyric, love poetry.

The sacred epic, of which Frye is so fond (if nothing else, to distinguish it from his deeply investigated *Secular Scripture*) includes, with the Bible, The *Epic of Gilgamesh*, The *Edda of Snorri*, The *Egyptian Book of the Dead* and, here is Frye’s surprising inclusion, *Finnegans Wake* by James Joyce. Doesn’t this authorize us to assemble in one big group of texts the *Song of Songs* with secular lyric poetry and mystical writings? Not only it authorizes it, I think, it also helps us in suggesting specific areas of analysis.

In the scriptural epic, Frye recognizes the hieratic nature of the “messenger”, may he/she be the prophet anointed by God or the character of HCE (Here Comes Everybody) of *Finnegans Wake*. In mystical lyric writings not only do we find no hieratic dimension in the writer, but he/she is also not afraid to confess his or her own weaknesses, defects, errors and sins. Furthermore, in the scriptural epic the significant content is the story itself, the *fabula*, or the myth (the same thing from Frye’s point of view). The person that narrates, therefore, anointed or not, be he/she a poet or a revolutionary writer, is well aware of the resonance of the story which is therefore dressed up, so to speak, with an adequately refined, loftily, authoritative and solemn language. “La lingua del poema eroico,” Tasso said in his second treatise on the epic, should be “meravigliosissima”. As we turn to our lyric mystical writings, however, we find no “pomp and circumstances.” Instead of solemnity, we find informality; instead of pondered reflection, we find spontaneity, the immediacy of a direct, one-to-one communication.

Once the verbal construct ceases to be hieratic, official, historical and didactic, it shifts its focus from time to space, as we mentioned above. The verbal construct that carries a symbolically meaningful story or myth will have to obey the rules of chronology. Only at the end of the story the readers, or perhaps the listeners, can see the point of the story
itself, be it a classical myth, a parable of the Gospel, or an exemplum of medieval sanctity.

The elements of space, as opposed to the elements of time, are those we have to look for in the introverted messages of our lyric mystical writings. And so we have “visions”, “dreams”, “apparitions”, intermittent lights and halos: all perceptions which are episodic and discontinuous, often impossible to frame within a fabula or the recollection of a myth.

We are at a point now, where the revealing differences between our lyric mystical writings and the scriptural epics have amply served the purpose of defining our perimeter of research; we can now turn to another set of comparisons: between lyric poetry and mystical writings. The starting point of any lyric poetry, from the Song of Songs to the lines of the Provençal troubadours, to Dante, Petrarch, and the Petrarchists of various centuries and in different languages, is the “innamoramento”, the act of falling in love.

A corresponding act constitutes the initial stage of the mystical experience, or more precisely, as we shall see, of the mystical itinerary. A wish, a desire, an act of will, variously camouflaged by a more or less colourful episode of a sudden wound received by the unprotected heart of the poet, usually in a church setting as per the Petrarchan archetype, is the beginning, marked by a vision, of an experience of the sense of sight, as we remember in Dante’s Vita nuova when Beatrice “dà per gli occhi una dolcezza al cuore / che intender non la puo chi non la prova.” Similarly, in mystical writings the beginning of the described experience is inevitably a desire, a wish for perfection that follows an “illumination”, a visual understanding that is, in itself, an “innamoramento”.

The position of the lyric poet after the “innamoramento” is not just similar, but identical to that of the mystical writer. The poet works to reduce the distance between himself and the woman he has fallen in love with; he understands that the burden, or rather the responsibility of action is his own, hence the act of writing as an enticing activity as well as a form of consolation.

Correspondingly, in mystical writings we see that the necessity of abbreviating the distance between the writer and Jesus (the ultimate object of desire) is the real motive for action. Just like the poet, the mystical feels that the responsibility of action is completely upon himself, or herself; so he/she acts boldly in order to leave to the other the minimum to do, a gesture of assent, a smile, a sign of reciprocated love. When love
from the earthly side has been declared, the preparation begins of the soul to receive the visit of the bridegroom.

Lyric poets express their love in episodic and discontinuous ways in which memory plays an active role in supplying illuminating flashbacks, as in the picture of Laura “dolce ne la memoria,” recalled by the poet/narrator with a sigh, “con un sospir mi rimembra.” But perhaps the most obvious sign of discontinuity in lyric poetry is in the title itself that Petrarch gave to its painstakingly well organized, organic collection: *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*, that is *Fragments in vernacular*.

Similarly, the bulk of mystical writings is made up of fragments of spiritual life, of special moments of enlightenment that might have specific, and I would venture hallucinating, precision in the calendar. So, just as in Petrarch the “love story” begins at a precise point in time, on Good Friday, April 6, 1327, equally precise temporal parameters we find at the beginning of the mystical itinerary of Thérèse de Lisieux: “It was the 25th of December, returning from Buissonet, after the midnight mass” that for the first time she felt the extraordinary power of mystical love that will accompany her for the rest of her life. This perception took place in a visual manner through the rather insignificant appearance of her shoe filled for the first time with Christmas gifts. She was 14, and this experience, recalled in her diary as the entering into adulthood as well as the beginning of her mystical itinerary, is the perfect literary equivalent of Petrarch’s *innamoramento*. “After that blessed night,” she says, “I would not lose any fights with the forces of evil; on the contrary, I would advance from one victory to the next.” I shall drop this issue here, not without noticing, however, that other specific dates appear in the *Canzoniere* as well as in *Histoire d’une âme*.

The functions of time which we have abandoned in favour of the vision of space in order to recognize the similarities between mystical writings and lyric poetry, could now be retrieved perhaps, now that we have made our critical and rhetorical acquisitions, and want to explore more closely the fragmentary *fabulae* started with the “innamoramento.”

The other most significant episode in Petrarch’s *Canzoniere* is the death of Laura, hence the partition of the book, and of the story as well, in *rime in vita* and *rime in morte di madonna Laura* [poems written before and after the death of madonna Laura]. This is the point where the scaffolding that helped us in recognizing the literary structure of mystical writings is no longer needed or sufficient to support the high pinnacles of the mystical experience. The detailed description of the mystical experience within the parameters of the itinerary (an itinerary that recalls the
Itinerarium mentis in Deum, or the Ascent to Mount Carmel, or La scala per salire con la mente a Dio, respectively by Bonaventura da Bagnoregio, Juan de la Cruz, and Roberto Bellarmino) is yet another great critical achievement of Giovanni Pozzi. Pozzi’s various stages of the process that for us in literary criticism assumes the authority of a recognizable literary convention or, even more, of a rhetorical genre, are as follows:

1) The initial stage is determined by the motivation of love and desire of perfection.

2) This leads to a series of actions aiming at the annihilation of the self. So much has been said about this stage, and most beautifully in this very conference by Pozzi himself. I would simply add, from a literary point of view, that this stage corresponds to the lament of the poet and the desire for death so that, as yet again in Petrarch, the loved woman may come to the burial place of the poet, and finally recognize and accept his great love for her. The annihilation of the self in mystical writing does not simply correspond to the cleansing of the soul, so that it can be loved by the divine Bridegroom, but also to a number of poetic images such as the “dark night” of the soul of Juan de la Cruz. This idea of nothingness corresponds, in fact, to an active void that actually works as a vacuum: the transformation of the soul as a perfect place that invites and attracts the Bridegroom to come and rest in it.

3) The third and last phase is, of course, the phase of the mystical union: a point of arrival indeed, but also a point that calls for many returns. Lyric poetry at this stage has become a distant rhetorical relative of mystical writings, and possible comparisons could only be suggested by some of the most refined poems on sacred subjects by very few inspired poets. In my field of study, which is Italian Baroque literature, I can only think of Giovan Battista Marino and Angelo Grillo. This is because lyric poetry thrives on the distance between the poet and the woman. Finally, I started with Frye and I’d like to finish with him, with a quote from the concluding pages of The Great Code that illustrates well the spiritual nature of poetry as well as its relationship to mystical and sacred writings:

The language used in the Bible is, in short, the language of love [...] and wherever we have love we have the possibility of sexual symbolism: [...] a symbolic male God and a symbolically female body of readers.

Coming the other way is the body of human imaginative response as we have it in the literature and the arts. [...] Here the imaginative product seems to be symbolically female, the daughter of the Muse. [...] And it is perhaps only through the study of this, of works of human imagination that we can make any real contact with a level of vision beyond faith.”
**BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE.**