THE MYSTIC EXPERIENCE BETWEEN PLAY AND FOLLY

The itinerary that I set before you here within the area of sanctity (understood as a total devotion of human life to God, to the Biblical and Christian God, in cognition and will,) crosses its extreme and opposite boundaries of the euphoric and the disphoric experiences: the aspect of folly, and the aspect of play.

I. SANCTITY AND FOLLY

There is a history of men and women who have taken literally the sayings of Christ and St. Paul, and have received from God the terrible gift of holy folly: those who have followed the insidious path of presenting themselves to the world in the figure of the madman, or madwoman.

In the Christian East, the “fool for Christ” constitutes a regular category of sanctity which, in the martyrology, under the name of sàbos, is sided by the martyr, the doctor, and the virgin. In the West, instead, such a type of sanctity has rarely been acknowledged as such, even if the texts of St. Paul on folly have always been present to the Church.

A Holy Folly Imitated: The Infant, the Idiot, the Jester, the Savage

Foolish sanctity (I prefer this expression to the more common “holy folly”) is not homogeneous. One must distinguish a type of it that becomes specific as counterculture (against the dominant Christian cul-
ture) and that recognizes itself in the Gospel figure of the Infant, the Baby Jesus. What prevails in this case is the relationship between holy folly and spiritual infancy, and this implies a series of postures which appear to be provocative or scandalous, because they are adopted by adults who are expected to maintain gravity and decorum. But these postures do not carry with them the note of craziness: this is the witty and happy sanctity of St. Philip Neri, or the bitingly witty sanctity of Thomas More (who not for nothing is the dedicatee of the humanistic masterpiece on folly, the Encomium moriae of Erasmus, whose title is based on a play on words with the surname of the saint).

There is, then, a second type that leads to the figure of the idiot, the simpleton, the man with no talent or culture, but possessing an innate and inspired wisdom of his own. Analogous to that of the idiot is the type that leads to buffoonery. Ioculator is a derogatory term. Not only was the art of the ioculator forbidden to clerics, but it was also labelled as undignified for a person of good standing. Here we have a measure of the audacity of Bernard [of Clairvaux] and Francis [of Assisi] in defining themselves as ioculatores. Within this last variant, we see also the aspect of play; however, they do not fall within the category of true play on account of their motive, which in fact is not ludic, that is, unmotivated, but provocative; it is an overt manifestation of counterculture (even if in Francis, as I shall say, there is also the purely ludic aspect). It is not play, but a form of teasing.

One could also distinguish a type that leads to the wild man, to the man of bad manners, one who provokes by his public nudity, like St. Andrew the Fool, or by his filth, like St. Benedict Joseph Labre, or by consorting with dissolutes and prostitutes, like Theophilus and Mary, who pretended to be a mime and a prostitute during the day and prayed by night, or finally, like the Irish saints who lived in the woods, in styles of life patterned on those of the animals. It is here that, by definition, a condition of excesses is established, which necessarily implies psychological aspects analogous to craziness. On the other hand, the fruit of these excesses is apatheia, that is, indifference, and blessed peace of the soul.

A Compendium: Jacopone da Todi

Almost all of these aspects are summarized in the figure of Jacopone da Todi, both in his biographical traits and in his writings. It is Jacopone, a man of high standing in his society, who, naked, went through the streets of Todi on all fours, a bit in his mouth, pretending to be a
four-footed animal, the figure of an ass. It is Jacopone, the crazy man, who with his excesses, teaches a different kind of wisdom and derides human reasonableness. He went naked to his brother’s wedding, with his entire body covered with honey and coated with down from his mattress, to demonstrate how ceremonies and parties are only expressions of vanity. When someone gave him a chicken to take home, he brought it to the family tomb, to show that that was his home. And so he could sing, “It seems wise and kind to me to go mad for Christ who saved me.” All this insanity has its own correspondence to the event of God becoming human. The incarnation is described in the strong terms of the *Word* who goes wild and desperate and finds a dwelling in the depths of the human nature:

> O Cristo omnipotente - dove site enviato?  
> Perché poveramente - gite pelegrinando?  
> Perché pelegrinando - ve site messo a andare?  
> Molto me maraviglia - de questa vostra andata  
> Persona tanto altissima - metterse a desperata.

[O omnipotent Christ - where are you going?  
Why so poor - you go as a pilgrim?  
Why as a pilgrim - you decided to go?  
I am so surprised - by this going of yours  
A person of such high rank - to go so wild and desperate.]

Jacopone describes Christ exactly in the terms of the Eastern *sàlos*, or of the Cistercian and Franciscan idiot:

> Ebrio par diventato - o matto senza senno  
[ A drunkard he appears to have become - or a madman with no wits]

And therefore folly is the path to follow in order to meet Him:

> Non vol gir po 'l tuo Segnore?  
Non poi aver maiur onore  
Che 'n sua pazia conventare.  

[Don’t you want to go to your Lord?  
You cannot have a higher honour  
Than to enter in His folly.]

In all of the cases listed here, sanctity is connected with a folly that has no correspondence with clinical factors. But it would not be appropriate, for this reason, to call it simulated folly, because simulation has a negative connotation which implies a certain falsehood. This is not a theatrical setting, either, analogous to that of the actor who in the theatre re-
cites the part of the madman, *Hercules furens* or King Lear. The fact is that neither the medical code (which explains the phenomenon according to naturalistic parameters) nor the theatrical code (which explains it according to cultural parameters) are suitable to interpret it. One must have recourse to the theological code that is based on the dogma of the incarnation: the *Word* has saved us and brought us back to the state of sons of God, as Adam was, because of a love that makes no sense. So the figure of the senseless or foolish man reflects the figure of Christ, and therefore, thanks to the principle of the *imitatio*, it becomes a model, and thanks to the principle of discipleship (*sequela*), it becomes the prototype for a way of life. This is why I was speaking of imitated and not simulated madness. It is an imitation that does not at all imply a flight from reason; on the contrary, it starts with rational criteria and aims at a rational result, namely the reaching of a true wisdom.

**Clinical Folly and Sanctity**

More delicate is the case in which a clinically ascertained folly has become the means to forms of sanctity. The case of Jean-Joseph Surin is well-known; one of the greatest theoreticians of spirituality, he experienced a psychic illness experienced after his contact with the possessed woman of Loudon, Jeanne des Anges which was a depressive state, similar to a schizophrenic manifestation. Even more dramatic is the case of Louise du Néant, in which we find a close association between mystical itinerary and agitated, restless folly.

Louise was born an aristocrat, and bore the name of Louise de Bel-lière du Trouchay, near Angers. Educated according to her rank, after alternating periods of ascetic and mundane life, she decided to embrace the hermitic life, and joined a group of pious laywomen established by the Jesuit Guilloré. Here she experienced a series of hallucinations. Let us listen to her confessor-biographer, P. Maillard:

> Elle fut agitée d’une fureur si horrible, faisant des cris épouvantables qu’on ne put par aucune voie arrêter ses agitations; il n’était pas naturel qu’une créature humaine fit des hurlements, pareils à ceux qu’elle faisait… ses contorsions et ses cris redoublaient de telle sorte, qu’elle faisait horreur à tout le monde.

She would through the streets screaming, followed by a crowd of curious and unkind people who insulted her and accused her of witchcraft. Priests and friars would also come to see her and accused her of having drawn God’s wrath by her iniquities. After moving from hospice to
hospice, she was finally locked up at the Salpêtrière of Paris, the section for women of the Hôtel général. It held approximately three thousand patients then. As one suffering from the worst degree of madness, Louise was locked up in a cachot: a cell with one opening only for air and light, in which the patient was bound at the sides by an iron ring fastened to the wall, and had both hands and feet tied. Among the abominations of the Salpêtrière, there were also the visits of the curious, who amused themselves with the sight of the mad. After various phases of isolation and of common life with other patients, Louise meets a priest who sees in her a person touched by grace. The confessor is François Guilloré, doctor at the Sorbonne, and penitentiary of Notre-Dame. He understands, from the manner in which the woman describes her experience, that she is going through the mystic itinerary of union with God through the dark night and dereliction. The disease is then transferred onto a parameter of a different kind, and brought within the frame of a tested experience and of a theory drawn from it: mystical theology. A wholly spiritual approach is then established to Louise’s delirium, to which Father Guilloré knows how to give a different sense, a sense tied to the language of sanctity. Along this path, Louise discovers a certain balance, a certain serenity. The new approach was, then, not only hermeneutic, but also therapeutic. Louise reached a psychic state of normalcy for which she could be released from the Salpêtrière. But she didn’t want to. In folly, she had found her Lord, and she wanted to continue to be clothed in his aspects. Under the direction of her confessors, Louise regains her mental health, but does not become “sensible” again. She then lives an imitated follows, like that of the Eastern saloi and of the medieval idiots. The letters she wrote from the mental hospital to one of her spiritual directors, the Jesuit Briard, describe at length her own sottises, extravagances, folies. The spiritual directors, under the guidance of the most experienced among them, F. Guilloré (the author of that exceptional psychological introspection entitled Les secrets de la vie spirituel qui en découvrent les illusions) repressed her outbursts with a duress that may appear inhuman. We find ourselves here before a paradox that reverses the terms of the question. First, in the delirium of a true folly, the aspects of an authentic sanctity are perceived; then, in the appearances of an imitated folly, the spiritual directors see a threat. It is perhaps possible that, with Louise du Néant, whose sanctity is intertwined with folly in the most disquieting and spectacular manner, and thanks to the opposition of Guilloré, a totally new model of sanctity makes its appearance, a model that will be personified by St. Thérèse de Lisieux, a saint who
cultivates the ideal of sanctity as folly, but strips it of any extravagant behaviour.

The Follies of Asceticism

The practice of voluntary self-inflicted pain and distress is a constant of Christian spirituality. From the point of view of the evaluation of an individual’s sanctity, as it is tested in the official recognition of the Catholic Church, it constitutes one of the points determining the heroicity of virtues. From a theoretical point of view, it belongs to the category which spiritual masters designate as asceticism. It represents the “painful” reversal of the union with God that constitutes the object of mysticism.

In Christian asceticism, we can distinguish two aspects: one pertains to abstinence, the other to direct intervention on the body.

Abstinence refers to the sensory parameter, and may involve even the higher senses: sight, with the punctilious precepts touching on the theme of the lowered gaze, pushed to the extreme with the self-imposition of avoiding the sights of the beautiful spectacle of God’s creation; hearing, with the self-imposed distaste for song and music, even sacred music. But it involves particularly the lower senses of smell, with the avoidance of smelling any fragrance; touch, by avoiding also the most innocent of contacts, such as the wearing of clothes made of soft fabric; and taste, especially with fasting, pushed to extreme forms of an anorexic type.

The direct intervention on the body also relates to the entire sensorium, with the practice of focusing upon repugnant sights, with the voluntary listening to deafening sounds; but it regards also the inferior senses: smell, with the smelling of foul objects; taste, with the ingestion of disgusting foods; touch in particular, with the long list of self-flagellation, self-inflicted wounds (often with symbolic values, as with the incision of the name of Jesus on the skin), burns, nails inserted under the skin (Blessed Mary Magdalene Martinengo had thirty-three of them all over her body.) These are not fortuitous actions, but well-planned, following abstract schemes (the number thirty-three refers to the years of Christ’s life, but the actual insertion of the nails flows from the sorrowful interpretation of his existence). These actions are lived in an alternative, which is by and large an irremediable laceration between inexhaustible desire and tamed rebellion. This tension is often aggravated by awkward and crude spiritual direction, as in the case of Rosa Brenti, in the early nineteenth century. A Capuchin friar of no good
judgement imposed atrocities on her, and took away all consolations. Brenti left us texts of a brutal immediacy regarding her penances, whose direct impact contrasts with the equally overwhelming coolness with which Martinengo listed her own.

As she followed the order of her confessor to make an open wound more bitter with salt and vinegar, Rosa let herself go to uncontrolled supplementary self-punishments, moved by an impulse to assert herself against the harsh impositions and of revolt against the divine wishes. In these extreme cases a program of sanctity overflows in rage and fury:

Finally, I got up and began with the usual system. At every moment, I thought that I would fail, doing everything by force and rage, and not for love, as I should have done it. The order was that I had to wash the wound that tormented me with vinegar and salt to increase the spasms, as I had done in obedience on the Saturday night, complaining against him who had given me such a command, and even more. Again, I came to do the same thing the same night; and then, collapsed on the floor, I turned about and moaned like a beast. Seized by the pain, I thought that one devil would drive out another, and so I got up, and started to apply the discipline vigor-
ously; and did so for the last hour without resting one minute. I was shocked that I had borne so much, but attributed everything to the rage that devoured me. To say it briefly, I have spent an entire week in the crudest suffering, desperate. As I felt like cursing, at every moment, God, Mary, the saints, and the confessor, who seemed to me a tyrant, I cursed the moment I came to the world; I wished that they would kill me, so that I would stop using so much outward violence upon myself; because, in any case, it always seems to be my last moment to let everybody understand my painful state, even my extreme impiety. Who can retell the deathly violence that I do to myself for whatever apparently good deed I do, especially for receiving holy communion, since I see myself, so perverse, hated by Him who comes in me; but justly hated for my iniquities and my enormous faults that I continuously commit?

I try to describe my present state, but I see that I am only able to belittle what I suffer. My God, have pity on me! I obey mechanically, but without knowing obedience or faith.

Along this path we could continue for a long time, even if we do not often happen to come across formulations as violent as Brenti’s.

In the sector of direct intervention on the body, self-flagellation has assumed a particular relevance which has given to it different aspects. In it, there is distinction between a private and a public practice; individual, in the sense of self-flagellation, and reciprocal, when a person accepts or imposes to be flogged by another; voluntary or subject to legislation, that is, to be carried out by members of a particular association in certain places and times.

As to public flagellation, one ought to retrace the history of the flagellants and of the disciplinati of the late Middle Ages up to the beginning of the Tridentine period. It is the history of a bloody collective furor, which spread throughout Europe and involved the masses. Less known is the development of the same practice during the great popular missions, which mark the last decades of the seventeenth century and the first of the eighteenth, as they were developed by the Jesuits on the initiative of Paolo Segneri. The Jesuit missionary action is very complex, because it indicates a strategy in which several factors converge: the place, because it consists in missions preached to abandoned populations in rural areas; the time, because the missions took place outside of liturgical feasts. They required, then, the combination of an open place (not by chance, the apex of the action was the procession, with its stops in public places) and ferial time. The sermons were not written, but improvised; the word was mixed with the action, a spontaneous and immediate action, and so not theatrical in the proper sense of the term, since the missionary does
not play the part of another “character”. Because of this, it involved the people in the form of the most complete immediacy, and the result could only be one of reciprocal paroxysm, all the more intense for not being rigidly fixed or foreseen, although it was inspired by an original experience that used well-tested instruments to arouse emotions and bring them to extreme consequences. However different the two self-punitive forms, private and public, may appear in their development, they have a common root in the pessimistic conception of the human conditions after original sin, in the opinion of a corrupt nature which rises up in ourselves, almost as a second character which, since it is opposed to the part that is enlightened by grace, takes on the form of a non-self in a struggle with the true self.

One cannot avoid mentioning, at this point, the sense of unease that these facts, and the very conception from which they derive, create with respect to their analysis by the psychological sciences. They are facts that could be catalogued with those which psychiatrists, psychologists, and psychoanalysts would enter under the rubrics of scatology, masochism, schizophrenia, and suchlike. Hence derives the thesis according to which ascetical and mystical experience could be reduced to a series of pathological phenomena, a thesis which examines all the exteriority of that phenomenology without even touching its interior motive.

The Follies of Ecstasy

On this point it seems that theology and psychology are irreconcilable. Not being an expert in either field, I shall not enter the dispute. It is enough for me to observe that shifting attention from this sector to the totality of Christian perfection, this perfection is defined in the concept of the union with God: the divinization of man in response the humanization of God. A perfect union implies the resolution of the multiple into the one, and where the divine is in play, the one is all on one side. The debate, therefore, does not take place between self and not-self, but between God and not-God. If the attention turns to the side of the not-God, what emerge are instances of the clash, to which all the facts examined above refer under the concept of purification. If the attention turns to the side of God, the relationship may be conceived in the perspective of his presence or absence.

I note, in passing, that here too an analogous obstacle crops up in terms of the pathological evaluation of the facts in which the divine union manifests itself: visions, levitations, stigmata, fevers, rigidity of the body, delirium. As if, avoiding the Scylla of the afflictive morbidities of
scatology and masochism, we fatally run into the Charybdis of hysteria and catatony. But this is another subject which I will not follow up. A reference to the personal confessions of people who have experienced these phenomena is necessary here, since these are events whose impulses, if not always the manifestations, are to be found in interiority. We must distinguish between texts in which the effects of the union are described, from the places in which these effects are inscribed in the text itself and leave a trace.

In the diary of Veronica Giuliani, the theme of madness is like a thread that runs through her entire immense written work, especially the *Diary*, which she kept for about thirty years and which amounts to over twenty-two thousand manuscript pages. I must say a few words on Veronica’s writing. It took place under particular circumstances. The confessors would give her one booklet at a time, which the seer had to fill, without corrections and without re-readings. She wrote only at night, in extremely uncomfortable positions, on a small board placed upon her knees: a writing born out of the union of exterior darkness and the darkness of the soul. In terms of contents, there is very little of the exterior world in it; Veronica is wholly concerned with the description of her interiority. Object of her reports are not the nature and aspect of the divine things which manifest themselves to her, but rather the passing of their apparitions, their unfolding on the scenario of the self. Veronica writes completely in the present; her word yields itself directly, and unfolds without cultural mediation. For this reason, even the theme of madness does not refer to the tradition which I have recalled to this point, but it is applied directly, according to the concept then current. On the level of exteriority, her frequent nocturnal runs through the orchard, interrupted by her climbing trees, are particularly qualified as madness. On a November night, she climbs a tall pear tree: the description of the scene in which, with the north wind blowing, she invites all creatures to the love of God, is extraordinary (II 301). These events often have a symbolic value because they are linked to the search for God, who is hiding, as in the *Song of Songs*.

Andavo nell’orto e come pazza correvo ora in un luogo ora in un altro… non avevo visione alcuna… mi pareva di sentire il Signore ma non so come, dicevo Mio Dio palesatevi… non vi veggo, vi sento, dove siete? e correvo e lo chiamavo forte, ora andavo sugli alberi, stieti per buon tempo in un susino, non so come feci a tenermi.

[I would go to the orchard and like a madwoman I would run first to one place and then to another . . . I had no vision of anything . . . I thought I felt
the presence of the Lord, but I didn’t know how, I said, my God manifest yourself . . . I cannot see you, I feel you, where are you? And I called him loudly, and would go over the trees, I stayed for a long time on a plum tree, I don’t know how I kept myself up there.]

Similarly, she terms as madness the screams she cannot hold back: “I cannot do without screaming so loudly” (III 44), “I know it is madness, but I cannot stop myself.” (I 670), “I would run, and then I would sing, without finding rest; place, I’ve done these mad things, and I would do them always, if obedience did not retain me” (V 208).

Up to this point, her acts of madness are rash ones which escape her control. But more often, the term “madness” is connected to an insatiable desire which consumes her inwardly; what counts the most is the relationship of this sentiment with self-inflicted punishments. So many, intense and varied, are these self-inflicted punishments, that we hardly find anything similar anywhere else: beyond the usual practices of flogging, burning irons, thorns, wounds and incisions of sacred symbols deep in the flesh, she carried enormous weights (a chest still preserved today) which she moved at night in the corridors of the convent to repeat the ascent of the Redeemer to Calvary. Now the epithet of madness is not applied by her to the penances themselves, but to the insatiable desire to increase the ones she has already accomplished:

Io non so cosa sia. Più pene vengono, più sete mi sento di esse, e questo è un patire che fa l’aggiunta a tutti gli altri patimenti. Ma non lo so capire… Sento che mi spaventa… ma sento farmi come violenza, ma con impeto, che non posso trattenermi di non dire Signore più pene… O Dio che stravaganza è mai questa, non la so capire. (I 522).

[I don’t know what it is. More pains come, more thirsty I feel of them, and this is a suffering which is added to all the other sufferings. But I do not know how to understand it . . . I feel that it frightens me . . . but I feel as if I were suffering a violence, but with an impetus, so that I cannot refrain from saying, Lord, more pains . . . Oh God, what extravagance is this, I do not know how to understand it. (I 522)]

The saint notices that this excessive desire contradicts the path of annihilation of her will; and therefore she must renounce the desire of more pains; nonetheless, she feels called to wish for pains; but, asking for them, she feels pain for having sought them.

Sono stata ferma nel possedimento del patire e l’ho sentito e lo sento molto al vivo. E delle volte, contuttocché mi volessi trattenere di non chiedere più il patire, mi vien chiesto, ma di cuore e non posso trattenermi di non dire: Mio Dio, più croci, più pene. Ma che! Non ho più presto detto questo che
mi apporto pena l’averlo detto, e colla medema pena vado dicendo: Più toramenti, più patimenti, più croci. E mi vien detto tante e tante volte che non posso tacere. O vedete che stravaganza è la mia. (I 501).

[I have been firm in the keeping of the pain, and I have felt it, and I feel it, very lively. And sometimes, although I would like to control myself and not ask for more suffering, I am asked, but from my heart, and I cannot refrain from saying, My God, more crosses, more pains. But, look! I haven’t finished saying this, that it gives me so much pain to have said it, and with the same pain I go on saying: more torments, more sufferings, more crosses. And it comes out spontaneously so many times that I cannot be quiet. Oh, you see, what extravagance is mine. (I 501)]]

These are her extravagances, but there are also the extravagances of the Other, who presses her, so that she repeats several times that God looks for extravagant ways and manners. She is deprived of understanding, of her sense of self, of her memory, and even of the very sentiment of love:

Nell’atto di spogliarsi anche dell’amore vi è stato un certo modo stravagante… l’amore amava se stesso in se stesso perché l’anima se ne era spogliata.

[In the act of despoiling himself even of love, there was a certain extravagant manner . . . Love loved itself in itself because the soul had despoiled itself of it.]

At this point, the two actors in the debate, God and the self, are equally connoted in terms of madness.

Iddio è impazzito delle anime nostre e l’anima mia ha sentito in sé gli effetti di questa pazzia (III 1117).

[God is crazy for our souls, and my soul has felt in itself the effects of this madness. (III 1117)]]

It is an experience that is impossible to describe because it does not have any describable form:

Questa mane ho sperimentato un poco di quel modo senza modo col quale opera il divino amore. Pare che Dio sia impazzito di questa anima e l’anima resti impazzita in Dio… con parole non posso raccontarlo (III 1109).

Per descriverlo vi vorrebbe la penna del medemo divino amore… il quale impazza di quest’anima ed essa di lui (III 209).

[This morning, I experienced a bit of that manner without manner by which the divine love operates. It appears that God has gone crazy for this soul, and the soul remains crazy in God . . . with words I cannot tell it. (III 1109)
To describe it, it would take the pen of the same divine love . . . who is crazy for this soul, as she is crazy for him. (III 209)]

To designate this impossibility, the saint repeats a formula in which that which is affirmed is denied:

God, crazy for her [the soul] has made all of himself felt in himself. Oh, what unheard-of things I have felt; I have felt them all in a way without a way, the way of God is without a way. (III 1332)

The alternative, which does not lead to possible solutions, is described in these terms by the saint:

I remained in an extravagant way in two seas, one against the other, the sea of happiness and the sea of bitterness, without enjoying one or the other because the Divine Love kept me despoiled of both and infused in me an unknown suffering. (IV 842)

The final point of this agitation is not possession, but dispossession. It is not the possession of God, but to possess nothing of the self. The torment that such a state provoked in her is expressed by Veronica in a passage which combines in an excellent manner clarity, introspection, and existential anguish. This is one of the highest confessions in all mystical literature, in which the cool, careful examination of interior realities is suddenly followed by a an explosion of passion to which it would not be improper to attribute the qualification of insane furor:

Mi trovo tutta contenta per non trovare contenti, ma anco di questo sento in un tratto spogliarmene, e sento una pace di questo spoglio. Poi in un tratto non ho nemeno questo; mi fermo nella volontà di Dio, sento mi viene levata; non che io perdi la volontà di Dio, ma non ho da sentire di starvi. M'acontento di stare nascostamente e di non conoscerla nemeno. Questo ho da conoscere: mi trovo senza niente, né affetto, né desiderio, né nulla, ma tutta ansiosa che Dio operi a suo volere. Io non m’importa a saperlo. Vivo posata senza pensiero. Di questo ancora m’ho da spogliare. Non so cosa sia di me e non ho da pensare a me né ad altro. Sto consumandomi e non trovo chi mi consuma. È in me e non so cosa sia. Solo sto posata, perché vivo secondo l’obbedienza, ma qui ancora v’è da fare e nemmeno ho da...
avere la soddisfazione di obbedire. Oh che modi, il non potere raccontare niente e sentire tante cose in me e non potere operare niente. Sento pene di morte, darìa stridi sino alle stelle; m'entra il fuoco fra pelle e cuoio, pare di sentirmi tutta scoiare, ma non è fuoco che aporti noia, ma dà vigore al spirito. Egli chiama e desidera ogni pena e tormento, e perché non si trova pena sufficente, l'istesso fuoco è il tiranno che martorizza e lo spirito e l'umanità. Sia tutto a gloria di Dio. Non dico altro, perché tanto non dico niente.

[I find myself all happy for not finding any happiness, but also of this I feel suddenly despoiled, and I feel a peace for this despoiling. Then, all of a sudden I do not even have this; I stop in the will of God, I feel that it is taken away from me; not that I lose the will of God, but that I do not feel that I am in it. I am happy to be in it hiddenly, and not even to know it. This I have to know: I find myself with nothing, no affection, no desire, no nothing, but all anxious for God to operate according his will. I do not care to know. I live at rest, without thought. Of this I still have to despoil myself. I do not know what happens to me, and I do not have to think of myself or of anything at all. I am being consumed, and I do not find who is consuming me. It is in me, and I do not know what it is. I am only at rest because I live according to the obedience, but here there is still work to do, because I ought not to have the satisfaction of obeying. Oh, what a way, not to be able to tell anything, and to feel so many things in me, and not to be able to do anything. I feel deathly sufferings, I would scream so loud the stars would hear me; I feel the fire under my skin, I feel that I am being skinned, but it is not a fire that brings displeasure, and it gives vigour to the spirit. He calls and desires every pain and torment, and since there is no sufficient pain, the fire itself is the tyrant that tortures spirit and humanity. May it all be to the glory of God. I say nothing else, because after all, I say nothing.]

This was in 1722, five years before her death, in July 1727; she still continued to say without saying, in a sort of furor scribendi until the month of March. Already in 1712 she had set down what may be regarded as the mark of her own way of writing; “I say, and say again, and say nothing.”

II. SANCITTY AND PLAY

Deus Ludens

If the representation of sanctity under the species of folly is fundamentally sorrowful, the joyful correspondent is often made concrete by recourse to the image of play. It is play that is not marked by rules, but it is expressed in the terms of an immediate vitality that emanates instinctively. It is play between two players, where an active part is performed
respectively by God and the soul. On the scene, then, there is a God who is playful in his intimate nature, and a human creature which is invited to take part in his play. In a passage of Proverbs, the Wisdom of God manifests itself as hypostasis which stands before him and inspires him, as it inspires in the artist the idea of the beautiful which leads him towards the realization of his work. This concept developed in a representation that has been present in ancient and medieval literature with the image of God as artist: Deus pictor, Deus architectus; God draws from the idea the exemplar of the great painting of the world, of the great house of the universe. But the divine play does not extend only to ad extra operations, but also ad intra, since the Wisdom of Proverbs is identified with the Logos and the Logos is the second person of the Trinity. A commentator of the seventeenth century, Cornelius a Lapide, evokes in this regard a verse of Psalm 109 (ex utero ante luciferum genui te in the Vulgate); he reads it according to the Hebrew version: “From the uterus, even from the dawn, the dew of his childhood” and he explains it:

Il Figlio, in forza della sua eterna produzione si chiama adolescente, anzi bambino nella rugiada e nel fiore della sua prima età, sempre occupato nel gioco davanti al Padre.

[The Son, because of his eternal production, is called adolescent, or better, child in the dew flowering of his first age, always occupied in play before the Father.]

As a consequence, the eternal life of the saved man is described as a reflection and extension of that play. The representation of the blessed life in the form of play is introduced by a very ancient Christian document of the third century: the acts of the Carthaginian martyrs Perpetua and Felicity; not only they are authentic, they also relate directly the most ancient words of a Christian woman. Perpetua sees her little dead brother in a tub of water; that is Paradise, surely with a reference to baptism. Her friend Saturus has a vision of the entrance in Paradise of the two martyrs: led by four angels, on the threshold they meet four old men who tell them: “Ite et ludite,” to which Perpetua answers: “Deo gratias. As in the flesh, I have always been joyful, here I will be even more joyful.”

*The Player Saint*

Man participates in this divine play sometimes by way of metaphors drawn from play, sometimes with a real mise-en-scène. By way of metaphor St. Bernard describes himself as God’s acrobat: “I shall jump till I make
them laugh, a joyful entertainment that makes people like Micol mad, but makes people explode in laughter and the angels rejoice.” In St. Francis, we have sometimes the pure *mise-en-scène* of play, without the slightest provocative intention, as in the episode in which he pretends to be playing the viola using two sticks. Play often accompanies the ecstasies of Maddalena de’ Pazzi: a “scenic” play, like the one she performs around the throne of the Trinity:

E fatte esse tre prostrazione, di nuovo rizzandosi sù cominciò a rigirare essa sala a modo di ballo, e faceva certe belle reverenzie e scambietti con i piedi con una destrezza e con tanta bella grazia che non pareva creatura umana, ma un angelo disceso di cielo; ed era gran maraviglia a vederla. Andava girando a quel modo così un po’ per canto e non in faccia, sempre col viso alto e occhi elevati, aperti e risplendenti che parevano due stelle. Alcuna volta faceva alcuni gesti col viso e alzava le mani che faceva accennossi a qualche persona, facendo certi be’ risi e dicendo certe parole tanto piano che non la potevomo intendere, solo vedevamo quel muovere di bocca con que’ gesti del viso che mostrava d’intendersi con qualcuno. E girato che ebbe così intorno per alquanto, fece nel mezzo di sala una bella danza, per dire al modo nostro di quaggiù, però che non era danza ma un ballo di quelli di paradiso. E quanto a llei per allora era in paradiso, sendo ratta e fuora d’ogni sentimento corporale. E ballato che essa ebbe così un poco, si prostrò un’altra volta in terra nel mezzo di essa sala, ma volta pel contrario dell’altra volta al trono della ss. Trinità.

[And after she had made three prostrations, she got up and started to turn around the room in a manner of dance, and she made some beautiful bows and steps with such great dexterity of her feet and such beautiful grace that she did not seem a human creature, but an angel descended from heaven; and it was a great wonder to look at her. She was turning in that manner, a bit by the side and not straightforward, always with her face raised and eyes looking up, her eyes which were open and resplendent, like two stars. Sometimes she made some gestures with her face and raised her hands, as if she were pointing to somebody, with some smiles, and saying some words with such a low voice that we could not understand her; we could only see her mouth move, with those facial gestures indicating she was communicating with somebody. And after she had gone around in this way for a while, she performed a beautiful dance in the middle of the room, as if in a manner proper of this world, and yet it was not a simple dance, but a dance of paradise. For she was then in paradise, enraptured and out of any corporal sensation. And after she had danced for a while, she made another prostration on the floor, in the middle of the room, but turning to the opposite direction, to the throne of the Most Holy Trinity.]
In a more interior representative form, the image of play is called to describe the union of the soul with God. Mechtilde of Magdeburg, in the work *The Flowing Light of Divinity* (V 25) asks God how He could welcome the appeals of a soul which feels forsaken by him. God answers that his total acceptance is conditional to the fact that the soul present herself to him poor and naked, and throw herself in His arms, “in a way that he may play with her”; because in the Trinity, soul and body have to run and play and go up and down until they cannot take it anymore.

Veronica Giuliani offers an analogous representation when she recalls that God “as an infant, began to play with me, as if to draw to Himself this soul of mine” (I 884). At the beginning, there are expressions of amorous playfulness:

> Ella diceva che non le chiedesse il cuore perché digià era suo, assoluto. Ed esso diceva che non era vero. Replicando essa “è vostro”, dicendo egli “non è vero” essa soggiungeva “è vero”. Pareva che l’anima mia stesse così salda nel divino volere… Gesù mi pareva che scherzasse con me e di nuovo dicevami che io non dicevo da vero (III 108).

[She said that he did not have to ask for her heart since it was entirely his already. And he said that it was not true. She answered, “It is yours,” and he, “Not true,” and she, “True.” It appeared that my soul was so strongly set in the divine will . . . Jesus seemed to play with me, and again would tell me that I was not telling the truth. (III 108)]

But soon the divine game focuses on the manner of the union, with Veronica’s consciousness of her own nothingness and consequent identification with God:

> Non posso far di meno di non dire, ridire e dir sempre: O felice niente il quale ci fa apprendere il tutto! E quando la medema anima si trova in questo fondo del niente, in un istante è sollevata, è arricchita, è adornata di tutte le felicità celesti. Ella sta in terra, ma gode un paradiso anticipato. E più si nasconde in questo nulla, più Iddio la cerca, la chiama a sé, e delle volte il divino Amore fa anche di questi scherzi amorosi. Mentre l’anima sta nel fondo del suo essere e va penetrando davvero che non può niente, non è niente, il divino Amore va e ruba la medema anima al niente (II 88).

[I cannot avoid saying, saying again, and saying always: oh blissful nothingness, which makes us understand everything! And when the same soul finds herself in this depth of nothingness, in one instant she is lifted, enriched and adorned with all the celestial blessings. She is on earth but enjoys an anticipated Paradise. And the more she hides in this nothingness, the more God seeks her, calls her to himself, and sometimes the divine Love also]
plays these love games. While the soul is in the depth of her being, to the point of being able to do nothing, is nothing, the divine Love goes and steals the soul from nothingness. (II 88)

The playing becomes true play with a reciprocal casting of arrows (II 1286), or with the throwing of each other’s heart as a ball (II 1292), complete with rules and winner. As she, in a vision, finds herself in the middle of a group of saints:

Mi parve che alcuni di essi mi facessero cenno che io giocassi con loro, e che per pegno vi ponessi quella gioia (il patire). Ma io non vi volsi fare perché tosto averiano vinto et io saria restata priva di si caro tesoro (V 44).

[It seemed to me that some of them were gesturing to me, inviting me to play with them, and gamble that joy of mine (the suffering). But I did not want to, because I knew that they would win right away and I would be left deprived of such a dear treasure. (V 44)]

But God Himself joins in the game. He takes her heart and transports it into his own: “All this was a play of God,” she comments (V 364). It is a game in which she is always the loser:

Vi erano certe gare fra Dio e l’anima. La vinceva Iddio (V 302).

There were certain competitions between God and the soul. God would always win. (V 302)

The Virgin Mary comments on a night of ecstasy in which Veronica’s very self was at stake:

Ricordati che tutta la notte vi fu una gara fra Dio e te. La vinse Dio. Il divin amore spesso con voli ti portava a Dio e nel tornare in te ti trovavi nella tua impotenza, ti fermavi nel tuo niente (IV 451).

[Remember that for the entire night there was a game between God and you. God won. The Divine Love often made you fly to God, and you, coming back to yourself, found yourself again in your impotence, and stopped in your nothingness. (IV 451)]

But God reaches victory observing the rules; and the Virgin Mary also recalls:

Vi furono fra te e Dio gare amorose, accordi e legami indissolubili (IV 844).

[These were amorous games, agreements, and unbreakable bondings between you and God. (IV 844)]
The Holy Plaything

In both, Maddalena and Veronica, there are two players in the game. Even when the annihilation of the soul is at stake, the role of player is still not lost by them. A completely new image, to represent this fundamental aspect of the experience of the divine, is offered by St. Thérèse de Lisieux, a writer who hides the deepest thoughts under the appearances of a shamelessly frivolous language. She wishes to be a plaything, “a worthless ball which children throw on the ground or forget in a corner, although it could also be squeezed to the heart, if that would please.” The image used by Thérèse is probably drawn from devotional literature, from pious legends in which Jesus as a child plays with a ball. And yet, without knowing it, she reproduces a thought that goes back all the way to Plato, who defined man as a plaything of God.

(Translated by Francesco Guardiani)