

The Mystical Denial of Language

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The language people use to communicate mundane matters commands very little interest or respect in the spiritual world of the mystic. Yet language is a central subject of discussion of many mystical works in all religions. The term *language* in the context of the mystical discourse refers to the word of God as expressed in scripture. Inevitably, the mystic's attitude toward language expresses his fundamental relationship to the religious culture that surrounds him and sustains his spiritual existence.¹

I present here a few examples from various periods, religions, and cultural environments to illustrate my discussion of the attitude of mystics toward religion and its linguistic expression: the Shaker movement in late-eighteenth-century England; the famous medieval mystical directory, *The Cloud of Unknowing*;² the Jewish mystical masterpiece, the Zohar;³ and finally, a contemporary discussion between Michel Foucault and Georges Bataille on the subject.⁴

The Shaker Movement

The Shaker movement, which originated in England in the middle of the eighteenth century, was influenced by the Quakers (most of the Shakers first belonged to the Friends before separating and constructing their independent movement), as well as by other apocalyptic trends and beliefs that flourished in England at that time. They followed Ann Lee, who in 1770 had a revelation that Christ had been resurrected within her, as within every other believer. The experience of the coming again of Christ is the essential characteristic of the movement (though it began a generation before and had already become a distinct group in 1747). The Shakers left England and established themselves in the United States (the last remnants live today in Sabbathday Lake, Maine). This movement may be regarded as the most overt, unambiguous historical manifestation of the attitude of the mystics toward communicative language. As far as I know, adherents of this movement never expressed their linguistic theories in any systematic fashion, thus remaining loyal to their most cherished concept: if language cannot express truth, it cannot even express its rejection of itself. The Shakers denied any theological linguistic formulation and did not demand adherence to any linguistic formula.

The Shakers are characterized by their belief in the resurrection of Christ in every person. They identify every member of their denomination, male or female, with the living Christ. Whether this is a mystical or a theological attitude is debatable. What is manifestly untheological in their message is the fact that they did not develop a theology to demonstrate, explain, and elaborate this revelation. They are unique in their denial of a creative attitude toward scriptures, expressed in their refusal to create their own linguistic distillation of the new, revolutionary message which they believed that they had received; indeed, they are unique in their rejection of traditional scriptures, the Old and New Testaments, as sacred revelations of the ultimate divine truth. Truth, for them, cannot be congealed into a body of words.

The Shakers are especially unique in their understanding (intuitive rather than dialectic) that the language of religion includes not only the actual words that transmit ancient divine truth, but also the nonverbal body of rituals, norms, instructions, manuals, ethics, and customs, which together constitute religious observance and way of life. Semiotic expression was denied by them in the same way that semantic messages were.⁵ In order to approach divine truth, according to them, one must reject all forms of expression that shape and regulate that truth.⁶

A contemporary historian of the Shakers, who belongs to the denomination, describes the early beginnings of the movement thus:

In the desire to be led by the Spirit, their worship began to develop directions ultimately leading away from both Quaker and contemporary English Protestant forms. The Friends had originally sought to worship without form, and so be completely open to the Spirit's inspiration. They met in silence—the very positive silence of *waiting upon the Lord*—with every expectation of being further enlightened with inner inspiration whereby the Spirit would lead the community; those so moved would give witness through spoken reflection, exhortation, and the like. However, with their new expectations and consequent experiences, the early Shakers found that, ironically, the Quaker “formless” mode of worship could be the most constraining form of all: sitting in silence unless moved to speak. For many Shakers were experiencing quite unexpected “movements of the inner Spirit,” often overflowing into emotion-charged manifestations—songs without words, strange languages, prayer through bodily gesture such as kneeling, ecstatic spontaneous dancing, and disturbing bodily agitation and trembling. (It is from this last that their mocking neighbors called them “Shaking Quakers.”) Many other Shakers remained outwardly calm in manner yet welcomed all these manifestations as the signs of a great inward work. They, in turn, moved away from purely silent worship through the early development of worship songs and solemn discourses.⁷

The silence of the Quakers, sometimes interrupted by spontaneous statements, was too meaningful for the early Shakers, and this caused their separation from their original religious context. They sought a way of worship that denied any meaningful structure or expression. The “mocking neighbors,” as Robley Whitson calls the surrounding society, were perceptive enough to select the trembling and shaking as the identifying characteristic of this new group because this was the least expressive, the least communicative among the various gestures and modes of behavior adopted by the new denomination. This extreme denial of communication, which sprang up within the context of the general Protestant rebellion against the extremely stylized and organized verbal and ritualistic worship of the Catholic Church, expresses the wish not to exchange one mode of expression for another—the Shakers believed that even the Quakers' silence was such a substitution—but to seek a completely noncommunicative mode. This response is the ultimate denial of language as a constituent of religion.⁸

The Shakers' concept of resurrection can be identified typologically as a form of self-deification, which is a constant element found in different forms in linguistic records of the *unio mystica*. In many cases, however, the mystic believes that he has acquired, through this union, some access to the divine language and has become the master of divine wisdom. He is unable to transmit this knowledge and wisdom through the communicative language of his fellow believers, but he seeks some way to communicate the new vistas opened before him by a torrent of words. The Shakers are different in that their complete certainty in their identification with the risen Christ did not create a body of new knowledge, new wisdom, and new language. Their shaking and trembling express the complete transcendence of any form of communication, semantic or semiotic. Ritual, prayer, custom, and order become impossible in the new realm of divinity residing on earth. The original Christ, when he first appeared, spoke, preached, and acted in a meaningful way, and his disciples wrote treatises. The resurrected Christ in the hearts of the Shakers did none of these things; he could only tremble. The Christ of the New Testament speaks the language of religion. The Christ of the Shakers unspeaks the nonlanguage of the mystics.

The Cloud of Unknowing

***The Cloud of Unknowing*, a fourteenth-century work, is one of the most popular and influential treatises dealing with mysticism; despite its anonymity and absence of particular background and authority of a person or an order, it had a meaningful role in shaping Catholic spirituality and mysticism. It is a rare phenomenon, particularly among popular works, that the title of a work is a thoroughly negative phrase: *cloud* in this context means that which covers and hides, so that the title is actually a double negative. Throughout the work, which is intended to lead the believer toward union with God, negative terms abound**

(the “cloud of forgetting” is one of the better-known examples). The treatise is written in simple, straightforward language, staying away from philosophical or theological terminology. The concept of language itself is not problematized in the treatise, and the author does not insist on a systematic adoption of negative language; the term *love*, for instance, is central, and the author uses it as a positive, meaningful word.

The role of language in the process—or its absence—is demonstrated in the detailed instructions given in several chapters concerning the ways by which one can forsake the physical and emotional earthly realms and their temptations and immerse oneself completely in the “darkness,” which is the nonplace where a person is united with God. The senses and reason are denied as a source of knowledge of true things. “All rational beings, angels and men, possess two faculties, the power of knowing and the power of loving. To the first, to the intellect, God who made them is forever unknowable, but to the second, to love, he is completely knowable.”⁹ Love is a term that represents that nonsensual and nonintellectual urge that directs the believer in his quest for God. The author does not conclude—as he could—that the realm of “love” must be nonlinguistic because language must rely on shared sensual and intellectual concepts in order to be communicative. The author’s attitude toward language is expressed instead in another significant way:

Should any thought arise and obtrude itself between you and the darkness, asking what you are seeking, and what you are wanting, answer that it is God you want: “Him I covet, him I seek, and nothing but him.” Should he (the thought) ask, “What is this God?” answer that it is the God who made you and redeemed you, and who has, through his grace, called you to his love. “And,” tell him, “you do not even know the first thing about him.” And then go on to say, “Get down,” and proceed to trample on him out of love for God; yes, even when such thoughts seem to be holy, and calculated to help you find God. Quite possibly he will bring to your mind many lovely and wonderful thoughts of his kindness, and remind you of God’s sweetness and love, his grace and mercy. If you will but listen to him, he asks no more. He will go on chattering increasingly, and bring you steadily down to think of Christ’s Passion. There he will show you the wonderful kindness of God, and he wants nothing so much as that you should listen to him. For he will then go on to let you see your past manner of life, and as you think of its wretchedness your mind will be well away, back in its old haunts. Before you know where you are you are disintegrated beyond belief! And the reason? Simply that you freely consented to listen to that thought, and responded to it, accepted it, and gave it its head.¹⁰

Continuing, the author says that these thoughts are “both good and holy” and serve a necessary purpose, but if one wishes to proceed on the quest for God, one has to “put them away deep down in the cloud of forgetting if he is ever to penetrate the cloud of unknowing between him and God.”¹¹ It is obvious, both in this discussion and in parallel ones in the treatise, that these thoughts represent the language of religious worship, of identification with Christ’s passion and the struggle against worldly temptation, leading to wholesome religious life. It may be a necessary precondition for the meaningful quest, but it is not part of the same path. In order to stop the torrent of words of this communicative religious language, one has to relegate it to the “cloud of forgetting,” ignore and suppress it, “trample on [it],” and adopt a new attitude toward language:

So when you feel by the grace of God that he is calling you to this work, and you intend to respond, lift your heart to God with humble love. And really mean God himself who created you, and bought you, and graciously called you to this state of life. And think no other thought of him. It all depends on your desire. A naked intention directed to God, and himself alone, is wholly sufficient. If you want this intention summed up in a word, to retain it more easily, take a short word, preferably of one syllable, to do so. The shorter the word the better, being more like the working of the Spirit. A word like “God” or “Love.” Choose

which you like, or perhaps some other, so long as it is of one syllable. And fix this word fast to your heart, so that it is always there come what may. It will be your shield and spear in peace and war alike. With this word you will hammer the cloud and the darkness above you. With this word you will suppress all thought under the cloud of forgetting. So much so that if ever you are tempted to think what it is that you are seeking, this one word will be sufficient answer. And if you would go on to think learnedly about the significance and analysis of that same word, tell yourself that you will have it whole, and not in bits and pieces.¹²

One little word, one syllable, is the substitute offered by the author to the long, verbose discourse of religion. The single word is not chosen because of its meaning; rather, when temptation to ponder its meaning presents itself, the believer should avoid and ignore it. It is nothing but a mantra, an arbitrary focus of attention that has nothing to do with the communicative and meaningful aspects of language. The author's attitude seems to be—both here and in many other sections of the work—that language is the domain of religion, while the quest of God within the darkness, the mystical process, is meta-linguistic. In this realm of darkness, language is not only unnecessary, but it presents a danger of the return to God's beauty, kindness, mercy, and passion, all the characteristics of religion that one wishes to forget in order to be able to proceed. It should be noted that there is no emphasis here on a concept of a ladder of ascension in which religion encompasses the lower rungs and mysticism the upper ones. The presentation insists on the difference between the two attitudes rather than emphasizing a link of continuation between them. Their relationship is either/or, rather than one after the other.

This focus is even more evident when the author discusses the meaning and nature of prayer. Liturgy is the strongest statement in scriptural religions of language as a constant and meaningful verbal connection between the believer and God. The insistence on a ritual of prayer several times a day indicates a belief that words are bridging the gap between earth and heaven constantly and efficiently. *The Cloud of Unknowing* includes an unambiguous statement concerning this:

Just as the meditations of those who seek to live the contemplative life come without warning, so too, do their prayers. I am thinking of their private prayers, of course, not those laid down by the Holy Church. For true contemplatives could not value such prayers more, and so they use them, in the form and according to the rules laid down by the holy Fathers before us. But their own personal prayers rise spontaneously to God, without bidding of premeditation, beforehand or during their prayer. If they are in words, as they seldom are, then they are very few words; the fewer the better. If it is a little word of one syllable, I think it is better than if it is of two, and more in accordance with the work of the Spirit. For a contemplative should always live at the highest, topmost peak spiritually. We can illustrate this by looking at nature. A man or woman, suddenly frightened by fire, or death, or what you will, is suddenly in his extremity of spirit driven hastily and by necessity to cry or pray for help. And how does he do it? Not, surely, with a spate of words; not even in a single word of two syllables! Why? He thinks it wastes too much time to declare his urgent need and his agitation. So he bursts out in his terror with one little word, and that of a single syllable: "Fire!" it may be, or "Help!" Just as this little word stirs and pierces the ears of the hearers more quickly, so too does a little word of one syllable, when it is not merely spoken or thought, but expresses also the intention in the depth of our spirit. Which is the same as the "height" of our spirit, for in these matters height, depth, length, and breadth all mean the same. And it pierces the ears of the Almighty God more quickly than any long psalm churned out unthinkingly.¹³

It is evident that the writer is at least impatient with, if not scornful toward, the established church's use of language. Meaning, according to him, can be found in one syllable (that is, an unstructured, nongrammatical,

nonsyntactic cry), when it emerges from a believer's heart and reaches heaven. This syllable need not have any semantic value (*OM* will probably do nicely); if it did, there could not be such a strict limitation on its size. The believer does not speak to God, does not engage in conversation or explanation. The link formed between worshiper and deity is nonsemantic. The author concedes that the "contemplative" fulfills the requirements of the church concerning the ritual of prayers, but this is not a part of his contemplative, spiritual, and mystical ascension to God. Language has to be forsaken, even trampled under one's feet, if the mystical quest is to be pursued.

The Zohar

If a man says that a story in the Torah is there simply for the sake of the story, may his spirit depart!¹⁴ For if it were so, it would not be a supernal Torah, a Torah of truth. But in very truth the Torah is holy, supernal, a Torah of truth. Come and see. A mortal king considers it below his dignity to converse with a commoner, let alone write down a commoner's words. And if you think that the supernal king, the Holy One, blessed be He, does not have sacred words of His own, from which to make a Torah, but that He needs to collect the words of commoners, such as those of Esau, Hagar, Laban's to Jacob, the words of the ass, and of Balaam, Balak and Zimri, and that He gathers them and all the other stories written in Scripture, and makes a Torah of them, why is it called "the Torah of truth" (Malachi 2:6)?¹⁵

There is nothing unique in the concept that scripture has a sublime, hidden meaning, extending even to the most seemingly mundane narratives included in it. What is unusual here is the attitude of denigration toward and rejection of the literal meaning of the narratives. There is no hint of a literary appreciation of these stories; they are presented as an anthology of the meaningless utterances of gentiles, sinners, and animals. The author does not have any doubt—as he states later—that human writers of fiction could do much better as far as narrative literature is concerned. This is not just a quest for the secret meaning of the Torah, but an unambiguous rejection of its narrative language.¹⁶ In another section, the author of the Zohar states:

Rabbi Simeon said: Woe to the man who says that the Torah intended simply to relate stories and the words of commoners, for, if this were the case, we ourselves at the present time could make a Torah from the words of commoners and do even better. If the intention was to deal with the affairs of [this] world, then the [profane] books in the world contain better things. Shall we then follow them, and make a Torah out of them? But all the words of the Torah are exalted and are supernal mysteries. Come and see. The upper world and the lower world are measured by the same measure. Israel below, and the celestial angels above. It is written of the celestial angels that "He makes His angels spirits" (Psalm 104:4). When they descend to the world below they clothe themselves with the garments of this world. And if they were not to clothe themselves with garments that are characteristic of this world, they could not exist in this world, and the world could not tolerate them. Now if this is true of angels, how much more true it is of the Torah that created them, and created all the worlds, which exist only for its sake. When it came down into the world, the world could not have tolerated it if it had not clothed itself in the garments of this world. Consequently, the narratives of the Torah are the garments of the Torah. If a man thinks that the garment is the actual Torah itself, and not something quite other, may his spirit depart, and may he have no portion in the world to come. It is for this reason that David said: "Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of Your Torah" (Psalm 119:18)—from beneath the garment of the Torah. Come and see. There is a garment that is seen by all. And when fools see a man in a garment that appears to them to be beautiful, they look no further. [But] the value of the garment resides in the body, and the value of the body resides in the soul. Similarly, the Torah has a body. The commandments of the Torah are the bodies of the Torah. This body is clothed in garments, which are the narratives of this world. The fools in the world look only

upon the clothes, which are the narratives of the Torah; they know no more, and do not see what is beneath the clothes. Those who know more do not look upon the clothes, but upon the body beneath the clothes. The wise, the servants of the supreme King, those who stood at Mt. Sinai, look only upon the soul, which is the foundation of all, the real Torah. And in the time to come they are destined to look upon the soul of the soul of the Torah. Come and see. So also above there is a garment and a body and a soul, and a soul's soul. The heavens with their hosts are the garment; the Assembly of Israel [*shekhinah*] is the body that receives the soul, which is the glory [*Tiferet*] of Israel, and therefore is the body for the soul. The soul that we have mentioned is the *Tiferet* of Israel, the actual Torah, and the soul's soul is *Atika Kadisha*, and the whole is interdependent. Woe to the wicked who say that the Torah is only a story, who look upon this garment and no further. Blessed are the righteous who look upon the Torah in the correct manner. Wine can exist only in a bottle. So the Torah can exist only in this garment. Consequently, one must look at what is beneath the garment. Therefore all these matters, and all these stories are garments.¹⁷

The Torah consists of four levels: the lowest is the narratives, historical accounts, and so on, which are described as the “garment”; the second is the physical commandments, which are designated as the “body.” This level is not rejected, but its meaningfulness is dependent on its being united with the third level, the soul, or spiritual meaning—a union that is designated in the usual Zoharic erotic metaphor of the union between the female and the male elements in the divine world. The commandments are represented by the female element, the *shekhinah*, who acquires meaning only when she is united with her husband, *Tiferet*, the masculine principle in the divine pleroma. Nothing is said here directly about the value of indulging in the “body” level alone, which means studying the Torah for the sake of the law, the *halakah*. In other places in the Zohar, this approach is criticized rather harshly.¹⁸ It should be noted that nothing is said here directly about the nature of the “soul” of the Torah, nor about the “soul of the soul,” which will be revealed only in the future, in messianic times.

The concept of two languages is apparent here, even if the terminology is different. In other sections of the Zohar, the metaphors of the tree of good and evil versus the tree of life are employed to designate the difference between the two ways in which the language of the sacred text should be read. It is evident, however, that the author denies, and denigrates, the ways in which his contemporary coreligionists read and understand scriptures. He believes that he knows another way, which is described elsewhere in the Zohar.

The Zohar, like *The Cloud of Unknowing*, was written as an anonymous work. Both books were published within a historical context of strict orthodoxy, in which loyalty to religious hierarchy was demanded as an absolute. Yet both works express unhesitatingly the rejection of the normative language of religion as utilized in daily rituals, including the word of God himself as incorporated in the scriptures and understood by their traditionalistic coreligionists. The Zohar was written in the literary format of a midrash, a hermeneutical exegesis of the Torah.¹⁹ Yet the Zohar does not hesitate to deny in radical terms the text of the divine revelation incorporated in the Torah and to reject its understanding not only by his contemporaries but by Jewish exegetical tradition as a whole. Such an attitude reflects his belief in the existence of a different, nonlinguistic avenue by which the soul of the Torah can be accessed—the mystical one.

Foucault and Bataille on Linguistic Expression

Michel Foucault dedicated an article, “A Preface to Transgression,” to an analysis of Georges Bataille’s concept of language. This article was described by the author as a “homage” to Bataille and was printed in *Critique*, Bataille’s journal, in 1963 (Foucault often assisted in the editing of this journal). It refers mainly to Bataille’s book *Eroticism*. Foucault, in this article, emphasizes Bataille’s metaphor of the eye, which is used to designate introspection, or the turning of the eye to observe the interior of the brain and of a person’s soul. Throughout the article Foucault repeatedly refers to Bataille’s book, which includes a section dedicated

to an analysis of Christian mysticism; Foucault's discussion, therefore, is oriented toward an analysis of the concept of the inward-looking eye in a mystical context. In a key passage in this article, Foucault says:

What significance has this insistent eye which appears to encompass what Bataille successively designated *the inner experience, the extreme possibility, the cosmic process*, or simply *meditation*? It is certainly no more metaphoric than Descartes' phrasing of the "clear perception of sight" or this sharp point of the mind which he called *acies mentis*. In point of fact, the upturned eye has no meaning in Bataille's language, can have no meaning since it marks its limit. It indicates the moment when language, arriving at its confines, overleaps itself, explodes and radically challenges itself in laughter, tears, the overturned eyes of ecstasy, the mute and exorbitated horror of sacrifice, and where it remains fixed in this way at the limit of its void, speaking of itself in a second language in which the absence of a sovereign subject outlines its essential emptiness and incessantly fractures the unity of its discourse. The enucleated or upturned eye marks the zone of Bataille's philosophical language, the void into which it pours and loses itself, but in which it never stops talking—somewhat like the interior, diaphanous, and illuminated eye of mystics and spiritualists that marks the point at which the secret language of prayer is embedded and choked by a marvellous communication which silences it. Similarly, but in an inverted manner, the eye in Bataille delineates the zone shared by language and death, the place where language discovers its being in the crossing of its limits: the nondialectical form of philosophical language. This eye, as the fundamental figure of the place from which Bataille speaks and in which his broken language finds its uninterrupted domain, establishes the connection, prior to any form of discourse, that exists between the death of God (a sun that rotates and the great eyelid that closes upon the world), the experience of *nitide* (springing up in death, twisting the light which is extinguished as it discovers that the interior is an empty skull, a central absence), and the turning back of language upon itself at the moment that it fails—a conjunction which undoubtedly has no other equivalent than the association, well known in other philosophies, of sight to truth or of contemplation to the absolute. Revealed to this eye, which in its pivoting conceals itself for all time, is the being of the limit: "I will never forget the violent and marvellous experience that comes from the will to open one's eyes, facing what exists, what happens." Perhaps in the movement which carries it to a total night, the experience of transgression brings to light this relationship of *nitide* to being, this moment of the limit which anthropological thought, since Kant, could only designate from the distance and from the exterior through the language of dialectics.²⁰

One key element in Foucault's presentation is unacceptable to the historian. Foucault treats language as an anthropomorphic entity, which begins and ends and folds upon itself as a sovereign, independent phenomenon. A historian cannot but view language as something used by people, who are motivated by different drives and needs, and in most sentences it should be the object rather than the subject. If we reread this discussion in such a manner, making the speaker-writer the subject and language the object, I believe that we have before us a penetrating, highly intuitive, and remarkably accurate description of the language of the mystics.

The language of the "upturned eye" is nondiscursive and nondialectical (in this context it may also be regarded as nonrational). It is a language of silence, in which words cease to express and are replaced by laughter, tears, sacrifice, death—silence. In contemporary terminology, with which Foucault may not have been familiar in 1963, semantic language is replaced by semiotic expression (which legitimately includes silence). But, at the same time, Foucault emphasizes, "it does not stop talking." Even though linguistic (here, semantic) expression has reached its limit and no words can reveal the new vistas opened before the eye, words still pour out. This is one of the most characteristic phenomena concerning mystical expression: even though words are delegitimized and are declared inefficient and insufficient, they still pour out, filling up library walls and heaps of manuscripts.

The relationship between the two languages is described by Foucault as that between sight and truth, where sight may be regarded as the representative of all human senses.²¹ This first language is also the language of dialectical discourse and rationalistic philosophy, that of Descartes and Kant, whereas the second language, which denies the senses, is that of the mystics and spiritualists and—what seems to be most important for Foucault—that of the nondialectical philosophers, among whom, undoubtedly, he counts Bataille and himself.²² This language is recognized by its semiotic characteristics, its inclusion of nonsemantic elements like laughter, tears, and even death—death of man and death of God—despite the fact that words still pour out. It is, therefore, a nonsemantic, nonrational, partially verbal, irrational, and nonsensual language. All these elements are found, as Foucault is well aware, in the language of the mystics.

A Second Language?

A vast difference lies between the context of literary criticism and nondialectical philosophical discourse (the genre employed by Foucault) and mysticism (in which a person speaks within the boundaries of a particular faith, to which he or she vehemently adheres). Whether he is a heretic or an orthodox (terms which denote historical judgment rather than spiritual context), a mystic believes wholeheartedly that he is a devoted, loyal servant not only of his God but also of his church. Loyalty to God and church means, in linguistic terms, loyalty to the word of God as it is conceived in the tradition to which the mystic belongs. The denial of language—the claim that a second language takes over when the first reaches its own demise—is rather easy for a novelist, a critic, and a “nondialectical philosopher.” Such a denial is very difficult for an intensely religious person who wholeheartedly believes that God presented his truth in the words incorporated in scriptures. Postulating a second language in such a context means claiming that God is bilingual, a thesis that harbors considerable religious difficulties. It has been employed from time to time, but another possibility of solving this paradox seems to have worked better: scriptures can be read in two different ways. There are not two languages but two kinds of readers, the mystics and the nonmystics. The nonmystic deludes himself that he reads and understands scriptures as a sensual and rational language. The mystic knows that this is impossible because truth cannot be conveyed by such means. He perceives in the language of scriptures the nonsensual, irrational undercurrents in which God’s truth is hidden.

Foucault and Bataille discuss language while analyzing its relationship to external phenomena—erotic excitement, pain, happiness, reality, death. The mystic confronts, first and foremost, language itself, because religion is mainly a linguistic phenomenon. What he writes—the words that pour despite the demise of language—are words reacting to words, linguistic revelation reacting to a previous linguistic revelation. The resulting turmoil produces the language that denies itself—the language of the mystics.

Notes

1. The negative aspect of the language of the mystics has been forcefully presented by Michael A. Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); a similar approach is presented in Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). Concerning the problem of mystical language as a whole, see Joseph Dan, “In Quest of a Historical Definition of Mysticism: The Contingential Approach,” *Studies in Spirituality* 3 (1993): 58–90. See also Joseph Dan, *The Heart and the Fountain: An Anthology of Jewish Mystical Experiences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 1–15.

2. *The Cloud of Unknowing and Other Works*, translated into modern English with an introduction by Clifton Wolters (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1961, 1978).

3. Isaiah Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar: An Anthology of Texts*, trans. David Goldstein (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

4. Michel Foucault, “A Preface to Transgression,” first published in “Hommage Georges Bataille,” *Critique* 195–96 (1963): 751–70; translated into English by Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon and published in the volume *Michel Foucault: Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977), 29–52, esp. 48–49.

5. There is one aspect in which the Shakers seem to have created a new theology: the inclusion of a feminine element in the Godhead and the perception of the Trinity as bisexual. Catholic theology resisted temptations to do that, as did Islam; the Jewish Kabbalah, however, adopted that concept wholeheartedly, as did the ancient gnostics. In the context of the Shakers, however, this seems to be more the result of intuition and insistence on the identity of the human and the divine; if humanity is gender oriented, so is the Godhead. The erotic element, so prominent in Gnosticism and the Kabbalah (and in Islamic and Catholic mysticism, despite the rejection of this element from the Godhead itself), is rather absent from the Shakers' thought and practice. See the discussion of the use of the term *carnal* by the Shakers in Robley E. Whitson, ed., introduction to *The Shakers: Two Centuries of Spiritual Reflection* (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), 30–31. The book is part of the series the Classics of Western Spirituality: Spiritual Reflection. The subtitle should not be taken literally. The volume contains an anthology of two centuries of Shakers' writings, which is a testimony to the fact that for two centuries the Shakers have written almost nothing and that the little they produced is hardly a record of "reflection"; the few treatises and letters included in this anthology are exceptions that prove the rule that linguistic expression was not part of the Shakers' religious experience throughout their history.

6. History is often cruel to people who attempt to deny the power of linguistic structures. One of the best-known characteristics of the Shakers is their denial of gender differences, a remarkable idea at that time or any time. They insisted that there was no difference, as far as the resurrection is concerned, between men and women, who share equally in that experience. When enacting this belief in historical terms, however, they found themselves emphasizing rather than ignoring gender differences. They sought complete disregard of gender, but in order to express it they had to insist on absolute equality, which entailed, for instance, the strict adherence to equality rules, like always having two men and two women constituting their leadership. The enactment of equality made gender an ever-present concern of their leadership structure rather than leading to its disappearance.

7. Whitson, introduction to *Shakers*, 9.

8. Their attitude toward the Gospels and the ancient body of scriptures is complex, but the key term used by them is *opening*. Language as present in the scriptures is *closed* until opened by the believer. The language of the ancient divine message becomes incidental and is denied any normative meaning. See selected passages in the chapter "Travel in the Gospel," in *Shakers*, 86–155.

9. Wolters, *Cloud of Unknowing*, 63.

10. *Ibid.*, 68–69.

11. *Ibid.*, 69.

12. *Ibid.*, 69–70.

13. *Ibid.*, 104–5.

14. The context is a discussion of the verse "And the ark rested in the seventh month ... upon the mountain of Ararat" (Genesis 8:4). The previous paragraph concluded: "What does it matter to us whether it rested here or there? It must have rested somewhere!" It seems that this verse was selected in a similar way that the Talmud selected the verse "And Timna was concubine to Elifaz, Esau's son" (Genesis 36:12), to state that there is no difference in sanctity between this verse and "I am the Lord thy God" (Exodus 20:2), the opening words of the Ten

Commandments (TB *Sanhedrin* 99b). In other words, according to the Zohar, every biblical verse comes from the same source and represents the same level of sanctity and divine wisdom.

15. *Zohar* Numbers 149a–b, cited in Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 3:1125.

16. The Zohar reflects in this and the following statements an attitude first presented in Judaism by an eleventh-century philosopher and mystic, Rabbi Bahya ibn Paquda, the author of *The Duties of the Heart*, trans. and commentary by Yaakov Feldman (Northvale, N.J.: Aronson, 1996), one of the most influential spiritual treatises in the history of Jewish culture (the author was influenced by Sufism, and the work includes many quotations from Sufi literature). The concluding paragraphs of the author's introduction to the treatise include a denial of the notion that the stories in the Torah convey a divine message. The author maintains that these were included in the Torah only for the purpose of differentiation between the wise and the stupid; the latter would embrace the narrative and historical material, while the wise would reject it and dedicate themselves to the sections dealing with divine matters. See Joseph Dan, *The Hebrew Story in the Middle Ages* (in Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Keter, 1974), 7–8. The language of the Zohar includes phrases that are derived from Rabbi Bahya's discussion (whose work was translated from Arabic to Hebrew by Rabbi Judah ibn Tibbon in the end of the twelfth century).

17. *Zohar* Numbers 152a; Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 3:1126–27. In this particular case there is no need to hesitate to interpret the Zoharic statement in a radical way because we have a Hebrew version of the same statement written by the author of the Zohar, Rabbi Moshe de Leon, in an independent treatise. In this version Rabbi Moshe quotes the talmudic discussion of the verses in the talmudic tract of *Sanhedrin*. The Hebrew version includes an element that is not present in the quoted paragraphs from the Zohar: that the biblical narratives are not only worthless and undistinguished, but they include an element which, when taken literally, is ethically reprehensible. He mentions the story of Jacob acquiring the position of firstborn from his hungry brother, the story of Sarah banishing Hagar from her home, and that of Rachel stealing the teraphim. He concludes that the literal level of scripture is dangerous, not just neutral in its meaninglessness. Concerning the text, see Isaiah Tishby, "Response of Rabbi Moshe de Leon concerning Kabbalah" (in Hebrew), *Kovetz Al Yad* 5 (1951): 30–31.

18. See Tishby's discussion in *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 3:1089–1100.

19. Concerning the Midrash and its relationship to mystical language, see Joseph Dan, *On Sanctity: Religion, Ethics and Mysticism in Judaism and Other Religions* (in Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1997), 87–130.

20. Foucault, "Homage Georges Bataille," in Bouchard, *Michel Foucault*, 48–49, emphasis in original.

21. This statement is remarkably similar to that of another French writer a generation before Foucault and Bataille: Antoine de Saint-Exupry, who in his book *The Little Prince* refers several times to a great secret that the fox knows. When the prince is dying, the fox reveals that secret: "It's quite simple," he says, "Anything essential is invisible to the eyes" (New York: Harcourt, 2000), 63. Like Foucault, Saint-Exupry asserts that whatever the senses may reveal belongs to the realm of the first language, the limited one that does not include truth, while nonsensical knowledge, expressed in the second language, is the vehicle for the expression of truth.

22. One of the most inspired discussions of the limitations of language was presented in the beginning of the last century by the Hebrew poet Chaim Nachman Bialik in an essay entitled "Revelation and Concealment in Language," in *Kol Kitve Chaim Nachman Bialik* (Collected Works) (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1958), 1:192. The English translation is in Robert Alter, ed., *Modern Hebrew Literature* (New York: Behrman, 1975), 130–37. In a highly

eloquent discussion, Bialik insisted (like Saint-Exupry's fox many years later) that language is adequate for the unimportant things; when dealing with great truth, language obscures rather than reveals.