Free Contribution

God is Unconscious. Of an Other Enjoyment.
Psychoanalytical Attempt at an Atheistic Mysticism

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Abstract

The aim of this essay is to elaborate structural epistemological and ethical equivalences between mysticism and psychoanalysis. This allows us to make the central concerns of mysticism accessible to contemporary secular thought. The article is driven by two intentions: on the one hand, not to misunderstand mysticism as a moral enterprise of self-perfection, and on the other hand, to oppose the contemporary “guiding culture” of enjoyment with an ethics of desire.

Keywords

psychoanalysis – mysticism – alterity – ethics of desire – sublimation – other enjoyment

The resurgence of religion [...] is to be thought of in terms that are no longer theirs.¹

¹ Certeau, Theoretische Fiktionen, p. 214 (own translation).
1 Introduction

The disturbing radicality of mysticism undoubtedly lies in the fact that it raises the question of human happiness not from this world, but from the beyond. Psychoanalysis – that is the central and perhaps provocative thesis of this essay – joins this view. In order to resolve this provocation, it is first necessary to liberate the concept of the beyond from the popular dichotomy of an earthly life on this side before death versus a heavenly life on the other side after death. It was precisely this concept of the afterlife that Freud (and in this, very much in the tradition of the Enlightenment) decisively rejected as an illusion, calling on us instead to seek ways of coping with life on this side. But even if his scepticism of religion repeatedly includes mysticism, in his acumen he does not neglect to take the latter seriously as an earthly doctrine of happiness.\(^2\) In fact, even a superficial engagement with mysticism will very quickly show us that its understanding of the beyond cannot be covered by the aforementioned popular temporal and local categorisations. Conversely, it will become clear that the idea of a beyond is also of fundamental importance for psychoanalysis. Both disciplines, however, refer to a peculiar beyond, one that we find precisely in the midst of earthly life, and even more so, that constitutes the actual, but beyond the sayable, centre and driving force of this life, which is closer to us than we are to ourselves. While mysticism calls this force beyond our ego “God”, psychoanalysis calls it “drive”. If the aim is to approach mysticism from the vantage point of psychoanalysis, it is vital to firstly address its Drive Theory.\(^3\)

\(^2\) Examples of both tendencies, scepticism and attention, can be found in Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, pp. 64–73. A cautiously positive assessment can also be found in the 31st lecture of the *New Introductory Lectures*: “[…] that certain mystical practices may succeed in upsetting the normal relations between the different regions of the mind, so that, for instance, perception may be able to grasp happenings in the depths of the ego and in the id which were otherwise inaccessible to it.” Freud, *New Introductory Lectures On Psycho-Analysis*, p. 78 et seq.

\(^3\) In discussing the psychoanalytic theory of drives, I will refer primarily to Freud and Jacques Lacan. The two are (together with Wilfred R. Bion) those analytical authors in whom the inner proximity of psychoanalysis and mysticism becomes most tangible. In Freud’s case in the form of a passionate ambivalence – he dismisses mysticism and cannot get away from it. Finally, he pays respect to it in the last entry of his *Nachlass* which is included in the German Edition of his Collected Works: “Mystik, die dunkle Selbstwahrnehmung des Reiches ausserhalb des Ichs, des Es.” (Mysticism the dark self-perception of the realm outside the ego, the id.) Freud, *Schriften aus dem Nachlass*, p. 152. Lacan’s reference to mysticism, on the other hand, is affirmative – he even goes as far as to claim himself or his writings into its tradition. Cf. Lacan, *Encore*, p. 76 et seq.
The affirmation that there is – in the concept of drive and God – a structural equivalence of the two disciplines will open up to us the possibility of a work of translation that also encompasses ethics, i.e. the doctrine of the conduct of life, and which will make it possible for us – in M. de Certeau’s words – to think of mystical knowledge, experience and practice in “terms that are no longer theirs”.

2 Theory of Knowledge

2.1 Myth of Origin (The Drive)
In a beautiful text, *Freud – So to speak*, Jean-Luc Nancy describes the Freudian drive as a force, an urge that “comes from elsewhere than from us” and that “is from the point of view of the conscious and volitional little ‘I’ undoubtedly suffered, [...] but that is also cooriginary with the birth and growth of this singular ‘one’ that we name the ‘subject’ [...].” According to Nancy, in an attempt to elaborate on this force in more detail, Freud turned against anything that promises an ultimate meaning: “In the final analysis – if you will – Freud is not looking for knowledge.” His “elsewhere” can therefore neither be seen as a beyond in terms of a transcendence, as understood by theologians, nor in terms of some positive scientific finding, such as in the field of neurobiology. Rather, as Nancy puts it, Freud’s works on the drive are

[...] the most powerful attempt that has been made since the end of the various metaphysics. It is able to escape the double trap of mankind’s self-production, on the one hand (in which Marx, particularly, is caught), and, on the other, a resurrection of some kind of divinity (as in Heidegger’s case). This is also why its own greatness offers it to us suspended between dangers that threaten on either side: the positivity of a supposed science or technique [...] and the belief in who knows what depths or phantasmatic powers, the entire imaginary of a ‘primitivity’ that psychoanalysis consists precisely in calling into question. But what it calls into question, whether as a supposed object or as a fabulous origin, is nothing less than its own consistency: this is what underpins what we are naming here the Freudian narrative. This narrative relates that – and how – mankind relates its provenance to itself in relation to an infinite

When, on the other hand, I speak in this essay about mysticism, i.e. about a phenomenon that we encounter in various forms in all cultures, religions and epochs, I refer throughout to Christian mysticism such as developed in Europe from the Middle Ages onwards.

5 Nancy, *Adoration*, p. 100.
surpassing of itself, to an excessive thrust that precedes and follows it, 
that sets it in the world and removes it from the world, even as this thrust 
demands that it give form in this world to this other worldly force.6

And a few pages later:

[It is] to the precise point where science stops and religion proves to be 
an illusion, where Freud reopens the mythical word. Where he gives a 
name, which is provisional, as are all mythical names (and perhaps there-
fore all names ...), to what thrusts [us] in being. Was he not able to write: 
“The theory of the drives is, so to speak, our mythology. Drives are mythi-
cal entities, magnificent in their indefiniteness.”7

Three points should be emphasised in Nancy’s appreciation of the specificity 
of Freud’s Drive Theory. First, the drive comes from “elsewhere” – it is prior to 
the ego, and it is suffered by it. Secondly, the demands of coping with the drive 
are the cause of mental life. Thirdly, Freud’s attempt to “give shape to this oth-
erworldly force” leads him to a speculative fiction – precisely to the “mythol-
ogy of the Drive Theory”. This way, Freud succeeds in pursuing his thirst for 
knowledge without abolishing the inherent impossibility of mentally grasping 
the extrapsychic in its entirety. For unlike religion and positivist science, both 
of which in their own way lay claim to a potentially final positive knowledge, 
myth by definition always remains mere narration. As such, it gives meaning 
in the form of a seen-through illusion that leaves open the gap between the 
meaning/the psychic and the being/the extrapsychic of the real.8 In contrast to 
the idea that it is possible to (at some point) fully subject the world to our ego, 
the narrative form of the myth thus always implies the experience of a limit to 
its cognitive and controlling capabilities and refers to its subjection to an urge 
coming from somewhere else and aiming at elsewhere.9

In the evolution of Freud’s drive theory, this aspect of alterity indeed emerges 
more and more clearly. In his two early major drafts thereof, Three Essays on 
the Theory of Sexuality (1905) and On Narcissism (1914), he had still been pri-
marily dealing with the intrapsychic shifts of the libido – and in doing so, as he

6 Nancy, Adoration, p. 103.
7 Nancy, Adoration, p. 104.
8 See Pfaller, On The Pleasure Principle in Culture.
9 It is by far no surprise that Freud always refers back to the artifice of the myth when it comes 
to the question of origin: myth of the Urvater (progenitor) (the origin of society), myth of 
Oedipus (origin of the subject), myth of the drive (origin of desire).
himself stated, he stayed on reasonably firm ground. However, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920, after the horrors of the First World War), he was concerned with establishing its counterpart, the “demonic” *Wiederholungszwang* (*compulsion to repeat*) working against pleasure, as it presented itself in the war neuroses and in the fixations of the negative therapeutic reaction in the transference. These phenomena, which contradicted the theory that our life is solely under the rule of the pleasure principle and ultimately only seeks to reduce tension, finally led him, in the last four chapters of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, to the question of the origin of drives. Searching for an answer, Freud himself fell prey to his own subject, becoming a restless character orbiting around something that did not let him go and yet which he could never quite get hold of. Every new consideration immediately brought to light its inherent contradictions and thus causing him to search for different solutions.

Leaving the inner contradictions and unresolved questions aside for the moment, it is important to outline the main features of the reconfiguration of the Drive Theory as elaborated in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. The most primal urge of what Freud calls the drive – and not only the drive of human beings, but of all animate matter – would be to relieve the tensions of life and to return to the absence of tension in non-living matter; that is both *death drive* (*Thanatos*) and *pleasure principle* in its purest form. It owes its emergence to a still quite unimaginable force by which at some time in inanimate matter the qualities of the living were awakened – birth of the *life instinct* (*Eros*) whose endeavour to combine the organic into ever larger units leads to all phenomena of life: growth and differentiation of organisms, creation of new life through division, budding and sexual reproduction – and any other form of increase in the complexity of the organic (e.g. through the emergence of the psychic, etc.). The conflict between the two forces, Eros and Thanatos, initiates a first modification of the pleasure principle. Instead of relieving tensions in the most direct way, it is content (at first) to avoid changes in tension as far as possible and to keep them as low as possible through repetitive iteration of the existing – still, death remains the goal, but it now accepts a detour via life. This is what Freud calls the *Selbsterhaltungstrieb* (*self-preservation drive*) and again, not only that of human beings, but of all living things. Contrary to

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11 Freud struggles with his thoughts and contests several times that his theories are on unsteady ground. For example: “Let us now hark back for a moment ourselves and consider whether there is any basis at all for these speculations.” And further: “[…] we should consequently feel relieved if the whole structure of our argument turned out to be mistaken.” Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, pp. 41, 44.
all appearances, he regards it as originally nothing more than a “myrmidon of the death”.\textsuperscript{13}

With these rather bold speculations, Freud undertakes an attempt to derive the origin of drives from universal laws of nature that go far beyond the human being and to integrate it into the greater context of all life. He thus underlines the radical alterity of human life: The forces that drive us and ultimately determine us do not stem from our ego – its function, like the function of the psychic in general, is rather limited to preventing the traumatic overstimulation of the nervous system (by external and internal stimuli), transforming them into tolerable stimulus quantities and thus making them mentally processible. While we repeatedly get the impression that we are the \textit{authors} of our own life through the representations (\textit{word-presentations} and \textit{thing-presentations}) and operations (cognitive processes) formed in this context, in reality we remain only the \textit{translators} and \textit{representatives} of a message that comes from somewhere else and is aimed at elsewhere.

The strength of Freud’s generalised materialistic Drive Theory, with its integration of human striving into universal natural laws, however, also shows its weakness. Freud fails to distinguish the human drive with the necessary clarity from processes of inanimate nature, from the division mechanisms of primitive organisms and from the reproductive instincts of more highly developed animals, and to comprehend and appreciate it as a specifically human phenomenon. It is precisely this distinction that Jacques Lacan makes very decisively in relation to the Drive Theory. With the instruments of a theory of media, i.e. the distinction between the registers of the real, the symbolic and the imaginary, he succeeds in developing a theory of drive that allows us to understand the drive as a characteristic of humans as a speaking being (\textit{parle-être}). If one follows Alenka Zupančič’s\textsuperscript{14} summary of Lacan’s reworking of Freud’s death Drive Theory, the specifically human about the drive – the “demonic” compulsion to repeat – is neither grounded in the striving to reduce the tensions of need (as in Freudian death drive which follows the pleasure principle) nor in the urge to repeat the associated pleasurable experiences described in \textit{Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality} (e.g. the \textit{mouth lust} associated with drinking). It is the former that the human drive has in common with all organic life, and the latter at least with more highly developed animal species. The specifically human part of the drive, however – and this is Lacan’s new accentuation – would be the consequence of the alienation of the human being in and through language. With the formation of representations of imagination as a medium

\textsuperscript{13} Freud, \textit{Beyond the Pleasure Principle}, p. 39.

\textsuperscript{14} Cf. Zupančič, \textit{Freud und der Todestrieb}, especially pp. 46–69.
of the psychic, already described by Freud (see above), but even more so with the capacity for reflection created by language, we become aware of the gap between the imagination and the real: we realise that we can never catch up with something that we mean and seek. If it is our fate – which is the specifically human of the drive – to circle around the objects of our desire, it would be nothing other in this respect than circling around the incomprehensible mysteriousness of life itself. Here, too, we encounter a fundamental alterity as the cause of the work of the psychic, i.e. of the drive. The latter is not content with satisfying its inherent unquestionable needs (e.g. hunger and thirst), but seeks to explore the mystery that confronts it in the gaps of its imaginative work, at the bottom of its desire, in the sudden traumatic emergence of the real.

If we compare Freud's Drive Theory with its accentuation by Lacan, Freud wants to ground the drive in its alterity in the materialist myth of a positive order of being – the urge of all life towards death (and he thereby understands the psychic binding primarily as the work of “translating” those objective stimuli that beset us from within and outside). For Lacan, however, the drive (in fact, what is specifically human about it) arises precisely in the tension of this “work of translation” itself; it does not want to achieve some positive goal of our being (e.g. death), but is nothing other than this circling around the void of the real which arises precisely with the formation of the psychic. What Freud and Lacan have in common is the phenomenon of the compulsion to repeat that is effective in the drive: both understand it equally as circling around an original traumatic real, that gap of alterity (that beyond), which, mentally intangible, is the cause of everything psychic.15

2.2 God is Unconscious

After it had previously been about the justification of the drive in a beyond and thus about considerations on the fundamental alterity of the psychic,

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15 We seem to encounter a profound difference between Freud and Lacan in the conception of the real. While Freud gives it a positive content, e.g. in the Death Drive Theory – it is the real of matter before and independent of any psychic grasp of the world – in Lacan's Drive Theory it is a product of psychic labour itself (just as the cavity of a vase is formed only with the construction of the vase). However, we already come across a similar idea in Freud – the unspeakable of the primordial repressed can only be owed to the process of primordial repression – and conversely, Cremonini (following Bruce Fink) also finds in Lacan the distinction between a pre-symbolic and a post-symbolic real: “The real is, on the one hand, the unimaginable real before all symbolic imprinting, and it is, on the other hand, the remainder produced by the attempts at symbolisation and appropriation, and in this respect always shaped by the symbolic.” Cremonini, Vom Realen des Mythos zum Mythos des Realen, p. 110 (own translation). For Lacan, the cause of the drive is above all this real of the remainder.
two further questions now arise: on the one hand, what entitles us to com-
pare the psychoanalytic conceptions of the drive and the psychoanalytic con-
cept of God with each other or even to equate them, and on the other hand,
whether and how the concept of God of psychoanalysis goes together with
that of the mystics.

To the first question: At first glance, not much seems to speak for an inner
kinship of drive and God, as they seem to belong to just opposite poles of
our experience: the most earthly natural – sensual – against the most other-
worldly supernatural – spiritual. Freud initially seems to confirm this view
when, on the one hand, he justifies the drives in the urge for satisfaction of
the stimuli originating from the inside of the body and, on the other hand,
makes God – as the internalized instance of the Father and representative of
culture – responsible for their mastery. Lacan does not contradict Freud in
this – for him, too, the idea of God remains inextricably linked to the drive-
taming Nom-du-Père, which founds culture. But he goes one step further in
both his understanding of God and in his conception of drives, by depriving
both terms of their last positive justification (in the physical stimuli or in the
paternal authority) and ultimately sees in them nothing more than myths
that try to grasp and banish the emergence of a traumatic bottomless real at
the bottom of our experience.16

As boundary concepts of experience, which are supposed to answer the
question of the whence, whither, and why of our life, God and the drive also
meet in our use of language; we repeatedly seek in them both the cause of our
life, the source of our aliveness, and the goal of our desire. And it is precisely in
view of their proximity to the borderline experiences of life that the two terms
are particularly “unstable” and tend, in situations of existential experience, to
cause the security of the reality attributed to them (of a positively conceived
God or drive) to disintegrate and instead the bottomless mysteriousness of life
to shine forth – the gap of the real inaccessible to the psyche for Lacan, the
primordial repressed, inconceivable to consciousness, for Freud.

These originally traumatic, i.e. psychologically intangible experiences find
a first, hermetic form, only rudimentarily accessible to conscious comprehen-
sion, in condensed forms of phantasmatic flashing – be it in the burning bush
of Moses, or in Jesus’ cry on the cross: “My God, my God, why hast thou for-
saken me?” (Mk 15,34)17 Be it in the radiance of “a white surface” described
by Didi-Huberman in the centre of Fra Angelico’s Annunciation fresco in

16  By the way, Lacan thoroughly agrees with Freud on this, let’s just remember that Freud,
too, cannot but only formulate the answer to our “ultimate questions” as myths – mythology
of the Drive Theory, myth of the Urvater, etc.
17  All literal quotations from the Gospels refer to the King James Version (KJV).
Florence,\textsuperscript{18} or in the ecstatic exclamation of the rapt in love. In all these phenomena, which are more the expression of occurrences than of narratives signifying anything, testimonies to a being still beyond or before any sense, Lacan recognises the \textit{screen of the phantasm}, whose rudimentary formations (such as the burning bush, the outcry, the pure white, etc.) protect us from the unbearable formless maw of the real. For Freud, this phenomenon of the phantasm also appears regularly in dreams, for example in the form of a “tangle” of images or words that cannot be further explained, which “does not want to unravel itself”, which makes no further contributions to the content of the dream, in those hermetic places that must be “left in the dark”: “This is then the dream’s navel, the spot where it reaches down into the unknown.”\textsuperscript{19}

Finally, in a further step (which begins, for example, in the case of the dream with the moment of awakening, and ends, another example, with theological reflections on the death of Jesus on the cross), we subject the phantasm to its conscious processing, which allows it to be reinserted into the context of our psychic reality, which has now changed though. Here now the essential type of this transformation for our topic: If we succeed in maintaining that openness to the underlying incomprehensibility of the real in this process of giving meaning (as it is shown, for example, in the idea of the Christ Child: we are happy to “believe” in it with the children, knowing full well that it is only a fairy tale that playfully grasps the ultimately incomprehensible origin of the gift of life), or does the striving for security push us into the conviction that a completed final positive knowledge would be possible: then there really is the being of God and the biochemically graspable drive.\textsuperscript{20} Against these attempts to reassure anxious souls, Lacan insists on seeing God and the drive as the central ciphers of a missed encounter fundamental to human life. This also opens up the understanding of his following – at first seemingly obscure – reflection:

For the true formula of atheism is not God is dead – even by basing the origin of the function of the father upon his murder, Freud protects the father – the true formula of atheism is God is unconscious.\textsuperscript{21}


\footnotetext{19}{Freud, \textit{The Interpretation of Dreams}, p. 525. See also p. 11: “There is at least one spot in every dream at which it is unplumbable – a navel, as it were, that is its point of contact with the unknown.”}

\footnotetext{20}{Robert Pfaller, as already mentioned above, has made these two kinds of belief, the playful myth against the positivist conviction, summed up by the French Psychoanalyst Octave Mannoni as \textit{croyance} and \textit{foi}, the basis of important cultural theoretical considerations. See footnote 8.}

This passage is found rather abruptly in the middle of Lacan’s discussion of the famous dream of the burning son cited by Freud, in which the (actual) fever death of a son in his father’s dream causes the sentence to appear: Father, do you not see that I am burning? This sentence, a shattering image of an ultimate experience of loss, powerlessness and guilt of a father, points for Lacan beyond the tragic individual case to the just mentioned structural deficiency in our relationship to the world: For no one, no father, no technology and no science, can close the hole of the real that opens up, for example, in the death of a son. And no God either. This is exactly what Lacan aims at with his just quoted consideration: In order to dismantle this omnipotent, it is not enough to let him die – because then this myth of Freud of an omnipotent, uncastrated primordial father would have really existed, at some point, in the past. The correct formula of this deconstruction can therefore only be that God is unconscious – that is, as already explained above, nothing else than a cipher, precisely a rudimentary phantasmatic screen in front of the maw of the real which it simultaneously covers and lets shine through and in this mysteriousness lets become the cause and the crystallization core of our questioning and desire.

Exactly one page later, Lacan briefly comes to talk about the drive – and he positions it without hesitation exactly at the place where he had located God just before, namely at

the place of the real, which stretches from the trauma to the phantasy – in so far as the phantasy is never anything more than the screen that conceals something quite primary [...].

These considerations now enable us to summarize the homologous structure of our two concepts, God and drive, in a psychoanalytic understanding: Initially, at their centre, they are both – each in their “language” – none other than expressions of a traumatic intrusion of the real at the origin of our experience (at the site of the “primordial repressed”). This traumatic intrusion ignites, in order to somehow grasp it, the formation of the unconscious phantasm (which is realized in the dream, in the slip of the tongue, in the false performance, in the unconscious repetitions), which in turn (after the awakening, so to speak) becomes accessible to a conscious processing. Thereby it is decided, as already mentioned, whether in this last stage of conscious processing the forces of desire or of defense have the upper hand: the forces of desire which keep open the relation of the representations (Vorstellungsrepräsentanzen) – Lacan

would say the signifiers forming in this process – to the gap of the real (and for which the concepts like God and drive are nothing but phantasmatic governors of the desire for a relation to this gap), or the forces of defense which want to close the gap with them (the concepts of God or drive) and give them a positive content: then God becomes the real almighty father of the faith of those who prefer certainty to desire, and the drive exhausts its desire for them in the mere satisfaction of need.

After the discussion of the homologous structure of drive and God in the (Freudian/Lacanian) psychoanalytic understanding, now to the second issue at hand, the comparison of psychoanalytic and mystical conceptions of God. The answer to this question can only be limited to hints here (mainly because there are more qualified people to judge the mystics’ conceptions of God). If we first understand Lacan’s above-outlined idea of the unconscious God as an expression of a decided depersonalization and depositivization of the psychoanalytic conception of God (God as a phantasmatic placeholder of the traumatic real), we can find correspondences to it on the side of mysticism – to pick only two examples – in the traditions of negative theology and, leading even further, in the development of the concept of God in Meister Eckhart. The central thesis, first of all, of negative theology is certainly the statement that God is neither positively sayable nor imaginable: for the cause (and goal) of everything limited by time and space cannot be something itself limited (otherwise the creator of everything would himself be a creature). And since the decisive medium of our psychic life, language, functions only in the limitedness of time and space, we can correctly speak about God at most negatively, in the negation of all positive determinations (“apophatic”), but never positively (“cataphatic”).

This purely logically justified rejection of any anthropomorphic or even otherwise conceptually graspable image of God is complemented by Meister Eckhart’s radical positive version of the corresponding experience of God. If we follow Bernhard McGinn’s discussion of this theme in volume 4 of his *Mysticism in the Occident*, it is grounded in Eckhart’s “master metaphor” of grunt; this denotes an “uncreated something in the soul”\(^\text{23}\) itself, namely in its innermost centre, precisely its *ground*. And while from this *grunt* all our conceptions of God and the world (the “birth of the Son/the Word”) develop, there is a “little spark in the soul” which is not satisfied with the creatures:

He is not satisfied with either the Father or the Son or the Holy Spirit [...] inasmuch as each (person) exists in its own particularity. He is not

\(^{23}\) McGinn, *Die Mystik im Abendland*, p. 210 (all following quotations are own translation).
even content with the single, still divine being. No, he wants into the single-fold ground, into the silent wilderness, into which no distinction ever entered, neither Father nor Son nor Holy Spirit [...] for this ground is a single-fold stillness, which is in itself and immovable; but from this immovability all things are moved and [...] [receive] life [...]."\(^{24}\)

In the three levels of the experience of God, which Eckhart elaborates here – personal God / divine being / unifold ground (\textit{einfaltiger grunt}) – we find again the three levels of the psychic processing of perception described above: conscious imagination / screen of the phantasm / touch of the real. And in the cry attributed to Meister Eckhart: “Oh God, free me from everything, especially from You!” we recognize again that paradox described by Lacan, which arises wherever man wants to decide with the tool of his consciousness, the language, about an experience which essentially eludes it. Other mystics, such as Teresa of Ávila, often seem, at least superficially, to be more simple-minded (or even more cautious) in their adherence to a personalized concept of God. In the practice of Teresa’s experience, however, this split emerges in the same way: The experience of the “unifold ground” shows itself to her in the contemplation of a “wordless fullness of emptiness”; the conceptually graspable meditations, on the other hand, refer primarily to Christ, the “Son made flesh”. What psychoanalysis was to accomplish half a millennium later, after the upheavals of the Enlightenment, was to grasp this real of the Godhead as a specific product of the psychic constitution of man as a speaking being (\textit{parle-être}) and of the dynamics of drive and desire derived from it, and thus – with a materialistic concept of God,\(^{25}\) as it were – to liberate it definitively from any positive ontology.

3 Practice of the Conduct of Life

When psychoanalysis poses the question of the origin of the drive and mysticism poses the question of the nature of God, these are by no means mere

\(^{24}\) McGinn, \textit{Die Mystik im Abendland}, p. 211.

\(^{25}\) When I speak here of a “materialistic concept of God”, I mean, in the spirit of the Enlightenment, the attempt at an unreserved, rational discussion of even the “ultimate questions” that life poses to us. In particular, this thinking rejects the imaginary closures offered to us by any form of positivism – be it religion or science – and, by exposing itself to the experience of its own inescapable mysteriousness, confronts the “rendezvous with the real” (Lacan), that is, a materiality of the world beyond sense (which is precisely what gives rise to desire).
theoretical speculations, but the foundations of a theory that aims directly at the practice of the conduct of life. Indeed, what particularly connects the two disciplines is that they both combine, each in its own way, a theory of man with a theory of practice, and this in turn with a systematic, as it were experimental elaboration of this practice (in the various instructions and institutions of spiritual life, in psychoanalytic treatment). Both are concerned with the same question, namely not necessarily for a happy, but for a succeeding life. At first, at least in a popular understanding of the two disciplines, the answers to this question could not be more opposite: Psychoanalysis is concerned with a worldly happiness, mysticism with the beyond. In the first part of this essay, however, the aim has been to show that the central reference points of both worldviews (the drive, God) can only be adequately grasped in the categories of a beyond, albeit in the materialistic conception of the term discussed. After the question of cognition, the following section will now be concerned with shedding light on the ethical implications of this conception. It will have to be shown that the issue of a succeeding life is decided precisely in the relationship of humans to this beyond; it is a matter of opening oneself to alterity or of closing oneself off to it, or of the intertwined proportions of both tendencies.

3.1 An Ethics of Desire
Let us begin again with Freud. For all the other transformations to which he subjected his drive theory in the course of its development, he always held on to its dualistic-conflictual character: Freud sees man in a fundamental field of tension of two antagonistic drives which are in a constant struggle with each other and thereby make the most diverse compromises. The two parties in this struggle are, on the one hand, the ego drives (or self-preservation drives) derived from the death drive, and their opponents the life or sex drives. First to the drives of self-preservation: They find their most primitive direct expression in the satisfaction of the most elementary needs (hunger, thirst) and other forms of direct tension discharge (up to suicide and murder). With the increasing replacement of the pleasure principle by the reality principle (under the influence of the life drive), they lead to the purposeful safeguarding of one's own life and the promotion of self-interests (health, wealth, social recognition, self-satisfaction, etc.). Finally, to the extent that – again under the influence

26 One could say that while the traditional understanding of the conceptual pair of this world and the other world separates the juxtaposed disciplines of psychoanalysis and mysticism by a vertical line, in our understanding this world and the other world must be separated by a horizontal line, for both participate in this world and the beyond.

27 For a short account of the development of the concept of drive, see Freud, Beyond the Pleasure Principle, p. 38, footnote 1.
of the life drive – the individual ego extends to the We of a social body (family, group, nation), the originally quite individual egoism also extends to that of the group: outwardly against a hostile outside world, inwardly by identifying and safeguarding the homogeneity of the group and for the more or less reality-adapted pursuit of other self-interests: security and order, morality, prosperity, nationalism, progress, etc. What unites all the competing efforts of the self-preservation drive is the attempt to bring life under control, to eliminate the Other (the alterity of life), and to be master in one’s own house, so to speak. This is Freud’s conception of this drive in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*: If we cannot completely shut off the disturbing stimuli that constantly invade us from outside and inside (the original and actual desire of the death drive is the return to the lifeless), we would at least like to control them and exclude everything disturbing, unpredictable new as far as possible:

Seen in this light, the theoretical importance of the instincts of self-preservation, of self-assertion and of mastery greatly diminishes. They are component instincts whose function it is to assure that the organism shall follow its own path to death, and to ward off any possible ways of returning to inorganic existence other than those which are immanent in the organism itself. We have no longer to reckon with the organism’s puzzling determination (so hard to fit into any context) to maintain its own existence in the face of every obstacle. What we are left with is the fact that the organism wishes to die only in its own fashion. Thus these guardians of life, too, were originally the myrmidons of death.28

Freud contrast these, one can well say, very worldly, the conservative tendency of all matter following self-preservation or ego drives, with the life drives. They are of mysterious origin: “The attributes of life were at some time evoked in inanimate matter by the action of a force of whose nature we can form no

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28 Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, p. 39. Even if Freud relativises this outright subsuming of the ego/self-preservation drives under the death drive in the same text and also ascribes a libidinous, narcissistic component to them, adherence to the distinction between the two drive forces directed at the ego, self-preservation vs. narcissism (descendant of the death drive vs. descendant of the libido), remains of great heuristic value for us: for despite the constantly diverse alloys of the two components in actual life, it allows us to take a closer look at the related reference to the Other: its elimination (in the intentions of the self-preservation drive) vs. the turning towards it (in the libido, including the narcissistic one). As we will see later, this distinction is of essential ethical significance not only for psychoanalysis, but also, under the name of the *distinction of spirits*, for mysticism.
conception.”

For the psychology of humans, the life drives undoubtedly find their most important form in the sexual drives. At the same time, however, the temptations of their Lustprämien (rewards of pleasure) generate those tensions which are connected with their dependence on the objects of love and the latter’s resistance to their excessive demands. By the fate of this conflict between Eros and ego interests the happiness of a human being’s life is decided.

Even if Lacan’s Drive Theory differs considerably from Freud’s, as mentioned above – for him the drive is specific to man and there is only one drive, which is at the same time a sex drive and a death drive – he still meets Freud in the importance he attaches to it for man’s happiness. With his specification of the modes of operation of the sexual drive, Lacan sheds new light on the logic of human desire and enjoyment. First of all: sexuality has its origin in bodily needs (be it in hunger, thirst or, later, also in the urge of hormones, these would be the mechanisms of action of the instincts), but it is not founded in them. Much more than this, and this is decisive, it is an effect of the attention by the fellow human being that is always necessarily connected with it: for the mother does not breastfeed the child like an algorithmically controlled machine, but takes – one could say, just the opposite – the necessity of breastfeeding above all as an opportunity to shower the child with all her conscious and unconscious desires directed at it – it should, at least and hopefully only in her reveries, fulfil and be what she lacks. Besides all the desires that the child can guess and fulfil (and children, in their dependence, are, as we know, extremely adept at it!), there is, however, as Lacan does not cease to expound, a structural gap in this relationship necessarily connected with man as a being of speech, which is grounded in the above-mentioned unbridgeable gap between the imagination and the real (we seek something that we can ultimately neither name nor catch up with). The mysterious nature of their relationship, founded in this, makes emerge for the child, in Lacan’s wonderful formulation, the question underlying the dynamics of his life: Che vuoi? However eloquent and active the

29 Freud, Beyond the Pleasure Principle, p. 38.
30 Freud, Beyond the Pleasure Principle, p. 43.
31 Enjoyment here, as throughout this text, is the English term for Lacan’s concept of jouissance, which denotes – as distinguished from desire – a form of pleasure that seeks to escape the limitations of the symbolic order.

The following continues the summary of Lacan’s theory of the sex drive by Alenka Zupančič already outlined in 2.1.
mother’s answers may be, they will never be able to satisfy the child’s thirst for knowledge – for the mother herself does not know the answer. It is precisely in this question, in her incessant circling around the incomprehensible enjoyment and desire of the other, that Lacan locates the origin of the sexual drive.

What interests us in the context of our ethical question are the fundamental structural modes of the response to the *che vuoi* – in our example, the mother’s response to the child’s question and the child’s own reception of this response – and the structure of the relationship to the *Other* that is founded in it. Does it threaten to disappear (as in psychosis) in the chimera of a closed figure of enjoyment (mother and child are one, there is no Other anymore), or does it freeze (as in perversion) in the assumption that the child’s renunciation of its own will and its obedience to the mother’s demands could be the whole answer? Or can between mother and child (as in neurosis and in so-called normality), with all the fusions of their enjoyment as in the adaptations of obedience, that gap between the two nevertheless form and be maintained in which the openness of the desire of the Other, i.e. the openness of sexual desire, finds its place and can unfold?

Although coming from a somewhat different drive conception, the question of a damaged or healthier psychic life also arises for Freud in a very similar way – he too is concerned with whether and how man can maintain his libidinous relation to the world. Using the example of the Oedipus complex, he explains to us the limits of reality (through the child’s physical immaturity, through the inevitable disappointments of his absolute claim to love, through the arbitrary disregard of his curiosity, through the educational restrictions – the famous “no” of the father) to which his libidinous affection for the mother repeatedly comes up against, pushing him to withdraw from her erotic occupation into concern for his own integrity and self-preservation.32 And as inevitable and necessary as detachment from the initial incestuous love relationship with the mother is for the child’s development, it nevertheless harbours the danger of fixing the libidinous renunciation: depending on how radical and constant this is, it becomes the decisive source of a damaged life.

That this partisanship of Freud and Lacan for the side of the libido is not as obvious as it may seem to us, a look at the past and present-day psychoanalysis shows us. Not too seldom, and not only in the U.S.-American “ego psychology” from the 1940s onwards, which was particularly attacked by Lacan, but also in the tendencies towards therapeutization which have always accompanied the history of psychoanalysis and which today, under the increasing pressure of social efficiency, often seem to become its very nature, the goal of treatment

is proposed not so much to increase the libido but above all to strengthen the ego functions and the reality principle. Under these auspices, psychoanalysis becomes rather a training ground for renunciation, mastery, and the acquisition of a supposedly mature, realistic, and successful attitude toward life. In this it may coincide with the healthy intentions of society – in the sense of Freud and Lacan, however, it thereby only repeats and affirms, and precisely in proportion to the extent of the concern for itself, that first great turning away of the child from its love relationship to the world just described, when in the Oedipus complex it sacrifices its libidinal love strivings for the mother to the preservation of its bodily integrity. It is precisely in the fixation of this necessary renunciation, i.e. in the fixation of the abandonment of the drive desire and its encapsulation in the “healthy” self-reference, that neurosis is forming. Accordingly, the renunciation of drives can never be the goal of analysis. On the contrary, its aim must be to free the libido of the subject from the rigidity of enjoyment and to rekindle its original desire. The subject is supposed to get back to recognizing and acknowledging its inscribed possibilities of pleasure and to fight for their realization – not without reliably coming up against those limits again and again that reality (constitution, nature, society, ultimately the lack of being founded in language) sets for them: it is thus about the permanent renewal, on the one hand, of an original radical claim and, on the other hand, of the experience of its limitation, which is necessarily connected with the love relationship to the world (this is what Lacan calls symbolic castration). On this path, too, a renunciation thus becomes unavoidable, even a twofold one – but this, and this is essential here, does not derive from a demand of maturity, but results from the nature of desire: it is first about the renunciation of the security of an enjoyment that has disconnected itself from the desire of the Other and has concluded itself in the solipsism of self-gratification: instead of enjoyment of renunciation, therefore, renunciation of (precisely this) enjoyment. Second, it is about the renunciation imposed by the reality of the full fulfilment of our desires. And finally, the prize we have to pay for a truly radical opening of desire will always be the renewal of the experience of its ultimate traumatic unfoundedness (just as for Jesus on the cross the abyss of the real opens up behind the phantasm of the loving God – this is the experience Lacan describes with the crossing of the phantasm). Paradoxically, however, this is at the same time the prize we are awarded for it: It is (just like the death of Christ on the cross) the renewal of the vitality of our life.

33 An overview of the aims of psychoanalysis is given, for example, by Sandler/Dreher, What Do Psychoanalysts Want?
While Freud and Lacan (along with many other theorists of psychoanalysis) are united in positioning psychoanalysis on the side of Eros in the question of the tension between opening and closing, a difference also opens up between the two: Freud, in fact, assumes two drives in humans that are always present at the same time and virtually equal, Eros and Thanatos, which fight and complement each other and generally (except for the extreme cases of, for example, love mania and suicide) only occur in different ratios of mixing.

For Lacan, on the other hand, there is no such thing as the death drive in the Freudian sense (for him, the path to death owes itself not to a drive but to a mere weariness of life). For him there is only one drive, which is sexual and death drive in one; and the conflicts and deformations of the soul result from the antagonism between the opening and the closing which is inherent in it. This difference between the two authors can be understood, at least in part, on a historical background: While Freud, the educated bourgeois at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, still embraced the idea of a heroic struggle between equals (for example, he is said to have thoroughly welcomed the beginning of the First World War) and – as the outcome of the struggle – advocated the classical Aristotelian values of balance and moderation (hence the question of the mixture of drives is always of crucial importance for him), Lacan, born half a century later, is already marked by a radicalisation of social conditions that revealed themselves in all their fierceness in the two world wars and found their equally radical echo in the intellectual life of his time. In view of the frightening manifestations of destructiveness (in the economy, politics and society of the 20th century), one of the leading critical intellectuals of his time can no longer count on the moderation of balance, it can only be about a radicality of desire directly opposed to this enjoyment: no longer about the right balance between opening and closing, but about the question of whether there is any place at all in this world for the desire of the Other.

The last chapter of Lacan’s Seminar VII, The Ethics of Psychoanalysis in July 1960 provides us with an example of this debate. First, he summarises here his attitude to the ethics of psychoanalysis in a concise way:

I propose then that, from an analytical point of view, the only thing of which one can be guilty is of having given ground relative to one’s desire. Whether it is admissible or not in a given ethics, that proposition expresses quite well something that we observe in our experience. In the last analysis, what a subject really feels guilty about when he manifests guilt at bottom always has to do with – whether or not it might be
admissible for the father confessor – the extent to which he has given ground relative to his desire.\textsuperscript{34}

He then counters this primacy of desire (using the example of Aristotelian ethics, but by no means limited to it) with that broad stream of Western ethics which is founded, in one form or another, in the “service of goods”, in the “good of others”.

The “good of others” versus the passion of the individual – this tension is nothing new, of course, but it has become more accentuated, allows less and less overlap today, as we can also see from the vehemence of Lacan’s attack. Cardinal Mazarin’s saying “politics is politics, but love always remains love”\textsuperscript{35} applies less and less. Instead, Lacan’s dividing lines stand out:

Part of the world has resolutely turned in the direction of the service of goods, thereby rejecting everything that has to do with the relationship of man to desire – it is what is known as the postrevolutionary perspective.\textsuperscript{36}

The seductive aspect of this “service to goods” is not only the various remunerations of power (ultimately always in some form of social recognition), but also the way out it offers man’s inner reluctance to face the very question of the meaning of his life. The flip side of this rejection of desire (and it is surely no coincidence that Lacan speaks here of rejection and not repression) is, however, the unmasking of the good: Behind the semblance of the promises of the worldly order, its true face emerges ever more clearly: to the extent that it excludes desire, it becomes the unconditional servant of power and demands one thing above all: renunciation, obedience and work. And this order of goods cannot protect us from the destructive consequences of its own logic, for example, not from “the violent phenomena that reveal that the path of the triumph of goods in our world is not likely to be a smooth one.”\textsuperscript{37} But it offers even less protection to our inner being:

Doing things in the name of the good, and even more in the name of the good of the other, is something that is far from protecting us not only

\textsuperscript{34} Lacan, \textit{The Ethics of Psychoanalysis}, p. 319. [Quotations slightly modified.].

\textsuperscript{35} Lacan, \textit{The Ethics of Psychoanalysis}, p. 324. Jules Mazarin, actually Giulio Mazarini (1602–1661) was a French diplomat and cardinal. His saying reminds of Jesus’ dictum: “Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s” (Mk 12,17).

\textsuperscript{36} Lacan, \textit{The Ethics of Psychoanalysis}, p. 318.

\textsuperscript{37} Lacan, \textit{The Ethics of Psychoanalysis}, p. 324.
from guilt but also from all kinds of inner catastrophes. To be precise, it doesn't protect us from neurosis and its consequences.38

On the contrary: neurosis, in this perspective, is precisely the consequence of the betrayal (and the guilt associated with it) that we commit against our own desire in the name of social demands (of the good). From there, the arc closes to the special responsibility of psychoanalysis to be an advocate not of the public good, but of desire:

If analysis has a meaning, desire is nothing other than that which supports an unconscious theme, the very articulation of that which roots us in a particular destiny, and that destiny demands insistently that the debt [to be faithful to this special destiny] be paid [...].39

Addendum: The radical nature of this position naturally makes us think of mysticism when it places obedience to the Word of God above that to the world.

3.2 Examples of the Ethics of Desire: Lacan and Teresa of Ávila, the Child, the Sinner

Before giving examples to illustrate the concrete unfolding of this “ethics of desire” and the resulting connections between psychoanalysis and mysticism, a small digression must be inserted at this point: In the tradition of the Enlightenment, the maxim has rightly prevailed that a political decision, a judicial judgment, etc., are not to be measured by the yardstick of the person of the politician or judge, etc.: We judge the queen according to the fulfilment of her symbolic function as queen, the judge according to the fulfilment of his function as judge; her private life and his secret passions are irrelevant to this, provided they do not affect the integrity of his conduct of office, and are of no further concern to us. Of course, the psychoanalyst also has a symbolic function: but in this, and this is his distinction, he is not the guardian of a public order (like the queen, the politician, the judge, and to the extent that they commit themselves to it, even the doctor and the psychotherapist) but the

39 Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, p. 319. [Remark in the square bracket G.G.] To this, Lacan’s judgement on the role of the (contemporary) human sciences should be added here: “The fields of inquiry that are being outlined as necessarily belonging to the human sciences have in my eyes no other function than to form a branch of the service of goods, which is no doubt advantageous though of limited value.” Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, p. 324. This is not least to be understood as Lacan’s warning against the current psychotherapeutization tendencies of psychoanalysis.
advocate of the desire of his analysands. Since the attitude towards the latter cannot, by definition, be founded in any objective maxim of what is right, but only in the liveliness of the transference relationship, the question of the analyst’s desire inevitably comes into play. It is therefore no wonder, but an inner necessity, that Freud explicitly grounds psychoanalysis on the foundation of truth, that is, in other words, on the fidelity of the psychoanalyst to his own desire. This, of course, manifests itself for the patient primarily in the conduct of the treatment itself, but its authentication is ultimately found in the degree, not of perfection, but of openness of the relationship that the analyst has to his own destiny.40 When we consider Lacan’s conception of ethics here, it is therefore legitimate and meaningful to bring up some characteristics of the work and life style of this psychoanalyst. Of course, other, far “nobler” contemporary examples of desire could be used,41 but Lacan provides us with a particularly vivid example of what is to be elaborated here: namely, to show the gulf, to the point of scandal, that separates an ethics of desire from a commitment to the healthy intentions of society.42

Let us now go into medias res of the questions we are interested in here: First, Lacan’s style of work: Again and again it is emphasized how friendly and direct he was in dealing with his psychiatric patients; his winning manner seems to have characterized, at least in general, also his work with his (innumerable) analysands. The problems of this work were rooted elsewhere, namely in Lacan’s dealings with institutions and their representatives. His refusal of all conformisms, whether the implicit social decorum and considerations, or the officially agreed upon rules of the institution, when they contradicted Lacan’s beliefs, became the scandalous hallmark of his style.43 Thus, he is said to have told his own analyst, Rudolph Loewenstein, whose technically solid

40 Freud’s letters to his friend and mentor Wilhelm Fliess are an eloquent example of this inner interweaving of the foundation of psychoanalysis with the life and desire of its founder.
41 For example, the diary entries Das denkende Herz of the Dutch Jew Etty Hillesum, treated in detail by Catherine Millot in La vie parfaite, about her attitude to the persecution and extermination of Jews in the Third Reich.
42 Those who talk about Lacan’s work and lifestyle today usually refer to biographies (in this case, above all to Elisabeth Roudinesco’s comprehensive and detailed biographical overview Jacques Lacan and Catherine Millot’s very personal account Life with Lacan). In addition, there are published treatment reports by patients and analysands and, naturally less and less frequently, oral reports by people who have personally experienced Lacan more or less closely. As far as my admittedly limited preoccupation with this subject goes, it gives the impression of a relatively large consensus, as if a canonised narrative had developed over time. The following remarks refer to this public image of Lacan.
conformity to the ‘standard rules’ he despised and to whom he felt intellectually superior, the following story, probably also aimed at the transference relationship, toward the end of the analysis: In his car, in a tunnel, he saw a truck coming straight at him that was just overtaking. He stepped on the accelerator and forced the truck to give way.\footnote{Cf. Millot, \textit{Life with Lacan}, p. 5 et seq.} Loewenstein is said to have considered him unanalyzable because of his personality structure and when Lacan was finally appointed a member of the “Société Psychanalytique de Paris” against Loewenstein’s will and only under the condition of continuing the analysis, Lacan, contrary to his promise, simply ended the analysis immediately afterwards.\footnote{Cf. Roudinesco, \textit{Jacques Lacan}, p. 74.} The same disregard for conventions became the hallmark of his own practice. For example, he saw nothing wrong (similar to Freud, by the way) in spontaneously inviting an analytic aspirant to lunch at his home, or, to his great astonishment, in chatting with him quite naturally while urinating at the urinal.\footnote{Personal note from M. Turnheim.} Another example for Lacan’s unconventional practise, as Catherine Millot informs us in her book \textit{Life with Lacan}, is that he had at the age of 70 an affair with her being his analysand and student who was 40 years younger than him, by no means kept secret.\footnote{There are at least two indications that this unconventional analysis has led to a good end: First, Catherine Millot’s own testimony in this book of her personal development in the course of the analysis and her working through the transference, and then the external testimony of a life as a recognised and successful analyst, book author and teacher.} As is well known, another violation of the rules, the “arbitrary” handling of the duration of sessions, eventually led to the stripping of his status as a teaching analyst and thus to the break with the International Psychoanalytical Association. The obsession, the unconditional desire to get hold of what interested him in the world, seemed to make him regard everything else as insignificant: it made him indifferent, for example, to many political and social ideals that were well founded from the point of view of the common good. An early example of this is the unscrupulousness with which he attended the propaganda event of National Socialism, the Olympic Games in Berlin, in 1936, against the explicit reproach of his prominent fellow analyst Kris (\textit{You don’t do that!}). Lacan was, of course, neither a supporter nor a fellow traveller of National Socialism, but simply interested in all manifestations of life, be they politically left or right, socially good or condemnable, religiously holy or demonic. He was passionately interested in the motivations and mechanisms of the political and social, but obviously not in the idea of using his own political commitment to stand up for a better, fairer or even ideal world: he did not get involved in the Resistance or, 25 years later, in the revolt of...
the 1960s. Lacan was, in this respect, as Roudinesco suggests, a real anti-hero. One could see this as an expression of cowardice or convenience. But does that really apply? Does it not rather show us Lacan's deep skepticism against any moral imperative of social responsibility, and simply emphasise his conviction, articulated in his Seminar *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, that any real change is founded in fidelity to one's own desire?

A second effect of this ‘fidelity to one's desire’ was Lacan's quite obvious unshakeable conviction of his own grandeur and superiority. This sheds light on the famous self-dramatisation of his public appearances, on the mysterious significance he gave to every word and every sigh of his lecture, on the extravagance of his lifestyle, his clothes, on his preference for exquisite restaurants, on his sense of social elitism, his arrogance – in short, on Lacan as a dandy.

A third phenomenon that we can classify in this context is Lacan's notorious ruthlessness against himself and others: We read how he raced just as recklessly down ski slopes (to the point of breaking a leg) as he did in his convertible across the hard shoulder of busy motorways (to the point of an accident), without regard for the fear of his fellow drivers and for the real danger to himself and others. Millot reports how he naturally expected his travelling companions to come along with him on his long walks in blazing sun and heat. She thinks it was simply his way of going after what he wanted in the most direct way, e.g., he gained entry to closed churches, was able to persuade the sacristan to bring him a ladder so that he could take a closer look at a detail of an altarpiece, just as he did not hesitate to wake up co-workers in the middle of the night and pester them with his questions, or how he tried (albeit in vain) to get a private audience with the Pope through a churchman he knew so that he could personally present him with his *Écrits*. In the picture painted by his biographers (especially Roudinesco and Millot), one could easily recognise an ego-obsessed character calculatingly seeking his own advantage. (If this were really the case, it would have been easy for him to avoid his excommunication by the *International Psychoanalytic Association*, which hit him so hard). What they show us, however, is much more the psychogram of a devoted player who does not aim at safeguarding but at making his life and the world the field of a game with full commitment: He does not seduce in order to be adored, but is adored because he is so seductive (and hated because he is so ruthless). Millot alludes to this lack of calculation when she says:

In private, Lacan was perfectly simple. Not in the sense of the great man whom we call ‘simple’ when he condescends to deal with his inferiors. It

was just that, in his relations with others, he was deprived of the complications entailed by that dimension of intersubjectivity known as psychology. Lacan had no psychology; he had no ulterior motives; he did not try to second-guess the other. His simplicity was also due to the fact that he did not hesitate to ask for what he wanted in the most direct way.49

In another place, Millot tries to explain Lacan’s character traits, his directness, his “lightning-fast mind”, but also his sense of humour and comedy with a kind of childlikeness:

His drollery was also due to his childish side. I often told him that he was five years old, the age of radiant intelligence in children (according to Freud), the age before the repressions that always afflict adults with a certain mental debility. Five years was also the age when, according to Lacan, he had cursed God. [...] Nonetheless, I once read somewhere that one day, over lunch, he had confided to his neighbour at table that he had a secret, and this secret was that he was five years old.50

And even if Lacan, like a child of that age, had not in some way internalised society’s commandments and prohibitions, this does not mean, of course, that he did not recognise the world and others as Other.

While no prohibition, no conventional limit ever led him to stray from his course, he still recognized the real when it barred his path. [...] The real was a serious matter [...]. In his case, in life as when he was treating a patient, the point was to get to that real, that indestructible kernel of reality; and anything that separates one from it, keeps it at bay or disguises it, is merely frivolous.51

It may sound impertinent and even scandalous when such examples of a ruthless insistence on one’s own desires are presented as a paradigm of ethical behaviour.52 But above all, one will now ask what this impassionate nature is supposed to have to do with mysticism. And indeed, if one compares Lacan’s

52  Hopefully, it will be understood that Lacan’s *behaviour* is neither condemned nor idealised here, and certainly not recommended for imitation. When the example of his life is given here, it is not about an imaginary but a symbolic identification: the aim is not to resemble the model but, like him, to be faithful to one’s own desire.
ethics, for example, with that of one of the greatest Christian mystics, Teresa of Ávila (Lacan also pays homage to her as such in his Seminar xx, *Encore*), one could hardly imagine a greater contrast at first glance. Here the dandy Lacan revelling in his own magnificence, there the saint who follows the invocation of God (like a good shepherd, with such a gentle whistling) to free herself from the entanglements of the world and of her own ego and give herself entirely to a chaste love. While Lacan, may it please the father confessor or not, enjoys quite sensually not only the love of his young analysand, but also luxury, recognition and all the possible pleasures of this world, Teresa calls on us to hold in low esteem precisely all these earthly enticements, to combat their temptations in order to become ever freer in humility and obedience for the self-forgetting love of God and neighbour. If one takes these drafts of the conduct of life, the differences could hardly be greater. But if we abstain for a moment from the judgment that would settle the whole matter once and for all, and remember Freud’s injunction to always trace in the manifest text the structures of the desire that moves it, we arrive at a reading that, to our own surprise, most closely connects the life designs of Lacan the libertine with those of St. Teresa: Is it not a matter for both of them to leave the fortifications of their ego in order to open themselves to the unconscious desire, or, better, to the desire for the unconscious? Are not both Lacan’s and Teresa’s cases at work, each in a particular historical and individual constellation, a remarkably radical wish to read and follow the traces of desire?

If we take Teresa’s main spiritual work, *The Interior Castle*, we might, like so many servants of ecclesiastical discipline, try to subject it to a moral reading. We then read of renunciation of desires and struggle against impulses, of the exercises of self-denial, of humble service in poverty, chastity, obedience, of being absorbed in concern for the good of our neighbour – of all these feats of mastery which are supposed to serve to perfect us more and more and to obtain the grace of God and eternal salvation (and perhaps the admiration of the community). This, Teresa confesses, is how she sometimes thought as a young girl. Her spiritual experiences, however, very quickly reversed this ego logic: it is not that works bring grace, but the experience of grace that urges us to make more and more room for it in our lives and works: the call of love, then, precedes works and grounds them. It (love) draws us to forget ourselves more and more and to open ourselves more and more to it in love of God and our neighbour.

The truly fundamental threat to the spiritual path is thus not sensual pleasures and earthly passions – they rather serve, as we shall see, to open the field on which the struggles between ego and love strivings can take place – the only truly fundamental danger to life in God, *mortal sin*, consists in “[...]
the human being’s refusal to be loved. The real sin is the rejection of love. The true antipode of the mystical path would therefore not be the passions, not even in their excessive intensifications such as in crime, addiction, etc. (insofar as these are still at least alloyed with traces of the libido), but a life without desire that closes itself off in imaginary certainties, for example by encapsulating itself in moral self-righteousness. For such a life it is true that

[...] the same sun that gave the soul such radiant beauty, and is still present in the centre of the soul, is now as if it were no longer there [...]. Nothing helps her further. Hence it is that all the good works she may perform are unfruitful for the attainment of eternal glory [...]. For since they do not emerge from that source, which is God, who first turns our virtue into virtue, and we depart from him, it cannot be pleasing to his eyes.

As confirmation of this “amoral” ethics of mysticism, two testimonies of the judgment of Jesus Christ may be cited here. The first one:

And they brought young children to him, that he should touch them: and his disciples rebuked those that brought them. But when Jesus saw it, he was much displeased, and said unto them, Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God. Verily I say unto you, Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter therein.

Mk 10,13–15

Infants, then (they still had to be “brought to him”), these – as one knows – true tyrants, who are still far from any morality and God-pleasing humility and self-denial and who want to assert their needs and drives ruthlessly, to impose their will on their environment – these infants are just the ones that Jesus would now make the model of spiritual perfection: “[...] for of such is the kingdom of God.” Freud justifies the admiration of the small children by the adults very astutely by their still unbroken narcissism, i.e. their libidinous occupation of their own ego, which has not yet submitted to the demands of society and the laws of reality, and by the resulting openness of their desires, with which they turn to the other without reservation – it is this (in the sense of Freudian Eros)

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53 Ávila, Wohnungen der Inneren Burg, p. 87 (all following quotations are my own translation). Note the passive mode of the statement: [...] to be loved! This is not about active performance, but about the passive “performance” of allowing (cf. footnote 56).
54 Ávila, Wohnungen der Inneren Burg, p. 88.
magnificent, erotic relation to the world that we adults so much admire in our young children and revive in them for ourselves: “His Majesty the Baby’, as we once fancied ourselves.”

What Jesus emphasizes so much about the little children in this passage and what makes them an absolute model for him is their way of relating to the other: “Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom as a little child [...].” Accordingly, the most fundamental demand on man (to receive the kingdom of God) would not be some form of active achievement (e.g., moral perfection), but the opening of his desire: Knock and it shall be opened unto you! Consider the lilies of the field: how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin, and yet your heavenly Father clothes them in all splendour – this is the message of love of the Sermon on the Mount (freely adapted from Mt 7,7 and 6,28).

The second example:

And, behold, a woman in the city, which was a sinner, when she knew that Jesus sat at meat in the Pharisee’s house, brought an alabaster box of ointment, and stood at his feet behind him weeping, and began to wash his feet with tears, and did wipe them with the hairs of her head, and kissed his feet, and anointed them with the ointment. Now when the Pharisee which had bidden him saw it, he spake within himself, saying, This man, if he were a prophet, would have known who and what manner of woman this is that toucheth him: for she is a sinner.

Lk 7,37–39

We know how the story ends: Jesus notices the disapproving attitude of his host and points out to him the proofs of love of this woman, contrasts them with the cool aloofness of his host and concludes with the famous sentence:

Wherefore I say unto thee, Her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much: but to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little. And he said unto her, Thy sins are forgiven.

Lk 7,47–48

In contrast to the children, here, with the adult woman, there is quite obviously the sin of depravity, and it is also seen as such. What is decisive for forgiveness and salvation, however, is not its extent, but the extent of love (which makes the sinner turn to Jesus). Contrary to the moral condemnation, it is precisely this sin that shows itself in the closest relationship to desire, namely in its

55 Freud, On Narcissism, p. 91. See also footnote 28.
passionate search for pleasure and fulfillment and the disappointments necessarily associated with it, i.e. in the turning to the other associated with it.\textsuperscript{56}

It is precisely this paradoxical inner relationship between sin and love (this most purified form of desire, in contrast to moral self-centeredness) that Pedro Almodóvar took up in his early film \textit{Entre tinieblas} (literally and very significantly: \textit{Between the Darknesses}),\textsuperscript{57} in his famous, sarcastically provocative manner. At first glance, the film shows a shockingly depraved life in a women’s convent. What flourishes behind the mask of monastic piety is a host of vices such as drug addiction, heterosexual and lesbian passions, complicity with murderers, addicts and prostitutes, involvement in drug trafficking and blackmail, a head-over-heels falling for all manner of lusts and addictions.

At the same time, however, the experience of symbolic castration that is possible with it becomes visible: the rejection of the love- and drug-addicted mother superior’s advances by the likewise drug-addicted nightclub singer Yolanda leads the former into the bottlenecks of her passion; her despair makes her hit the limits of the real, so to speak. In order to escape her sense of abandonment, she finally organizes a name day party that degenerates into excess: alcohol, drugs, erotic song performances and dances within the walls of the convent consecrated to God.

The finale: the appearance of the superior abbess, who – also invited to the feast – was shocked by the cesspool of sin in one of her convents. The guardian of true piety, she dissolves the convent and decides to send the nuns off to the mission or take them back to the order’s headquarters. And finally, the reaction of the weeping mother superior: She is not willing to go along with this kind of mediocrity! Faced with the choice between the darkness of addiction and morality, she opts for the tragic side of her passions.

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{56} In her \textit{Vida}, Teresa feels almost urged to present herself as a sinner. She wants to tell again and again about her sinfulness in order to emphasize her unworthiness, to reject any presumption of her own merit, and thereby to let God’s grace shine all the more – almost as if his insult of her would only incite him even more to court her love. However, the superiors who had commissioned her to write this book forbade her, to her great regret, any detailed confessions in this regard; they evidently wanted to avoid that this example of holiness would give too much space to other than holy passions. See \textit{The Life of Teresa of Jesus}.
\textsuperscript{57} Almodóvar, \textit{Entre tinieblas}.
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4 Paths of Mysticism

4.1 The Sublimation of Phallic Desire. From Mastery to Surrender.

The Night of the Senses

Have we already spoken the last word about mysticism with these considerations on the ethics of desire? No, of course not – first of all, we merely wanted to uncover its foundation, namely its grounding in the unconditional turning to the other, which is original to a human being, i.e. in the passions of the claim to love. Towards the end of a systematization of the doctrines of happiness, which Freud outlines in the 2nd chapter of his Civilization and Its Discontents, he gives it a special place:

I do not think that I have made a complete enumeration of the methods by which men strive to gain happiness and keep suffering away [...]. And how could one possibly forget, of all others, this technique in the art of living? It [...] locates satisfaction in internal mental processes [...]. But it does not turn away from the external world; on the contrary, it clings to the objects belonging to that world and obtains happiness from an emotional relationship to them. Nor is it content to aim at an avoidance of un-pleasure – a goal, as we might call it, of weary resignation; it passes this by without heed and holds fast to the original, passionate striving for a positive fulfilment of happiness. And perhaps it does in fact come nearer to this goal than any other method. I am, of course, speaking of the way of life which makes love the centre of everything, which looks for all satisfaction in loving and being loved. [...] What is more natural than that we should persist in looking for happiness along the path on which we first encountered it? The weak side of this technique of living is easy to see; otherwise no human being would have thought of abandoning this path to happiness for any other. It is that we are never so defenceless against suffering as when we love, never so helplessly unhappy as when we have lost our loved object or its love.58

What makes the happiness technique of love special for Freud here is, on the one hand, that it does not transfer the satisfaction into any materially measurable external facts (such as health, wealth, etc.) but “into inner mental processes”, into an “emotional relationship”. On the other hand, and most importantly, it does not settle for the “tiredly resigned goal of avoiding displeasure” (the

58 Freud, Civilization and its Discontents, p. 81 et. seq.
preferred happiness technique of any ‘concern for oneself’) but “holds fast to the original, passionate striving for positive fulfillment of happiness” through its objects. (We hear the echo of Lacan not to desist from one’s desire).

Freud, however, does not fail to point out the decisive weakness of this happiness technique – its susceptibility to disappointment, which results from the fact that the world often enough cannot or is not willing to bow to our wishes.59

Now it is exactly here, at this susceptibility to disappointments, or rather at their avoidance, that the special feature of the happiness technique of mysticism starts. If we have so far been concerned with locating it in the general framework of an ethics of desire, it is now a question of working out what gives it a special position in it. To put it succinctly, I think it succeeds in doing so through a certain radicalization of the “path of love”, eventually all the way to what Lacan calls an “other enjoyment”.

But let us begin with Freud again:

A small minority are enabled by their constitution to find happiness, in spite of everything, along the path of love. But far-reaching mental changes in the function of love are necessary before this can happen. These people make themselves independent of their object’s acquiescence by displacing what they mainly value from being loved on to loving; they protect themselves against the loss of the object by directing their love, not to single objects but to all men alike; and they avoid the uncertainties and disappointments of genital love by turning away from its sexual aims and transforming the instinct into an impulse with an inhibited aim. What they bring about in themselves in this way is a state of evenly suspended, steadfast, affectionate feeling, which has little external resemblance any more to the stormy agitations of genital love, from which it is nevertheless derived. Perhaps St. Francis of Assisi went furthest in thus exploiting love for the benefit of an inner feeling of happiness.60

Freud describes those modifications of the function of love in mysticism very aptly here. However, he looks at only one side of the coin: the relationship of

59 We recall Freud’s saying, “that man should be ‘happy’ is not included in the plan of ‘Creation.’” Freud, Civilization and its Discontents, p. 76. A few pages later he writes that cultural development increasingly prevents full satisfaction [of sexuality] and pushes away from the sexual goal. Lacan says the same thing with the provocative phrase: Il n’y a pas de rapport sexuel. He does not mean, of course, that there is no sexual intercourse, but that the notion of full satisfaction associated with it is incompatible with the constitutive alienation of the human being.

60 Freud, Civilization and its Discontents, p. 101 et. seq.
the mystic to the outer world. If we consider the above quotation soberly, it is first of all about a considerable renunciation: loving instead of being loved, extension of love to all people, renunciation of direct sexual satisfaction. However, the economic imbalance (the negative balance of the soul’s profit-loss account, so to speak) that this implies in fact explains Freud’s skepticism with regard to this exercise in selflessness: He wants to grant it only to “a small minority” whose constitution enables them to find happiness in this way of love, and he also immediately raises a rather sober fundamental objection to the readiness to love people and the world in general: Not all people are lovable.61 And the tendency to aggression and destruction is innate in human beings. If, therefore, we want to take seriously the mystical way of life with the undeniable attraction and duration with which it confronts us – and has indeed done so over centuries according to the testimonies of its adepts – rather than dismiss it from the outset as mere esoteric self-deception, we must find somewhere in its very core an element of satisfaction so strong that it can stand up to, or even surpass, man’s egoism and readiness to hate.

According to the unanimous statement of the mystics, there is indeed an all-superior element of satisfaction in the mystical life: it is the overwhelming experience of love associated with it. However, a human being does not reach and secure this, as Freud thinks, by shifting the main value from being loved to one’s own loving (in order to make oneself independent of the consent of the object), but, on the contrary, exactly by staking everything on the chance of being loved! According to the experience of mysticism, this is not something that human beings would have to work out and earn (by their works, for example, in courting the attention of people or God), but it is the fundamental (gracious) fact of one’s life itself: We live only because and insofar as we are already loved in the first place – and, in psychoanalytic terms, with the inscription of our first libidinous occupation by the Other.62 When mysticism asks us to find God in ourselves, it therefore does no more than give its radical meaning to that insight of Freud’s, according to which we all ultimately never seek in external objects anything other than the primordially repressed inner phantom of the

62 The question that arises from this: What about those mentally ill, e.g. endogenous depressives, in whom this occupation has only very insufficiently taken place or could be taken up by them? Teresa would probably answer this without hesitation: The occupation is there, without it we could not live at all. However, she did not fail to perceive and take seriously the inner needs of her ‘melancholic’ fellow sisters – brought on, as she says, through no fault of their own – and to devote herself with care to the guidance of their souls, in the struggle above all against a cruel super-ego: “[…] but you shouldn’t stress and worry the soul too much, it really can’t help it” (own translation). Ávila, Wohnungen der Inneren Burg, p. 237; cf. also pp. 235 on dealing with delusional patients; and more generally p. 123, note 30.
original lost object. One could also say that mysticism thereby liberates the longing for love from the practical constraints of the reality principle (which forces us to turn to the real objects) and puts it back from its head to its feet: it transfers the satisfaction – now, however, in a sublimated way – into “inner mental processes”.

What man has to accomplish in this process is, on the one hand, to open himself to this inner experience. The prominent path to this (the royal path of mysticism) is that of prayer, namely – as already mentioned – in its two most essential forms, meditation and contemplation. Whereas meditation, as Teresa clearly describes it, is more of a preparatory active performance of the mind, by which she develops a life of devotion on the basis of an identification with Christ and the saints (psychoanalytically expressed, her ego ideal thus forms), contemplation (Teresa’s ‘inner prayer’) sooner means the exercise of actual passive opening to the divine experience of love – Teresa describes it, e.g., as a “lingering with a friend with whom we often meet alone, simply to be with him because we know for sure that he loves us.”63 Driven by a longing for more, this encounter, which here still seems quite moderate, was to lead Teresa further and further, into the most consuming ecstasies of rapture, into experiences of an indistinguishable bodily-spiritual enjoyment that defies linguistic framing and allows moments of the real to shine forth. I will come back to this later.64

The second essential trait of the mystical way of life involves dealing with the aspirations of the ego: Teresa calls it the “practice in ego-dying”, John of the Cross the “night of the senses.” It is probably this very part of mysticism which gives the most cause for misunderstanding. For commonly (and even so in religious circles) it is often understood, as already mentioned above, primarily as the heroic achievements of ascetic renunciation, the mortification of the flesh, the struggle against sensual lusts, the observance of the vows of one’s own modesty, the exercises of charity and other good works, etc. But all of them, taken by themselves, under the pretense of self-denial, would eventually be mere stakes in an ideology of business, whereby man works out his eternal salvation (and thereby, under the cover of holiness, can unfold already in this world the sadomasochistic enjoyment of his moral superiority): an “ego-dying”, thus, which in reality amounts to a kind of ego-aggrandizement. It is actually

63 Ávila, Das Buch meines Lebens, p. 156 et seq (all following quotations are my own translation).
64 However, Teresa emphasizes repeatedly that the goal of the practice of contemplation is not an accumulation of raptures (which could be collected and displayed like trophies as evidence of grace), but only the degree to which we thereby become capable of abandoning the circling around ourselves and our intentions and opening ourselves to the Other within us.
about the elimination of the Other; deprived of his alterity, he becomes the mere other, i.e. the mere object of an autoerotic enjoyment – completely in the sense of Freud’s instinct of self-preservation, this “myrmidon of death”. However, the mystical practice of the ego-dying means just the opposite: it is not under the banner of the ego, but under that of Eros: in love, the subject loses (and fulfills) itself in the desire and enjoyment of the Other.

Both self- and clinic experience teach us that we can assign ourselves to the various mixing ratios of these two poles, shutting off the ego vs. opening it up to the Other, all the variations of the human pursuit of happiness – from the countless techniques of self-concern to the most oblivious devotion. Generally, we find ourselves somewhere in between in life, combining the experience of love with ego-aggrandizement: for example, we commit ourselves to a cause out of conviction and at the same time enjoy the recognition we receive for it – and perhaps realize only when it fails to materialize how attached we really are to it.

When mysticism now reminds us that the origin and goal of our desire is the renewal of the primordial experience of love, and that the enjoyment of autoerotic satisfaction produces nothing other than the imaginary appearance of a self-sufficient ego, it puts its finger, more clearly than any other cultural technique, precisely into this wound of an inescapable dependence on the Other. With its invitation to practice the dying of the ego, it actually invites us to a radical “modification of the function of love”, i.e., to its detachment from the concern for oneself that is regularly associated with it. Mystical literature bears witness to how arduous and difficult this endeavor is, since in the process we have to struggle against a part of our very nature. In her autobiography,

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65 The term “clinic experience” refers to the psychoanalytic treatment of patients and to Freud’s “Junktim” (bond between cure and research). Freud writes: “In psycho-analysis there has existed from the very first an inseparable bond between cure and research. Knowledge brought therapeutic success. It was impossible to treat a patient without learning something new; it was impossible to gain fresh insight without perceiving its beneficent results. Our analytic procedure is the only one in which this precious conjunction is assured.” Freud, The Question of Lay Analysis, p. 255.

66 We cannot touch upon this subject without pointing out the extent to which the zeitgeist, as expressed in the global neoliberal economic order and a politics increasingly radically instrumentalized by it, has shifted the tension between alterity and self-centeredness in favour of the latter: The de-solidarization of social life, the imperative of consumption, the hatred of strangers, the blindness to the impending ecological catastrophe, the retreat into the virtual spaces of the digital, all this shows us how much public life currently gives preference to solipsistic enjoyment over the desire of the Other. And it also shows us the importance of the “outmoded” dissent voiced by mysticism and psychoanalysis reminding us of the denied presence of the Other.
for example, Teresa describes her long-standing struggle, often desperate and seemingly hopeless, against her pronounced sense of prestige, with which, even in her most pious undertakings, she repeatedly sought to ground her identity in the vanities of social reputation rather than in obedience to divine invocation. And for John of the Cross, this process of “purification of the sensory realm” necessarily takes place in a “dark night”: for “[…] the unpurified human being is incapable of loving without intention; he seeks not only the You of God or of the beloved person, but unconsciously always himself as well.”⁶⁷ Purification is therefore necessarily connected with a temporary “loss of meaning, with regard to everything that fulfilled him up to now”, “[…] he loses everything that has given him fulfilment and security up to now.”⁶⁸ For John, this subjective transformation is a process comparable to the weaning of the child by the mother: for the baby’s experience of love was (almost) always coupled with the immediate experience of satisfaction (“the warm breast, the delicious milk”),

[... so the mother now lowers the child from her arms and places it on its own feet. It is to lose the peculiarities of a child and grow accustomed to greater and more essential things. The grace of God acts just as a loving mother, when providing the soul with new enthusiasm and fervour in the service of God.]

For what finally makes this struggle against self-centeredness persist is ultimately never the sacrifice, the renunciation, the struggle for perfection per se, but always the attraction and the lure of the experience of a now purified love.⁷⁰ Ignatius of Loyola describes the road towards this goal in the “Principle and Foundation” of his Spiritual Exercises in his well-known sober way:

The human being was created to praise God Our Lord […]. Therefore, it is necessary to make ourselves equanimous towards all created things […] so that on our part we desire health no more than sickness, wealth no more than poverty, honour no more than dishonour, long life no more than short, and accordingly in all other things.⁷¹

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⁶⁷ Kreuz, Die Dunkle Nacht, p. 211 (all following quotations are my own translation).
⁶⁸ Kreuz, Die Dunkle Nacht, p. 205 et seq.
⁶⁹ Kreuz, Die Dunkle Nacht, p. 33.
⁷⁰ This radical exercise in selflessness also has the paradoxical effect, among other things, that we can be more forgiving and less concerned with our own imperfections and – in the terminology of psychoanalysis – mitigate the cruel self-centredness of the superego.
⁷¹ Loyola, Die Exerzitien, p. 15 (own translation).
Finally, what remains to be dealt with here is the “sublimation of phallic desire” mentioned in the title of this chapter and associated with the “night of the senses”. By phallic desire (cf. the somewhat more detailed explanation in the next section), Lacan means the idea, which drives the life of man but is ultimately always illusory, that in the relationship with the Other (in the sexual relationship, or even in the relationship with God) he can overcome the lack that constitutes him – the lack that for Lacan manifests itself in the phallus as the most fundamental experience of difference and thus of the reality of a not-all in our life. While the humans often try to close this gap in a very real – grossly sensual – way (e.g. in the sexual act), mysticism, by shifting the experience of love to “inner processes”, does not (yet) give up this illusion, but subjects it (precisely in the God-relationship) to a determined sublimation.

4.2 The Night of the Spirit. From Phallic Desire to an Other Enjoyment

The experiences of the mystical love project unfold, according to the consistent testimony of their traditions, in several characteristic steps, each of which confronts its own threats, challenges of purification, pleasures and modalities of experience: Ignatius of Loyola, for instance, describes these stages in his *Spiritual Exercises*, John of the Cross in *The Dark Night*, Meister Eckhart in his *Homilies*, Teresa of Ávila in *The Interior Castle*. Here we want to restrict ourselves to the last of these developmental steps, in which the experience of God is radically de-personalized and emptied of meaning and thus, as already mentioned in the first section, increasingly leads to the formation of a “materialistic” concept of God (thus becoming particularly interesting for psychoanalysis).

In order to deal with this, however, let us first take a step back and begin with Teresa’s description of one of her particularly spectacular imaginative visions (it is the one that served as the subject for Bernini’s famous sculpture *The Rapture of Saint Teresa* in the Church of Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome):

It pleased the Lord that I saw the following vision a few times: I saw an angel beside me, on my left side, and in bodily form, which I hardly ever see [...]. He was not tall, rather small, very beautiful, with such a luminous countenance [...]. I saw in his hands a long golden arrow, and at the point of this iron a little fire seemed to flicker. I felt as if he were thrusting it into my heart a few times, and as if it were penetrating my entrails. When he pulled it out, I felt as if he would tear them out with him and leave me completely burning with strong love of God. The pain was so strong that it made me utter these lamentations, but at the same time the tenderness that this immensely great pain arouses in me is so overwhelming that not
even the wish comes up that it may pass away, nor that the soul may be content with less than God. This is not a bodily but a spiritual pain, even if the body does have a share in it, and even quite a lot. It is such a tender caress that takes place here between the soul and God that I ask him in his goodness to let him taste it who thinks I am lying.\textsuperscript{72}

This description leaves no doubt in its clarity: divine love here takes place entirely according to the model of human love, is completely inscribed in the register of phallic desire that hopes to find in the Other (personified here in the angel of God) the remedy for its own lack – and finds it at the moment of rapture.\textsuperscript{73} Here everything is still permeated by the idea of a personal God who, in his loving omnipotence, becomes the guarantor of our salvation.\textsuperscript{74}

Such raptures (sometimes more, sometimes less) are often found in mystical literature – and for some mystics they also mark the climax of their spiritual development. For the outstanding among them, however, they are only a transitory stage. The renewed and now definitive transformation of spiritual experience begins with what Teresa, along with John of the Cross, calls the \textit{Night of the Spirit} and Meister Eckhart calls \textit{spiritual dying}.\textsuperscript{75} In contrast to the night of the senses described above, which was about a purification of the sensual strivings of the ego, the human being now loses that spiritual certainty which the mystical experience had just given him and had thus given his ego its consistency: the certainty of being ultimately secure in God. A vivid summary of the inner desolation that develops in this process, often extending over many years, is given by Millot in her book \textit{La vie parfaite},\textsuperscript{76} based on the records of Madame de Guyon (\textit{Les torrents spirituels}), a French society lady and mystic of the 17th century. Shaken by a confusion of love, she experiences an inner fall after years of spiritual highs, with the loss of all the consolations that the loving

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{72} Ávila, \textit{Wohnungen der Inneren Burg}, p. 426.
\item \textsuperscript{73} Incidentally, the experience described in this vision points far beyond the fact that it is experienced by a woman. It shows us the structure of the mystical experience of love as a fundamentally \textit{passive receiving} and suffering, i.e. as a genuinely female connotated experience. However, since for Lacan gender is psychologically and not biologically determined, this does not of course prevent men from becoming mystics. (However, women are in fact often superior to them in this respect.)
\item \textsuperscript{74} This view differs from Lacan's assessment, who, however, does not refer to Teresa's description but to Bernini's depiction of the scene and wants to recognize in it an example of the other enjoyment: “What is she getting off on? It is clear that the essential testimony of the mystics consists in saying that they experience it, but know nothing about it.” Lacan, \textit{Encore}, p. 76.
\item \textsuperscript{75} Cf. McGinn, \textit{Die Mystik im Abendland}, p. 278.
\item \textsuperscript{76} See Millot, \textit{La vie parfaite} (all following quotations are my own translation).
\end{itemize}
experience of God had brought her: like Job or Jesus on the cross, she is abandoned by God. The consequence is a deep shaking of her whole personality – she loses all inner support, the pride of her virtues, feels at the mercy again of reprehensible tendencies long thought to have been overcome (arrogance, inconsiderateness, bulimia), the impulses of evil etc. She feels the wrath of God. She deserves hell and wants to die. The confessors give up on her: they accuse her of sinfulness, reproach her for not being worthy of receiving forgiveness. She loses her earthly reputation and has to retire to a convent. Finally, the death of her beloved son makes her experience the coldness of death in her soul. She becomes the castaway of God and of this world. Finally, she does not even feel this pain anymore, she is but ashes and dust, everything becomes indifferent, there is neither love nor non-love, neither pain nor pleasure, she is annihilated, reduced to non-being.77

Millot sees in these symptoms of mystical death above all an annihilation of the ego, this institution of mastery of the outside world and our drives. As such, it is ultimately “[…] an organisation in order to resist against the essential passivity of the subject in relation to the Other. The ego is the fundamental resistance to God […].”78 Its annihilation ultimately proves to be a passage into a new and this time irreversible freedom. For Madame de Guyon, this begins after seven years (such periods for subjective transformations are quite familiar to psychoanalysis) with a letter from a spiritual advisor: her state is given by God, a state of grace. With this interpretation (at the right time, mind you) everything changes for her, it is the birth of a vie divine, a true deification: experience of the one-ness of the soul with the unlimited divine without any attribute, indistinguishable from non-being. Millot concludes by referring to Madame de Guyon:

It is because of this, according to Meister Eckhart, that we should transcend the divine persons and come to divinity (rejoindre la déité), which we can only comprehend as nothingness, because it is without limitations, and which we only attain by becoming like nothingness ourselves […]. God dissolves as a distinct entity at the same time that we ourselves lose all distinction. [Guyon] no longer expresses herself metaphysically here, but poetically: ‘The soul loses itself in the immeasurable like a small fish in the boundless sea’.79

77 Cf. Millot, La vie parfaite, pp. 50–53.
78 Millot, La vie parfaite, p. 53.
79 Millot, La vie parfaite, p. 58.
We also find the same structure of this experience in Teresa (cf. the description of the sixth and seventh Mansions of *The Interior Castle*). From years of being in the deepest spiritual desert, with loss of all hope (in a double way: loss of God and loss of trust in oneself), finally blossoms the experience of *spiritual union*. This clearly distinguishes it from the previously experienced *spiritual betrothal*: if the latter was a temporary merging with a principally separate Other (as in the cited vision of the piercing by the angel) – an experience whose imaginative representations can be put into words – the unification takes place “in the innermost part of the soul” itself, in a soul that has become indistinguishably one with God, in a purely “spiritual experience” without the medium of any associated ideas.80 The deconstruction of the subject, literal the “traversal of the phantasm”, does not, of course, remain without consequences. Teresa describes “a great detachment from everything”, a slackening of all longing (whether for the enjoyment of God, or for suffering); for the soul “[...] is no longer looking for gifts or delights, for she has the Lord Himself with her.”81 Whereas in the past she had feared death (because it would separate her from her beloved ones) or later longed for it (in order to be at last totally unified with God), now she simply accepts it and sees in it “[...] no more than a gentle removal.”82 Surrender has taken the place of intention, in keeping with the Pauline dictum: It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. Following his example, she has become “God's slave”, “[...] whom, marked with his brand, the cross, he can sell as a slave to the whole world.”83

Similarly, Madame de Guyon describes a liberation from thinking (which always starts from something lost, from a lack in the ego) and an immersion in the experience of pure presence. This leads to an indifference to all things, be it pain or joy – not in an apathetic way, but in an allopathic way: It is God who

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80 Cf. McGinn, *Die Mystik im Abendland*, p. 340 et seq. In Western mysticism, for example, it is Meister Eckhart who (already 250 years before Teresa) very clearly conceived in theory the idea of the ultimate one-ness of God and human being and the human being’s path thereto. Eckhart’s mysticism of the return to the *grunt* is a doctrine of the human being’s detachment from every self-will (including the will to be good) to the point of his becoming nothing, i.e. accepting even physical and spiritual death (i.e. the loss of God). Insofar as this liberation from the ego succeeds – in the threefold movement of wanting nothing, knowing nothing, having nothing – the human being can immerse himself in the experience of his own divinity, in which, beyond the experience of a loving God the Father or an eternally creating Trinity, he finds himself in the omnipresence of an “einfältiger grunt” (simple ground), a “silent desert [...] beyond the birth of the Word.” McGinn, *Die Mystik im Abendland*, p. 228.


says yes to everything. The distinctions between good and evil, right and wrong, etc. dissolve in this experience; what remains is the world, not even as an act of ongoing creation, but as pure one-ness. The mystics thus live in a fundamental schism: from the side of their ego strivings, they continue to know the pains, joys and trials of the ego, the living participation in the fate of others and the world. But at the same time, they also live in God (or, in Eckhart’s words, are God themselves) and since their soul has overcome the passions, they nevertheless live in peace in the midst of the hustle and bustle of the world.  

If we could still assign the mystics’ personal experiences of God (such as Teresa’s aforementioned rapture) to a sublimated phallic striving for love on the basis of Freud’s theory of God, the experience of unification with God described above poses considerable problems of understanding for psychoanalysis. For while the personal experience of God, as already mentioned, can certainly be grasped in the registers of language, the immediate vision of God, according to the testimony of the mystics, takes place beyond all distinctions constituting language. Would therefore all traces of its development possibly be preserved in the human soul after all, and thus also the experience of a primary narcissism, with its still complete indistinction between ego and object, prior to any separating intervention of language – as Freud speculates in his Civilisation and Its Discontents in his response to Romain Roland’s reference to the oceanic feeling at the bottom of religious experience? Would the mystic, then, have direct access through regression to a primordial real that was only later primordially repressed? Freud leaves the answer open at this point, but does not conceal his skepticism.

To Freud’s reluctant attempt to explain the mystical experience as a regression to primary narcissism, Lacan opposes another proposed solution in his Seminar XX. According to this, for him, it is first of all the general fate of human beings to “inhabit language”: we are all subject to the alienation of our experience in language (Lacan’s symbolic castration) with the way back to a (anyway hypothetical) primary narcissism being barred to us. This, of course, does

84 Cf. Millot, La vie parfaite, pp. 64–69. Millot compares this split with the split between the conscious ego and the unconscious, Freud’s “anderer Schauplatz” (other theatre), as stated by psychoanalysis: to live in God would then mean to live by the unconscious; God is unconscious (Lacan), perhaps the unconscious in general (see Millot, La vie parfaite, p. 70: “[...] peut-être, l’inconscient est Dieu même...” (“[...] maybe the unconscious is God himself”), the source from which everything flows. In this context, Millot also refers to Mme Guyon’s method of automatic writing: “One writes what one does not know [...] it is a more mediumistic than poetic writing.” Millot, La vie parfaite, p. 70. This is precisely what Teresa emphasizes again and again: she does not know what she has to say, she writes on God’s behalf and God will write through her “when and how it pleases Him”.

not prevent people from maintaining the *phantasm* of the one, uncastrated ancestral father (Freud’s origin of the idea of God) and from clinging to the illusion of being able to overcome deficiency in the sexual relationship and to regain access to this full primordial enjoyment. This is what Lacan calls *phallic desire*. In pursuing this desire, the paths of the two sexes diverge: what the male, who thinks he also has, with the penis, the phallus, seeks in the other are the lost partial objects of his enjoyment (Lacan calls them *objects a*, as the first of which he points to the breast). The female, on the other hand, seeks in the male the phallus she lacks. So far, we are still on the terrain of Freud’s Oedipal logic. Lacan, however, adds his own psychology of the sexes to it – and claims to solve Freud’s enigma of female desire “*Was will das Weib?*” (*What does woman want?*): While men position themselves entirely in phallic desire, women are also, but not all of them and not completely caught in this logic. In addition to phallic desire, they know another form of enjoyment that does not aim at the sexual relationship. Lacan explicitly calls it *autre jouissance* (*other enjoyment*), and he designates its object with the notation S(Ⱥ) – signifier of the crossed-out “Big Other”. The signifier, that is first of all a phenomenon not beyond but in language, the signifier of Ⱥ, however, differs fundamentally from that of the not crossed-out “Big Other” S(A). While the latter promises to deliver the definite answer to desire – there would be him after all, this non-castrated Other of the Other, this God behind language – so S(Ⱥ) confirms precisely the experience of castration: here there is no guarantor of a meaning or a being beyond language, but merely this enigmatic “being of signifierness” itself. “There is nowhere any kind of a last word if not in the sense in which ‘word’ is ‘not a word’ [...].” Or to put is or more aptly: not a word, a letter! For,

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86 If Lacan explicitly ascribes a different way of enjoyment to women, then – as mentioned above – he is referring not to the biological gender, but to the psychological gender: one comes to the side of women “[...] means that when any speaking being whatsoever situates itself under the banner ‘women’, it is on the basis of the following – that it grounds itself as being not-whole in situation itself in the phallic function.” Lacan, *Encore*, p. 72. “Any speaking being whatsoever, as is expressly formulated in Freudian theory, whether provided with attributes of masculinity [...] or not, is allowed to inscribe itself in this part.” Conversely, of course, this also applies to the man’s side: “One ultimately situates oneself there by choice – women are free to situate themselves there if it gives them pleasure to do so. Everyone knows there are phallic women, and that the phallic function doesn’t stop men from being homosexuals.” Lacan, *Encore*, p. 72, 80, 71. Lacan is determined to attribute the “other enjoyment” to women because, as Freud had already noted, they have a different relationship to castration: Since they do not have a penis, they are (in reality) not castratable and thus not entirely caught up in the logic of castration.


strictly speaking, the word, too, has always been loaded with meaning, and it is
the letter that stands for the meaningless, merely material, so to speak, purely
corporeal aspect of the signifier, precisely for that “being of signifierness”89

Without us usually accounting for it, this being affected by the signifier is
in fact a constant companion of our everyday experience – we encounter it,
e.g., in the tone of voice, beyond what it wants to tell us.90 We often become
aware of this experience in retrospect, as the lighting up of an enigmatic phe-
nomenon (as described, e.g. in the cloud in Brecht’s love poem Reminiscence
of Marie A.). This other enjoyment is systematically cultivated, e.g., by those
poets among the artists whose works do not (as is unfortunately so often the
case today) exhaust themselves in phallic meaning, but who let the brilliance
of this pure material presentness shine forth.91 Whereas phallic desire aims at
the imaginary closure of meaning, this other enjoyment – we might say – takes
symbolic castration upon itself and enjoys losing itself in its real, i.e., in the
material presence of the signifier. Put succinctly, the experience of castration
itself becomes the object of enjoyment.92

When Lacan in Encore cites the mystical experience of unification that
arises from the night of the spirit (and which he explicitly distinguishes from
a phallic mystical enjoyment) – precisely as the paradigm of female enjoy-
ment, then he does not understand it to be the result of a regression into

89  For Lacan’s Scheme of Sexuation, see Lacan, Encore, p. 73. One more remark on this: as
already described above (under 2.2. God is Unconscious), the experience of the pure mate-
riality of the signifier emerges at that “interface where the psychic touches the real” –
for Freud, for instance, this interface becomes tangible in the “navel’s dream”, Lacan
describes it as the “screen of the phantasm”. Both expressions denote that point of experi-
ence in which the traumatic perception of the real adopts a first rudimentary enigmatic
form, tinged with a certain sensual quality, even before any meaning is associated with
it whereby we seek to explain it and thus subject it to our control. In a developmental
psychological perspective, this would be the mode of experience of the Infans, the tod-

dler not yet capable of language, who does not yet understand the meaning of the words
(e.g., a harsh command or a tender lullaby), but gets affected by their sensual quality – he
begins to cry fearfully or falls asleep pacified. For a detailed treatment of the processes of
early subject genesis, see Laquièze-Waniek, Das resthafte Subjekt.

90  I’m thinking, for instance, of a primal form of this experience, the onomatopoeic games
between adults and babies), or in the intangible of the look in one’s eye beyond any con-
text in which we always seek to ‘understand’ it.

91  What comes to mind here are Cy Twombly’s drawings, Mark Rothko’s paintings, Franz
West’s sculptures, Ernst Jandl’s sound poems, and, of course, the guitar riffs of a Jimmy
Hendrix. The art theorist Georges Didi-Huberman has repeatedly elaborated this aspect
of the pure presence of the work of art, particularly impressively, for instance, in Vor
einem Bild on the basis of the aforementioned fresco of Fra Angelico’s Annunciation
scene in the monastery of San Marco in Florence.

some hypothetical primary narcissism: It has nothing to do with an experience beyond language, but it is a phenomenon in language, or more precisely, the experience of that boundary at which language divests itself of meaning and allows the real of signifiers to emerge. The path to this leads through the practice of “ego-dying”, with which we let go of the illusionary active mastery of the world (via the ego’s production of meaning, all the way to the phallic enjoyment of an illusionary God) in a controlled manner, as it were, in order to open ourselves to the primordial and ultimate passive experience of “the last things”, that is, to the enigmatic presence of the world. In the measure of the emptying of meaning, the denominability of experience is lost. Thus, Lacan writes about the female mystic: “There is a jouissance that is hers about which she herself perhaps knows nothing if not that she experiences it – that much she knows.”

And very similarly Meister Eckhart, when he suggests that the quest for knowledge of God is a constant search for that which is per definitionem beyond reach: “This not-knowing causes the soul to marvel [...] because it feels ‘that it is’ but does not know ‘how’ or ‘what’ it is.” This quest for a “non-knowing cognition” (nichterkennendes Erkennen) is precisely what distinguishes mysticism for what it is: perhaps man’s most radical cultural technique – not regressing prior to language, but exploring to its limits the experiences inherent and possible in it. The efforts of the intellect and the crises of behaviour it has to work through in the process bear eloquent witness to this extraordinary human achievement.

94 Quoted (Sermon 101) according to McGinn, *Die Abendländische Mysitk*, p. 306 (own translation).
95 The descriptions of the mystical experience – the “traversal of the phantasm” in the night of the spirit, the dissolution of the ego in the unio mystica – inevitably raise the question of their distinction from psychosis, not only in theory but also time and again in the tragic fate of individuals (Mark Rothko’s suicide may be cited here as an example). How is it possible for the deconstruction of the ego, as described in the Night of the Spirit, to transform itself in the case of psychosis into the tragic experience of a traumatic bottomlessness, but in the unio mystica into the experience of an all-encompassing love? Without being able to answer this question exhaustively here, the decisive interpretation of Madame de Guyon’s experience of annihilation by her spiritual advisor, mentioned above, may give us a first clue: Her state is given by God, it is a state of grace. According to our hypothesis, this interpretation can only develop its effect inasmuch as it thus encounters an experience already pre-formed in the subject, in which an original traumatic world experience of the baby is captured by a desire of its caregivers (which, e.g., clothes the blackness of the night in the melody of a lullaby). It would thus be the desire of the Other that transforms primordial dread into primordial enjoyment, and it would be a question of whether this
One last word on this radicality: while art, for example, roughly reflects the general attitude of the world in the question of the relationship between phallic and other enjoyment – there is generally no either/or, but only mixed relations – mysticism takes a decided position here: The world, this whole reality constructed by us, ultimately brings only the temporary illusion of fulfilment. We therefore do not achieve our true destiny in its mastery, but only in the return to the original surrender to the Other. Once we have achieved this again (in the “Night of the Spirit”, or, in psychoanalytical terms, in the “Traversing of the Phantasm”), there is no longer a mixture, but only the experience of a gulf. Here the “toils of the world”, there the experience of one-ness: the struggle against nature – the strivings of the ego – leads to the true nature – the surrender to the Other.

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Bio

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desire of the Other emerges in the child’s experience – and whether the child can open up to this enigmatic gift of love. (Cf. also the related question in footnote 62.)


**Movie**