Ecstasy

St Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) was a Carmelite nun and religious mystic. She was a reformer who established her own order, and set up seventeen new convents throughout Spain. She was regarded as a saint in her own lifetime, and was well known for her ecstatic religious experiences, of which Gian Lorenzo Bernini would no doubt have been aware when he captured her so vividly in his exquisite sculpture, '*The Ecstasy of St Teresa*', in the Cornaro chapel of the church of Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome. Certainly St Teresa's '*visions*' had been cited when she was canonized in Rome in 1622 within thirty years of when Bernini began his sculpture.

To the contemporary world she is most famous for her vivid and incisive accounts of her ecstasies or 'raptures' that are recorded in her autobiography:

. . . Rapture is, as a rule, irresistible. Before you can be warned by a thought or help yourself in any way, it comes as a quick and violent shock; you see and feel this cloud or this powerful eagle rising and bearing you up on its wings.

The eagle is, of course, God. And a fundamental aspect of the rapture is the feeling of being raised aloft by God:

One sees one's body being lifted from the ground; and though the spirit draws it up after itself, and does so most gently if one does not resist, one does not lose consciousness. At least I myself was sufficiently aware to realize that I was being lifted. The majesty of One who can do this is so manifest that one's hair stands on end, and a great fear comes over one of offending so great a God.

Overwhelmed in this state of religious convulsion the rapture takes hold. It is a bitter-sweet moment of ecstasy that is both pleasurable and painful. In this her ecstasies share something of the sublime:

One seems to be on the point of death; only the agony carries with it so great a joy that I do not know of any proper comparison. It is a harsh yet sweet martyrdom. . . . Yet at the same time this pain is so sweet, and the soul is so conscious of its value, that it now desires this suffering more than all the gifts that it used to receive. It believes this to be the safer state, too, because it is the way of the cross; and, in my opinion, it contains a joy of exceeding worth, because the body has no part in it but agony, whereas the soul, even while suffering, rejoices in the bliss and contentment that this suffering brings.

As the word '*ecstasy*' implies this experience takes place beyond the body. '*Ekstasis*' means a '*standing outside*' of the body. The ecstatic rapture is an experience of the soul, an extra-corporeal sensation. During the process the eyes remain closed or half-closed, but, in any case, the individual is almost oblivious to the outside world:

Very often [the raptures] seemed to leave my body as light as if it had lost all its weight, and sometimes so light that I hardly knew whether my feet were touching the ground. But during the rapture it came on it; seated, for example, and with the hands open or closed. The subject rarely loses consciousness; I have occasionally lost it entirely, but not very often, and only for a short time. Generally the senses are disturbed; and though absolutely powerless to perform any outwardaction, the subject still sees and hears things, though only dimly, as if from far away. I do not say that he can see and hear when the rapture is at its height; and by 'its height' I mean those times when the faculties are lost, because closely united with God.

But what begins to emerge is a markedly erotic undertone to St Teresa'a description of her raptures. In particular, when she is being stabbed with '*a long golden spear*', as in the sculpture by Bernini, her language shares much of the discourse of erotic pleasure. She uses a metaphor of '*penetration*' for her ecstasies which seems to echo operations in sexual intercourse. Moreover her ecstasy is clearly a corporeal (or perhaps extra-corporeal) ecstasy:

In his hands I saw a long golden spear, and at the iron tip there appeared to be a point of fire. This he plunged into my heart several times so that it penetrated to my entrails. When he pulled it out, I felt that he took them out with it, and left me utterly consumed by the great love of God. The pain was so severe that it made me utter several moans. The sweetness caused by this intense pain is so extreme that one cannot possibly wish it to cease, nor is one's soul then content with anything but God. This is not a physical, but a spiritual pain, though the body has some share in it — even a considerable share. So gentle is this wooing which takes place between God and the soul that if anyone thinks that I am lying, I pray God, in His goodness, to grant him some experience of it.

It is through her raptures, then, that St Teresa comes into union with God. In this state of ecstasy, the boundary between the self and the '*other*' is broken down. The ecstasy allows for a form of mystical '*bonding*' which, while religious in its essence, shares certain characteristics with a more carnal form of love. Indeed Bernini's highly expressive portrait of St Teresa with her '*blissful*' expression, and the '*spent*' appearance of her feet and hands, only reinforces this connection.

The erotics of Ecstasy

If we are to look for early attempts to understand the condition of ecstasy beyond a merely mystical religious interpretation, we might turn first to the influential work of the French neurologist, Jean-Martin Charcot, well known for his use of hypnosis in the treatment of hysterics, who practiced at the women's psychiatric hospital in Paris, the Salpêtrière, and under whom Freud himself studied. In general terms, Charcot's attempts to offer a scientific account for ecstasy were part of a more general project to overcome religious mysticism through the epistemological rationality of science. Freud, however, describes Charcot not as a theorist, but as a visual observer of symptoms — an '*artist*' of neurology:

He was not a reflective man, not a thinker: he had the nature of an

artist — he was, as he himself said, a "visuel", a man who sees.

In effect, with Charcot the inspecting gaze of the doctor elides with the gaze of the artist, and just as the artist can only base his or her work on interpretations of nature, so the doctor '*divines*' his secrets of the neurological condition through inspection of the symptoms.

Operating within this predominantly visual domain, Charcot takes numerous photographic records of the conditions of his patients. What we find then in Charcot's work is an attempt to render the invisible visible, although he sometimes succeeds in conflating religious ecstasy with hysteria as he does in the case of St Teresa. Charcot could also be accused of linking hysteria to questions of sexuality, even if he does reject the traditional etymological link between hysteria and the uterus, which reads hysteria as a '*wandering*' of the uterus. Moreover, his emphasis on the visual leads Charcot to overemphasise the significance of that realm. Medicine is co-opted as a branch of aesthetics. What distinguishes good hysterics from demoniacs, for Charcot, is that the former '*look like*' religious mystics in their poses. On occasions, the poses of the supposedly ecstatic subjects seem to ally themselves very closely with well known religious poses, such as the crucifixion. Nonetheless, through his charting of the pathology of hysteria Charcot establishes a terrain for examining within a scientific framework what had previously been considered the province of religious mysticism. In so doing he opens up the possibility for understanding ecstasy within the rubric of libidinal forces, as a condition of a corporeal psychopathology.

The connection between mysticism and the erotic has been explored further by a number of commentators. Richard von Kraft-Ebing, for example, in his early treatise on sexual pathology, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, (1886), claims quite explicitly '*sexual feeling is really the root of all ethics, and no doubt of aestheticism and religion*'. Mysticism and eroticism would appear interchangeable for him. Moreover, both may lead to a form of masochism or cruelty:

'Religious and sexual hyperaesthesia at the zenith of development show the same volume of intensity and the same quality of excitement, and may therefore, under given circumstances, interchange. Both will in certain pathological states degenerate into cruelty.'

Hence ecstasy itself is a highly questionable condition. It is,

for von Krafft-Ebing, '*a condition in which consciousness is so preoccupied with feelings of mental pleasure, that distress is stripped of its painful quality*.' Somewhat simplistically von Krafft-Ebing diagnoses St Teresa as '*sinking into an hysterical faint*'. Hysteria, for him, is a question of sexual excess:

'In the hysteric the sexual sphere is abnormally excited, and very frequently [hysteria] disposes girls, and even women living in happy marriage, to become nymphomaniacs.'

We might therefore conclude that for von Krafft-Ebing, St Teresa herself was succumbing to some sexual excitation. As Cristina Mazzoni comments,

This is the pitfall most often encountered by the mystics as well as by women, Krafft-Ebing seems to imply, for just as religious fervor frequently degenerates into sensuality (witness the lives of saints and the orgies of the ancients), so the disappointed or unappeased sexual instinct often finds a substitute in religion. It is possible, then, and even likely that religious pathology springs from some sexual pathology because "religion as well as sexual love is mystical and transcendental".

Bataille and Eroticism

Georges Bataille was also intrigued by this connection between mysticism and the erotic. Bataille was, of course, a theorist who delighted in the excess, a critic who both wrote and theorised on the subject of obscenity and eroticism. Alongside his own often highly erotic fictional work, *The Story of the Eye*, he wrote a theoretical text, *Eroticism*. In *Eroticism* Bataille picks up on the way in which the religious always threatens to fold into the erotic. He compares and contrasts these two overlapping moments. Bataille is not interested in simplistic equations which collapse the two into the same category, reducing the religious to the erotic and treating rapture as little more than a form of sexual orgasm.

The contrast between divine and carnal love is a very marked one... We must avoid two reefs: we must not try to diminish the experiences of the mystics for the sake of comparison, as psychiatrists have done albeit unintentionally. Neither must we spiritualise the domain of sexuality to exalt it to the level of ethereal experiences.

Moreover, the key difference, for Bataille, is that the mystical experience leaves the individual in a state of exaltation,

whereas the sexual experience leaves that person in a state of disgust:

Mystical and erotic experience differ in that the former is totally successful. Erotic licentiousness results in depression, disgust, and the inability to continue... In contrast, a promise of light awaits at the limits of the mystical outlook.

Nonetheless he admits that there are *'staggering similarities and even corresponding or interchangeable characteristics in the two sytems'*. Marie Bonaparte, he notes, had compared the rapture directly with the sexual act, citing the example of a nun who had experienced such raptures, only to discover in later life when she left the convent and became married, that these *'raptures'* had been in fact a form of sexual orgasm. St. Bonaventure had also observed that mystics are not infrequently *'sullied with the flow of carnal flux'* during their ecstasies.

Eroticism was published in 1957, a few years before Bataille's own death, and it is perhaps no coincidence that a key theme in this text is that of death and its relationship to life in the context of the erotic. For it is not simply that on occasions the propagation of life may lead literally to death, as in the case of a mother dying during childbirth. Rather the two become entwined within the erotic moment. Eroticism, Bataille observes, is *'assenting to life up to the point of death.'* It is this theme that Bataille pursues through the figure of St Teresa who had herself acknowledged the sense of death that accompanied the vital experience of her raptures. For Bataille it is as though the desire to live life *'to the limits of the possible and the impossible with ever-increasing intensity'* brings with it the desire for death, but it is a desire for death that amounts — seemingly paradoxically — to a transcendence of death:

It is the desire to live while ceasing to live, or to die without ceasing to live, the desire of an extreme state that St Teresa has perhaps been the only one to depict strongly enough in words. 'I die because I cannot die.' But the death of not dying is precisely not death; it is the ultimate stage of life; if I die because I cannot die it is on condition that I live on; because of the death I feel though still alive, and still live on. St Teresa's being reeled but did not actually die of her desire actually to experience the sensation. She lost her footing, but all she did was to live more violently, so violently that she could say that she was on the threshold of dying, but such a death as tried her to the utmost though it did not make her cease to live.

The ecstatic state of the religious mystic is one in which all differences are effaced, and all distances overcome. The ecstatic subject is lost in a sea of oceanic bliss:

There is no longer any difference between one thing and another in any respect; no distances can be located; the subject is lost in the indistinct and illimitable presence of the universe and himself ceases to belong to the passing of time. He is absorbed in the everlasting instant, irrevocably as it seems, with no roots in the past or hopes in the future, and the instant itself is eternity.

Here there are clear links with Bataille's theory of sacrifice. The *'death'* of the erotic moment is akin to the death of the sacrificial moment. Eroticism leads to a dissolution of the boundaries of the self, but so too a fusion of the self with the other, which overcomes the *'self-contained'* character of our normal existence. Eroticism, then, like sacrifice, leads to a transcendence of the self, and an opening up to the fundamental continuity of existence:

Erotic activity, by dissolving the separate beings that participate in it, reveals their fundamental continuity, like the waves of a stormy sea. In sacrifice,.... a violent death disrupts the creature's discontinuity; what remains, what the tense onlookers experience in the succeeding silence, is the continuity of all existence with which the victim is now one.

Above all, it is important to recognise that, in Bataille's terms, sacrifice — like love — leads not to discord, but to a form of harmony:

It is the common business of sacrifice to bring life and death into harmony, to give death the upsurge of life, life the momentuousness and the vertigo of death opening on to the unknown. Here life is mingled with death, but simultaneously death is a sign of life, a way into the infinite.

While Bataille does not make any explicit reference to aesthetic experience in general, he draws a connection between poetry, death and eroticism, and articulates clearly the fusion that poetry itself may offer:

Poetry leads to the same place as all forms of eroticism — to the blending and fusion of separate objects. It leads us to eternity, it leads us to death, and through death to continuity. Poetry is eternity; the sun matched with the sea..

Thus, for Bataille, the erotic and the mystical come together

to some extent in the ecstatic moment, and they do so within the symbolic framework of life and death.

Lacan and the Jouissance of St. Teresa

Jacques Lacan is also fascinated by Bernini's sculpture, '*The Ecstasy of St Teresa*', and uses it to illustrate the front cover of one of his publications. And like Bataille, he too observes the parallels between eroticism and religious mysticism to which the sculpture seems to allude. Certainly, for Lacan, St Teresa's experiences as conveyed by Bernini's sculpture are deeply erotic ones: '*It's like for Saint Teresa — you need but go to Rome and see the statue by Bernini to immediately understand that she's coming. There's no doubt about it.*' There is, admittedly, a certain reductive and patronizing tone to Lacan's somewhat flippant comments about St Teresa. Mazzoni is surely right to criticize him for regressing to

the positivistic attitude of Charcot and of his school at the Salpêtrière, where doctors, wrapped up in their visual contemplation and compulsive photographing, did not bother to listen to the hysteric's and the mystic's words.

Lacan's key contribution, however, is to locate the whole question of ecstasy within the broader context of *jouissance*.

In this work Lacan focuses on the sense of *jouissance* that emerges from the sculpture. The term *jouissance* has been used in English literature since the Sixteenth century. It might literally be translated as '*pleasure*', referring, for example, to the '*pleasure*' of the text. In French *jouissance* maintains a certain erotic purchase that has been lost in English appropriations of the term — it has a more overtly sexual connotation, referring to the pleasure of the sexual act itself. If post-structuralist writers from Derrida to Cixous constantly evoke the term, it is in this extended sense of the 'erotic' pleasure to be derived from reading the text.

In Lacan the term *jouissance* exceeds the simple sense of '*pleasure*'. It is at the point when we go '*beyond the pleasure principle*', when the sheer overload of pleasure constitutes a form of pain, that we experience jouissance, which can therefore be understood as a form of '*painful pleasure*'. As Dylan Evans puts it,

'The term jouissance thus nicely expresses the paradoxical satisfaction that the subject derives form his symptom, or, to put it another way, the suffering that he derives from his own satisfaction.'

But the problem with *jouissance*, for Lacan, is not that we have too little of it, but rather we have too much. *Jouissance* comes to be perceived as unbearable suffering, although at an unconscious level it is experienced as a form of pleasure. This might explain why some people continue to make the same mistakes that cause them pain and grief. The point is that they *enjoy* the consequences of their mistakes. In *jouissance* we might therefore glimpse the presence of the sublime. For it is the moment of *jouissance* that reveals a trace of the intensity of the '*real*', which — in Lacanian terms — is always inaccessible. The '*real*' cannot be symbolised. It remains a foreclosed element that may be approached, but never grasped. Thus *jouissance* itself comes to stand for what is hidden. As Borch-Jacobsen observes:

'Jouissance, which is nothing — nothing that could ever be presented — is nonetheless thought of as what is "hidden", "veiled", "disguised" by the image that represents it.'

And when we encounter an object that bears witness to the '*real*', like the '*terrifying*' angels of Rainer Maria Rilke's second Duino Elegy, it is always a traumatic event. Hence the bitter-sweet ecstasies of St Teresa offer a perfect example of *jouissance* at work. Above all, it is important to recognise that, for Lacan, the urge to break through the pleasure principle and seek this bitter-sweet moment of *jouissance* is an urge to realise the death drive. Thus, as Dylan Evans puts it, '*Jouissance is "the path towards death". In so far as the drives are an attempt to break through the pleasure principle in search of jouissance, every drive is a death drive.*'

Aesthetics-Religion-Love

What begins to emerge is a sense in which the erotic shares similarities with, on the one hand, the state of religious ecstasy, as observed by Bataille, and, on the other, the *jouissance* of the text observed by Lacan and others. If we include architecture and other objects of aesthetic contemplation with the latter category of the '*text*' we might begin to recognise that the mechanisms in play with aesthetic contemplation replicate — to some extent — those in both an erotic and a religious encounter. Hence we might explore the fundamental nature of aesthetic contemplation by comparison with the other two.

There are clear parallels between all three modes of articulation. Religious ceremonies, especially within the Catholic Church, often depend upon the aesthetic — the singing of the choir, the smell of incense, the visual display of religious garments, paintings, statues and architecture. Art, moreover, is for Freud a form of sublimated eroticism, while Adorno compares the aesthetic to a mode of loving, and Kristeva makes connections between all three – the religious, aesthetic and erotic.

Throughout there is a sense in which the engagement with the '*other*' amounts to a forging of a relationship with the 'other'. This relationship is, of course, a symbolic relationship. It is as though the basic mechanism that underpins religious identification with the '*other*' — the mythic leap of faith — can be found in all identifications with the '*other*'. This might be extended to include the identification implicit in love, and also aesthetic identification.

According to psychoanalytic theory, in the case of love there is no actual link between the self and the other. '*Il n'y a pas de rapport sexuel*' — '*there can be no sexual relationship*' — as Lacan has observed. Love therefore becomes a '*mirage that fills out the void*' of the impossibility of a relationship between the two sexes. To those involved, of course, love appears as decidedly real. But it is important to recognise that within Lacanian theory what we take for the real is not the '*real*' itself, but an appearance. Everything that we perceive is filtered through the maze of the imagination. This is not to reduce love merely to some realm of fantasy. While love depends upon the existence of an image, true love, as Renata Salecl observes, always aims at the kernel of the Lacanian '*real*', that raw element whose trace appears in *jouissance*.

This same principle will hold true for religious devotion where '*faith*' would fill that gap between the self and the '*other*' — between the worshipper and God. For '*faith*' here is equally a mythic construct. There is nothing to authorise the supposed communication between the worshipper and the divine except '*belief*' itself. The worshipper simply '*believes*' that he or she is in communication with God. Faith, like love, takes the form of a '*mirage*', and while, like love, it is not '*real*', it appears as such to the worshipper.

Again, the same principle would hold true for an aesthetic engagement with anything, such as architecture, where a symbolic

attachment comes into play. Here we must speak not of physical engagements — the actual presence of an individual in an environment — but the symbolic engagement which serves to personalise that environment and give it meaning. '*Attachments*', in this sense, are no more than symbolic attachments, susceptible to shifts and erasures, as the full fluid dynamics of unconscious identification comes into play. The environment, then, — the world around us — should be understood as fundamentally '*other*'. We may forge emotional links with that environment — identify, that is, with it — but this identification can only be understood as a symbolic identification that shares the essential characteristics of love and devotion.

It is within this framework that concepts such as '*home*' can be understood. The very fluidity and transferability of the concept of home which may shift from one place to another, reveal it as a term of mere symbolic identification, an identification, that is, which is forged over a process of time. The process of making ourselves '*at home*' in a new space is akin to the process of shifting our allegiance from one lover to another. It is a question of forging a '*relationship*' with that space. We must acknowledge, of course, the complexity of the operation, for attachment to place does not depend simply on aesthetic questions, just as attachment to a loved one does not depend solely on beauty. Yet parallels persist. Likewise, although most do not change their religion as they do their homes, the very process of developing a religious belief and allowing it to wane, belongs to the same category. Religious affiliation, emotional bonding and aesthetic appreciation can therefore be seen to share the same inherent structure. All these forms of identification must be based on some belief system which '*claims*' a link between the self and the other at the level of the symbolic.

At the same time, a degree of caution must be introduced here. For just as there are different modalities of love, there are different modalities of aesthetic engagement and religious devotion. Here it might be useful to return to Kristeva, who famously differentiates various forms of love — notably *agape from eros*. Kristeva is anxious to distinguish love from theological concerns. Her argument goes back to the question of the thetic divide, and the problem — as Kristeva sees it — of '*boundary failure*'. There is a potential crisis of non-differentiation, which points also to the potential dangers of mimetic absorption into the other, when the thetic divide is not maintained. Art breaches the thetic divide. It '*pulverizes*'

the thetic through the negativity of its transgression, but in the end, for Kristeva, it does not '*relinquish*' that divide.

It is this maintaining of the thetic break that, for Kristeva, distinguishes religious sacrifice from art:

> We thus find sacrifice and art, face to face, representing the two aspects of the thetic function: the prohibition of jouissance by language and the introduction of jouissance into and through language... On the other hand, poetry, music, dance, theater — "art" — point at once to a pole opposite that of religious prohibition... Far from denying the thetic, which through the ages religion has assigned itself the privilege of celebrating — though only as a prohibition — art accepts the thetic break to the extent that it resists becoming either delirium or a fusion with nature.

The problem, then, with sacrifice is that it manifests the tendency in religion to destroy the thetic divide, and collapse the self — uncritically — into the other.

Can we therefore assert that love and theological devotion do not overlap, and that one maintains the thetic divide, and one collapses it? The answer, perhaps, is contained in Kristeva's own work. For, significantly, the modality of love that she celebrates — *agape* — is itself a religious term. Agape points to an open, selfless '*love*' or '*communion*', that underpins a form of belief that is not fixed within some rigid structure of dogma. For dogma must be seen as the negative side of religion that must be resisted at all costs.

It is here that we should turn once more to mimesis and poetic language in that, according to Kristeva, they resist the dogmatization of the sacred:

> Mimesis and poetic language do more than engage in an intra-ideological debate; they question the very principle of the ideological because they unfold the unicity of the thetic (the precondition for meaning and signification) and prevent its theologization. As the place of production for a subject who transgresses the thetic by using it as a necessary boundary — but not as an absolute or as an origin — poetic language and the mimesis from which it is inseparable, are profoundly a-theological. They are not critics of theology but rather the enemy within and without, recognizing both its necessity and its pretensions. In other words, poetic language and mimesis may appear as an argument complicitous with dogma — we are familiar with religion's use of them — but they may also set in motion what dogma

> represses. In so doing, they no longer act as instinctual floodgates within the enclosure of the sacred, and become instead protestors against its posturing.

In other words, while mimesis and poetic language operate from within the same space as religion — they are the enemies from both '*within*' and '*without*' — they do not partake of the theological, if by theology we understand a dogmatic, ideological position. Instead, they both recognise and challenge the limitations of dogma, attempting to '*release*' what dogma represses. Yet it is not as though mimesis and poetic language do not align themselves with the sacred. Rather they serve to counter the '*theologization*' of the sacred. If, then, we are looking for their equivalent within the realm of the sacred, we should turn to agape, as the expression of the sacred which resists the '*posturing*' and '*pretension*' of theology.

Agape is a form of devotion which preserves the thetic divide, and which is constituted by a form of abjection. It is an idealised notion of devotion that operates within an open system. *Agape* is therefore quite distinct from — and indeed antagonistic towards — religious dogma. In this sense, provided we accept religion as *agape*, the overlapping of the religious and love is perhaps less problematic than might first appear. Indeed we might even go so far as to follow Simone de Beauvoir who distinguishes between '*masculine*' and '*feminine*' love, ascribing the former a more theological quality. As Mazzoni comments:

> It is not that divine love is a rarefied, sublimated version of sexual love; rather, sexual love has for woman the quasi-religious character of a love for (divine) transcendence; for common, earthly lover is thus granted, by the sole virtue of his masculinity, the attributes of (a) g/God.

By extension, *agape* also has strong affinities with poetic expression as embodied in the principle of *mimesis*. Both are concerned with opening up to the other. Yet both preserve the thetic divide. But this might also lead us to rethink the question of ecstasy. For if ecstasy were to be aligned to a notion of love and devotion as '*agape*', it would not be a complete surrender of the self to the other, nor a complete dissolution of boundaries. Rather it would subscribe to the disruptive potential of poetic expression, which '*breaches*' and reconfigures the thetic, but ultimately respects it. Ecstasy, then, would amount to a '*yielding*', an '*assimilation*', a close approximation between the self and the divine. It is a

conditional surrender, but never a total surrender, a blurring and reworking of boundaries, but never a complete dissolution of boundaries.