

Article

A Mystical Therapy: Re-Booting the Mystical

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Abstract

One of the central themes of this journal is to 're-boot' the mystical tradition for the contemporary seeker. The author, a practising psychotherapist, undertakes this in the present article by connecting three strands of thought and practice to propose a 'mystical therapy'. First, there is the Christian mystical tradition as exemplified by the medieval tradition of *theologia mystica*. Second, the practices and insights of present-day therapy and counselling arising from the pioneering work of Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) and his successors, including recent approaches from practitioners such as James Hillman and Wilfred Bion. Finally, the philosophical reflections of Freud's Viennese contemporary Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951), especially in regard to *das Mystische* and the choreography of saying and showing. All three strands are blended together as the author reflects on three decades of work in the area and the possibility of 're-booting' the mystical through these means.

Keywords: Sigmund Freud; Ludwig Wittgenstein; *theologia mystica*; psychotherapy; counselling; mystical therapy

1. Introduction: What Is the Mystical?

If we are attempting a 're-booting' of the mystical the first question that arises is, of course, 'what exactly do you mean by "the mystical"?' Having read this far in the present journal you will no doubt have a good idea of the many varying approaches and strategies that can be taken to approach this 'weasel word'. One of my interlocutors for the present paper, the Viennese linguistic philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951), once wrote: 'sometimes an expression has to be taken out of the language and sent to the cleaners. Then it can be re-introduced into circulation' (Wittgenstein 1993a, 8.504).¹ Which, I would contend, is precisely the task when we engage in discourse on the 'mystical' as so importantly undertaken in the present journal. Early in my academic career I undertook a survey of the contemporary literature on the subject and came to the following conclusion which is worth quoting:

Our understanding of the contemporary academic discourse on 'the mystical' can best be seen as comprising two over-arching tendencies: that towards evaluating 'mysticism' as a quasi-ontological, cross-credal category. . . and a contemporary academic movement which seeks to concentrate primarily on the *form* of mystical discourse at the expense of any content, especially psychological content, what we shall refer to as 'constructivist' approaches.² (Tyler 2011, p. 3)

When we survey contemporary investigations into the 'mystical' in psychotherapeutic contexts these two broad trends tend to hold; however, following Freud, the first (and preventive) category seems to dominate (the second, following the work of Katz et al. from



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the 1970s onwards has taken a little longer to permeate into psychotherapeutic discussions of the subject, see, inter alia [Katz 1978, 1983, 1992](#)). Freud himself famously referenced an *Ozeanisches Gefühl* (Oceanic feeling) in the first chapter of *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* ('Civilisation and its Discontents', translated by Strachey in [Freud 1991](#)) in response to a letter from his colleague, the Swiss man of letters Romaine Rolland objecting to the fact that Freud's earlier book *The Future of an Illusion* had failed to mention 'a particular feeling'³: 'a feeling which he would like to call a sensation of "eternity", a feeling as of something limitless, unbounded—as it were, "oceanic".' Merkur in his excellent 2010 analysis of the evolution of Freud's thought on the subject stresses the importance of Rank's 1924 *Trauma of Birth* (see [Rank 1993](#)) for introducing the idea of an origin for the 'oceanic feeling' in a pre-Oedipal, inter-uterine experience, which is more or less what Freud presents in *Das Unbehagen* as an 'explanation' for Rolland's 'particular feeling'. Yet, however satisfactory or not we find Freud's/Rank's approach to *das Mystische* it is clear that both theirs, and Rolland's, approach to the phenomenon lie within our first named category of seeing 'the mystical' as a 'quasi-ontological, cross-credal category' that underpins all religions and, indeed, is the source of all religion. In this they follow the main architects of what I called in my earlier work 'modern mysticism', writers such as Robert Vaughan (1823–1857), William James (1842–1910), William Ralph Inge (1860–1954) and Evelyn Underhill (1875–1941) who formed this modern category of talk of *das Mystische*.⁴

Following Freud, as I have said, many (but not all) contemporary commentators on the subject adopt a similar stance. In so far as he defines the term Michael Eigen, for example, would see 'the mystical' as part of a feeling structure that underpins both therapeutic work and world religions, in his case Judaism and Buddhism:

I have not defined mystical feeling because I am unable to. My hope is, if I speak around it, or from it, well enough, something of value will get communicated to the reader and myself. Discussions of mystical awareness tend to undo themselves because of the paradoxical nature of the experiencing involved. ([Eigen 1998](#), p. 31)

Merkur, again, in common with several modern commentators (see, for example, [Merkur 2010](#)) goes further to emphasise the 'ecstatic' nature of that feeling, especially if it arises in altered states of consciousness:

Mysticism may be defined as a practice of religious ecstasies (that is, of religious experiences during alternate states of consciousness), together with whatever ideologies, ethics, rites, myths, legends, magics, and so forth, are related to ecstasies. ([Merkur 2010](#), p. 1)

My own approach in this article is to shift the emphasis away from these 'votaries' to something perhaps a little more 'workaday'. In this respect I have been influenced by the pioneering work of authors such as Katz and Jeffrey Kripal (see, for example, [Kripal 2001](#)) who have emphasised the 'structural' aspects of the phenomenon in contrast to its ontology of 'feeling' (Freud, interestingly enough, has the same reservations of analysis of 'feeling' / *Gefühl* in the essay mentioned earlier, see [Freud 1991](#), pp. 252–53). However, in contrast to these later 'constructivists', I want to retain the transcendent apperception to the phenomenon as developed in my earlier books, especially [Tyler \(2011, 2016\)](#). To 'square the circle' between modern ontological recreations of the mystical (or even 'oceanic') 'feeling'/'ecstasy' and the (de-)constructivist innovations of recent years, I have developed arguments first presented in the philosophical work of the Austrian linguistic philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951). One of the over-riding features of Wittgenstein's approach, especially as he proceeded in his discoveries, was a move away from looking for supposed transcendent entities that 'lie behind' ordinary speech

and language (the ‘occult’ entities mentioned in *Zettel* and the *Blue and Brown Books*).⁵ The Austrian, especially in his later work, preferred a move towards explanation by means of observations of the ‘language games’ (*Sprachspiele*) embedded in our practices or ways of life and thus revealed by observing the pattern and nature of speech set within the way of life of the speaker. Taking my cue from him, I sought early on in my exploration of the literature to find a ‘way of life’ and ‘language game’ that corresponded to the ‘mystical form’ that we began this article with (Tyler 2009). As a Catholic Christian, I decided that rather than search for this language game in other religions (and I have no doubt similar explorations can be undertaken in other so-called ‘mystical’ religious traditions) I would concentrate on that ‘game’ unfolded within my own tradition.⁶ In this respect I was able to isolate at least three clear ‘families’ of language games in the Christian tradition. First, the early Christian uses of *mūs* or *mūstikos*, so well described in the writings of, for example, Bouyer (1981) and McGinn (1991). Second, the ‘modern mysticism’ already alluded to above, beginning roughly in the mid-nineteenth century and still, as we have seen, very much alive today. However, between these two periods I was struck by a sophisticated and well documented medieval language game/form of life which I called in my early works the tradition of ‘*theologia mystica*’/‘mystical theology’ that stretches, roughly, from the innovations of St Augustine of Hippo via St Bernard of Clairvaux and the Rhineland Mystics ending somewhere around the late 16th and early 17th centuries with the final flowering of Spanish mysticism. Initially, my studies have been preoccupied with how this *Sprachspiel* worked in practice and what, as it were, were the ‘rules’ of this discourse. However, alongside my academic theological work in the area, I had developed a private psychotherapeutic practice having trained in the aforesaid mentioned ‘Object Relations’ and transpersonal schools of the late twentieth century here in London. Initially, the two threads ran largely parallel to each other; however, as my work has progressed these past few decades, I have noticed fascinating synergies between the two approaches which form the basis of the present article.

Therefore, taking my cue from this Wittgensteinian analysis of the *theologia mystica* and following the aim of the present article, I shall concentrate here on what I believe Wittgenstein presents (like his medieval forebears) as a ‘mystical strategy’ within a specifically ‘therapeutic’ dynamic. This dynamic, I will argue, is revealed within the saying/showing dynamic set up in his early (and only published philosophical) work the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, and developed, as we have seen, in his later writings. I will therefore argue here that one of the golden threads that runs through both the practitioners of the *theologia mystica* and through Wittgenstein’s *oeuvre* is not so much a concern with constructing metaphysical towers of theology (the medievals’ ‘*theologia speculativa*’) or indeed modern ‘cross-credal, ontological entities’ as with providing the practical means whereby distressed and disorientated folk may find some measure of solace and peace. Whether that is John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila writing for their novices, Meister Eckhart speaking to the lay beguines of Cologne or Ludwig Wittgenstein helping the seeker to ‘find a way out of the fly-bottle’. In this respect my concern here (and throughout most of my writing career) has been and continues to be how such writing can provide a practical and pastoral help to the seeker—as indeed how therapy can provide a means to the resolution of conflict and stress within the patient—the origins of my own ‘mystical therapy’.

2. *Theologia Mystica*: The ‘Foolish Wisdom’

To begin, then, I shall briefly elaborate on what I understand by the term *theologia mystica* and outline why I think it is important for reclaiming or ‘rebooting’ the mystical in our present times.

The tradition of *'theologia mystica'* which we can say, roughly, begins in the schools of Paris, Chartres and Oxford from the twelfth/thirteenth centuries onwards, relying heavily on interpretation and reflection on the foundational texts of Augustine and Dionysius the Areopagite, can be said to be a way of knowing (or perhaps, better, a way of unknowing), a way of theology, a way of writing and a way of praying. All four aspects will have a role to play in the subsequent influences of the tradition, especially on the material presented in the present article. Writing around 1500 the Spanish Franciscan friar Francisco de Osuna (who would later be described by Teresa of Avila as 'her master'), drawing upon the writings of the Chancellor of the University of Paris, Jean Gerson, a century before him, advanced the position that there were in essence two types of theology—the first, what he terms the *'theologia speculativa'* is essentially a theology of the intellect that sharpens a seeker's understanding of the *logos* of the Christian life. For Osuna such a theology

Uses reasoning, argumentation, discourse and probability, as do the other sciences. It is called scholastic theology, which means it is of learned people (*letrados*) and if someone wishes to excel in it, he needs the learning tools required to excel in any science: a good mind, continual exercise, books, time, attentiveness, and a learned teacher to study under. (De Osuna 1981, p. 162)

In contrast, Osuna suggests that the 'mystical theology' is an 'art of love (*arte de amor*) because only through love is it realised, and in it love is multiplied more than in any other art or instruction' (De Osuna 1981, p. 164). Here, as I say, he follows Gerson for whom 'knowledge of God is better acquired through a penitent affect than an investigative mind' (Gerson 1958, p. 70).⁷ Speculative theology, what we would find in most modern university theology courses today, he stresses uses 'reasoning in conformity with philosophical disciplines' (Gerson 1958, pp. 76–77). Mystical theology, on the other hand, needs no such 'school of the intellect' (*scola intellectus*) for it is acquired through the 'school of the affect' (*scola affectus*) and the exercise of the 'moral virtues' that 'dispose the soul to purgation' (Gerson 1958, p. 77). Which is why he calls it a *'stulta sapientia'*, literally a 'foolish wisdom' (Gerson 1958, p. 73). These two ways of theology thus point us towards two ways of knowing—one 'through the intellect' and the other 'through the heart'. Yet, as both Osuna and Gerson acknowledge, if we are not going to use scholastic means to acquire this 'heart knowledge', by what art or means is it acquired?

Much has been written of these arts, what Michael Sells in his influential book called 'the mystical languages of unsaying', and there is no doubt that Sells is correct in pointing towards specific methods by which the 'heart knowledge' of the medievals was acquired, understood and transmitted (see Sells 1994). In his analysis Sells points to three responses to the 'unknowing' that lies at the heart of the 'mystical dilemma' that anything we say of God, who transcends speech, cannot be God (hence Eckhart's famous prayer: 'therefore let us pray to God that we may be free of God that we may gain the truth and enjoy it eternally').⁸ First, silence. Second, adoption of the medieval (and especially Thomist) use of analogy in our speech of that which transcends speech. And third, the approach he adopts, a concentration on the 'mystical strategy' of the discourse whereby what is affirmed, is denied, etc. This is the method I have adopted in my own analysis hybridising Sells' fertile approach with the thoughts of Wittgenstein contained here.

A good example of how such a mystical performative discourse 'worked' in practice is seen in the early reception of the mystical works of the Spanish mystic, John of the Cross (1542–1591). John himself had studied the *theologia mystica* at Salamanca University as a young man so that when he came to write his own mystical works in maturity, he naturally drew on these ancient medieval traditions (see Howells and Tyler 2024). Yet, when his works appeared the following century, one of his editors, Diego de Jesús (1570–1621), felt the need to expound to new readers of John something of the style of his 'mystical

theology'. This is important from our perspective as it reveals that 'mystical theology' as a particular genre with its own rules and ways of going about the search for 'heart knowledge' was certainly a well-established idiom by the later medieval/early modern period. As Diego writes:

This licence to use particular and out of the ordinary terms is especially true in the *mystical theology* as it treats of things very high, sacred and secret and touches on experience more than speculation—on taste (*gusto*) and divine savour (*sabor divino*) rather than knowledge (*saber*), and this in a high state of supernatural and loving union with God. Which explains the paucity of terms and phrases used in speculative thought, which in these non-material matters are surpassed by the extraordinary experience itself. (John of the Cross 1929, I.353)

Thus, the *theologia mystica* as developed in this tradition is as much an 'initiation' into a heart knowledge as a speculative analysis of thought. This reflects the original texts of Dionysius whose own text the '*Theologia Mystica*' was to give the name to the tradition.⁹ For Dionysius, theology is as much an initiation into a 'way of life' (to use a Wittgensteinian expression) as a discourse. Such an 'initiation' occurring as much through work on the emotions/*pathos*, as work on the reason/*logos*:

The traditions of the theologians are twofold, on the one hand ineffable and mystical, on the other manifest and more knowable; on the one hand symbolic and presupposing initiation, on the other philosophical and capable of proof—and the ineffable is interwoven with what can be uttered. The one persuades and contains within itself the truth of what it says, the other effects and establishes the soul with God by initiations that do not teach anything. (Epistle 9 in Dionysius the Areopagite 1950, p. 1105)¹⁰

Again, employing another Wittgensteinian theme to which we shall return shortly, mystical theology in this respect (as opposed to speculative theology) does not so much 'say' as 'show' its truth.

So, how then does this 'mystical theology' go about its work of showing? And indeed, how might the mystical therapist go about their work of developing this mystical approach in their practice? We shall move to that shortly via the insights of early analytical psychology; however, before we leave the foundational texts of the *theologia mystica*, especially Dionysius, it is important to note that very early on Dionysius (as with other great proponents of the art such as Meister Eckhart) realised that much of the work of the practice will be held in interpretation of our speech of the ineffable. As Dionysius puts it in *The Divine Names*:

We must not dare to resort to words or conceptions concerning that hidden divinity which transcends being, apart from what the sacred scriptures have divinely revealed. Since the unknowing of what is beyond being is something above and beyond speech, mind or being itself, one should ascribe to it an understanding beyond being. (Dionysius the Areopagite 1987, p. 49)

In passages such as this, transcribed into English by Lubheid in his text as 'beyond being, beyond speech,' etc., Dionysius creates his own neologic *hyper*-terms to express that moment when as we talk of the ineffable, to use Wittgenstein's terms again, 'language goes on holiday' (Wittgenstein 2001, p. 16, §38). The ineffable for Dionysius in this discourse is beyond all terms of affirmation and denial and really at the edge of speech itself. This is the *mūs*/*mūstikos* of the early Christian tradition to which we referred earlier. For Dionysius, as a Christian author, the ineffable signifier is provided by the Christian scriptures (Dionysius' 'divine oracles') and liturgy. As McGinn puts it:

What cannot be demonstrated by the Church is according to Dionysius made present both on the material level of symbols used by scripture and in liturgy and also by extension, on the conceptual or intellectual level, where the negation of names and eventually the removal of both affirmation and negation bring the soul to union with the divine mystery. (McGinn 1991, p. 173)

To summarise then, if, as we have done here, we survey the style of writing within the *theologia mystica* of, for example, Dionysius, we see an attempt to hold an aporia between what cannot be ‘said’ of the ineffable through our language (‘the apophatic’) and what can be ‘shown’ through the symbolic means of, for example, liturgy and scripture (‘the cataphatic’). Essentially, a twofold process of ‘becoming and unbecoming’ (to use Eckhart’s later phrase) whereby we deconstruct what cannot be said before opening ourselves up to the possibility of what can be shown through the symbolic.¹¹

Both of these symbolic means of the tradition of *theologia mystica*, the liturgical and the scriptural, are unavailable to the contemporary therapist (unless they are working in an explicitly Christian and sacramental context). Therefore, as we proceed in our construction of a contemporary ‘mystical therapy’, we need to essay the possibility of a clinical approach that uses the means of ‘becoming and unbecoming’ without an explicitly Christian sacramental framework, and it is to this we turn next.

3. Excursus: Saying and Showing

However, before we do that it may be as well at this point to reinforce some of the Wittgensteinian perspectives already alluded to, especially the ‘saying/showing’ dynamic mentioned above. At which point another question arises—‘Why Wittgenstein?’—and what, indeed, does logical analytical philosophy have to do with medieval mystical theology? Well, as it happens, quite a lot. A number of recent commentators have tried to make sense of the final gnomic remarks that the Viennese philosopher made at the end of his only fully published philosophical work, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, completed whilst on active service in World War One and a prisoner in Monte Cassino, Italy:

6.44 *Nicht wie die Welt ist, ist das Mystische, sondern dass sie ist*

(Not *how* the world is, is the mystical, but that it is.)

6.45 *Die Anschauung der Welt sub specie aeterni ist ihre Anschauung als—begrenztes—Ganzes.*

Das Gefühl der Welt als begrenztes Ganzes ist das mystische.

(The view of the world *sub specie aeterni* is to view it as a limited whole.

The feeling of the world as a limited whole is the mystical.)

6.522 *Es gibt allerdings Unaussprechliches. Dies zeigt sich, es ist das Mystische.*

(There are indeed things that are inexpressible. They *show themselves*. That is the mystical)

7 *Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schwiegen.*

(Of what we cannot speak, we must pass over in silence.)¹²

As many commentators have pointed out (see, inter alia, Badiou 2011), one of the difficulties with coming to terms with Wittgenstein’s texts is the deliberate ambiguity of his remarks. When Frank Ramsey went to Austria in 1923 to help with the English translation of the *Tractatus* he wrote back to his mother: ‘Some of his sentences are intentionally ambiguous having an ordinary meaning and a more difficult meaning which he also believes’ (Wittgenstein 1973, p. 78). Thus, it is perhaps unsurprising that this style, especially in these remarks on *das Mystische* coming at the end of what purported to be a thesis on logical form,

should, literally, mystify his earliest commentators, not least Bertrand Russell.¹³ Although his former mentor and friend paid fulsome praise to the work in his preface ('a book no serious philosopher can afford to neglect') he did not accept the conclusions, especially the references to 'the mystical'. Consequent commentary has often sided with Russell (and most members of the Vienna Circle) in finding the 'mystical remarks' a sideshow or hindrance to the main action of the *Tractatus* which is seen as primarily concerned with logical form or the nature of meaning.¹⁴ Another approach has been to co-opt Wittgenstein's remarks into a wider search for the 'mystical' as an ontological, cross-credal category—something, again, I would argue, which does not seem to be Wittgenstein's purpose here.¹⁵ Rather, as I argued earlier, I interpret the Austrian as presenting a view of the 'mystical' that neither concerns itself with supposedly 'cross-credal, ontological entities' nor with the medieval theologians' desire to seek a transcendental perspective. Rather, I am concentrating in the present article on what I understand the Austrian presents (like his medieval forebears) as a 'mystical strategy' within a specifically 'therapeutic' dynamic.¹⁶ Which is the approach the philosopher struggles to introduce into his later writings (none of which were published in his lifetime), most especially in the posthumously published *Philosophical Investigations*. As Wittgenstein counsels, and experience has shown me, this is not achieved through clever interpretations and interventions but rather by 'surveying the foundations of possible buildings':

Clarity, perspicuity (*Durchsichtigkeit*) are an end in themselves. I am not interested in constructing a building, so much as having a clear view (*durchsichtig*) before me of the foundations of possible buildings. My goal, then, is different from the scientist and so my think-way is to be distinguished. (Wittgenstein 1993a, 8.459)¹⁷

Thus, this peculiar art of standing in relation to the other—whereby we observe the foundations of thought without building new metaphysical entities—is for me the essence of what I would call this 'mystical therapy' having its roots both in the medieval mystical tradition and Wittgenstein's (post-) modern approach to our personal interactions—especially in a therapeutic setting. Like his philosophy, therapy: 'simply puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything—Since everything lies open to view there is nothing to explain. For what is hidden, for example, is of no interest to us' (*Philosophical Investigations* §126 in Wittgenstein 2001, p. 43).¹⁸

We are therefore describing a post-Enlightenment (and indeed pre-Enlightenment) way of knowing/unknowing (therapeutic and mystical discourses) that requires a more interactive and immediate medium or frame of reference than thinking or conceptual analysis alone provides (hence, as we shall shortly see, the importance of the symbolic use of, for example, symptoms and dreams, in tandem to the 'unknowing' gaze of the apophatic).

Therefore, for both Wittgenstein and the mystical writers discussed above *change* and *transformation* are paramount. They entice us, excite us, goad and puzzle us. *They are not meant to leave us alone*. They pose us problems (Wittgenstein's thought games, the mystical writers' word pictures and challenges) which cannot be ignored. If we play their games with them, they re-orientate our perceptions of reality, ourselves and our place in the world: for they are primarily *performative discourses* that 'show' rather than 'say'. In Genova's words they are 'elucidations':

Elucidations are in a class of their own, not quite poem, aphorism or logical equation, they resist categorization... They instruct by example, by showing rather than saying. (Genova 1995, p. 108)

As Wittgenstein states in his preface to the *Tractatus*, there is what is presented on the written page and what is unwritten, and often 'this second part is the important one' (Wittgenstein 1967b, p. 143).¹⁹ Thus:

Instead of helping us ‘find’ something already existing but supposedly hidden behind appearances, (Wittgenstein’s) methods help us grasp something new, as yet unseen, in the emerging articulation of our speech entwined activities. (Schotter 1996, p. 16)

To conclude this article, therefore, I will suggest ways in which these influences have evolved into my own ‘mystical therapy’, drawing on the traditions and practices developed within the therapeutic tradition since its inception by Wittgenstein’s contemporary (and his sister’s analyst) Sigmund Freud in late nineteenth century Vienna and expressed through recent work by analysts such as Wilfrid Bion and James Hillman.

4. Evenly Hovering Attention

Reflecting on the innovations brought about by his new psychological practices over the preceding decade, Freud in 1912 decided to ‘put analysis on the couch’ and discuss the *Technik* that lay behind the rapidly evolving insights of the nascent discipline (the paper was later published as *Recommendations to Physicians Practising Psycho-analysis* in the *Standard Edition* of his collected works). According to his own anthropology the aim of the analyst was to seek ‘the fundamental rule of psycho-analysis’: for just as the patient ‘must relate everything that his self-observation can detect, and keep back all the logical and affective objections’ that occur to him, so too the analyst ‘must put himself in a position to make use of everything he is told for the purposes of interpretation and of recognizing the concealed unconscious material’. Freud’s own anthropological perspective suggested that there was the existence of an ‘unconscious’ realm to the psyche that can be accessed by means of the intuition of the analyst and patient alike. Again, without concentrating too much on Freud’s own metaphysical/anthropological constructs what interests us here are the *means* (or in Freud’s language, *das Technik*) by which this end is achieved.²⁰ For, as with our medieval practitioners of mystical theology, so Freud saw his nascent method as allowing access to levels of the self ‘beyond logical and affective objections’. So, how then were these layers accessed? This he adeptly summarises thus:

The technique, however, is a very simple one. . . It consists simply in not directing one’s notice to anything in particular and in maintaining the same ‘evenly hovering attention’ (*Gleichschwebende Aufmerksamkeit*) (as I have called it) in the face of all that one hears. . .

It will be seen that the rule of giving equal notice to everything is the necessary counterpart to the demand made on the patient that he should communicate everything that occurs to him without criticism or selection. If the doctor behaves otherwise, he is throwing away most of the advantage which results from the patient’s obeying the ‘fundamental rule of psychoanalysis’. The rule for the doctor may be expressed: ‘He should withhold all conscious influences from his capacity to attend, and give himself over completely to his “unconscious memory”.’ Or, to put it purely in terms of technique: ‘He should simply listen, and not bother about whether he is keeping anything in mind’. (Freud 1958, pp. 111–12)²¹

Such an ‘evenly hovering attention’ would mirror the place of ambiguous becoming/unbecoming, saying/showing we elaborated above. Adopting a phrase of the 19th Century English poet, John Keats, we could talk of this attitude as adopting a ‘negative capability’ in pastoral interactions with others. Keats used the term to specify a key attribute of the poet which makes a person: ‘capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.’ (Keats 1970, p. 43). This was elaborated by the systems analyst Robert French who added:

Thus, Keats's poet is 'related' to the therapist, and indeed to many other 'family members': mother, teacher, priest, consultant, manager—anyone, perhaps, whose role involves responsibility for others. What links them is this 'disposition of indifference', which Pines called 'aeolian' after the aeolian harp: 'to show how the therapist's mind can be stirred by the communication of the patient, and how, unselfconsciously, the therapist finds himself responding in depth to the patient's hidden meanings'. (French 2000)

Thus, adopting this ambiguous attitude of 'unknowing' within Freud's 'lightly hovering attention' opens up new possibilities in the therapist's engagements with the people they work with. The British Object Relations analyst, Wilfred Bion, was aware of Keats's dictum and tried to put it into practice in his interactions with clients writing:

Discard your memory; discard the future tense of our desire; forget them both, both what you knew and what you want, to leave space for a new idea. (Bion 1980, p. 11)²²

He suggested the therapist must have the courage and humility to step into this 'space of unknowing' when engaging with others. Precisely, the space of the 'mystical therapy' I am advocating here: a place that requires the therapist to put aside memories, the need to control, the need to define—all the whirring chatter of the 'monkey mind'—as they 'observe the foundations of possible buildings' and allow themselves to be present for the other before them. Not least, this involves challenging the therapist's conception of themselves and their role—especially in a 'professional' context:

It is, indeed, difficult to say how to denude one's mind of preconceptions, memories and desires which make such a noise that one cannot hear the patient speak—at least not the one that we need to hear speak. In my experience the noise of my past has so many echoes and reverberations that it is difficult to know whether I am really listening to the patient or being distracted by one of these ghosts of the past. (Bion 1994, p. 65)

This, indeed, is too the 'foolish wisdom' of the medieval writers who present themselves in unknowing before the wonder—and indeed mystery—before them.

5. Mystical Therapy in Practice

Therefore, we might say that what is being advocated here is something that runs counter to much 'psychologising' as presently occurs in a clinical setting. What is being advocated is not the proliferation of possible diagnoses, syndromes or other collections of acronyms, but rather the necessity to sit with the client and enter together with them into the 'mystical unknowing' that is the encounter with the other. As Wittgenstein put it in the *Philosophical Investigations*:

The first step is the one that altogether escapes notice. We talk of processes and states and leave their nature undecided. Sometimes perhaps, we shall know more about them—we think. But this is just what commits us to a particular way of looking at the matter. For we have a definite concept of what it means to learn to know a process better. (the decisive movement in the conjuring trick has been made, and it was the very one that we thought quite innocent). (Philosophical Investigations § 308 in Wittgenstein 2001, p. 87)

One of the aims of Wittgenstein's last writings here was to critique what he calls 'the psychological' explanation of mental phenomena. That is, an approach to psychology that attempts to 'seek causes' for mental phenomena—which we can interpret as the

neurological or reductionist search for the physical causes of the change—either in the firings of neurons or some other aspect of brain structure:

Indeed, I confess, nothing seems more possible to me than that people some day will come to the definite opinion that there is no picture/representation in either the physiological or nervous systems which corresponds to a *particular* thought, a *particular* idea or memory. (Wittgenstein 1982, p. 504, I have adjusted the translation slightly)

True to his later growing disillusion with the universalist claims of such ‘scientism’, he declares that such searching for causes is of no interest to him (Wittgenstein 1982, p. 434). For as he says himself in the *Philosophical Investigations*, by ‘giving all these examples I am not aiming at some kind of completeness, some classification of psychological concepts’ (Wittgenstein 2001, p. 175). This I think is neatly summarised by John Heaton in his *The Talking Cure* (2013) where he stresses that what we learn from the later Wittgenstein, is that:

Minds are secondary to language—we do not ‘have’ them in the same sense as we ‘have’ brains and livers. Who is this ‘we’ that possesses a mind? Is it another mind? (Heaton 2013, p. xii)

‘Of course’, he continues, ‘therapists may be stimulated by famous therapists—Freud, Jung, Lacan, Beck, etc.—but these should provoke [us] to thought, not to being a follower who identifies with their theories’ (Heaton 2013, p. 11). Therefore, as was developed by later theorists such as Lacan, the notion arises that ‘psychotherapy is a cure by means of language and other symbolic systems which act very differently from chemical cures or physical interventions’ (Heaton 2013, p. x). And *this*, I would agree, is the major insight from Wittgenstein’s ‘mystical’ use of language for psychotherapy—that therapy itself, in the words of the American transpersonal analyst, James Hillman, develops a ‘psychology that assumes a poetic basis of mind’, so that ‘any case history of that mind will have to be an imaginative expression of this poetic basis, an imaginative making, a poetic fiction disguised in the language of medical science’ (Hillman 1983, p. 4). Or, to paraphrase Wittgenstein, therapy thus lies on the boundary of ‘saying and showing’—much as ‘the mystical’ had done in those final gnomic remarks of the *Tractatus* we referred to earlier. In similar fashion the therapist waits on the boundary of ‘saying and showing’ to put into speech that which the client stumbles to articulate. As Paul Ernst (1866–1933), Wittgenstein’s contemporary, put it: ‘the problem that is *unsolvable* by means of the experience of reality is solved by an invented, rationalised story’ (Rothhaupt 1995). So, I conclude this paper as I promised by proposing a ‘mystical therapy’ that puts these theoretical considerations into practice, a practice, I may say, that I have adopted myself in my clinical work over these past three decades in London.

6. How the Mystical Therapist Goes About Their Work

In a lecture on ethics given in 1929, Wittgenstein suggested that his tendency as a philosopher had been to ‘run against the boundaries of language’ (Wittgenstein 2023, p. 63). I can think of no better description of the work of the therapist—to run against the boundaries of language. All therapists must ask themselves at some point, ‘that tricky thing—language—what does it *mean* for us?’ For therapy is, indeed, the ‘talking cure’ *par excellence* and, as Freud realised from the beginning of the practice, the work was effectively done on the boundaries of language—in Wittgenstein’s term, on the boundary between saying and showing, as he put it in the *Tractatus*:

4.121 Propositions cannot represent logical form: it is mirrored in them.

What finds its reflection in language, language cannot represent.

What expresses itself in language, we cannot express by means of language.

Propositions show the logical form of reality.

They display it.

4.1212 What can be shown, cannot be said.

In this respect, then, what is *not said* in the therapy room is as important, if not more important, than what *is said*. Hence, the therapist will pay a lot of attention to body posture, gesture, tone of voice, pauses, etc. as here, in the gap between speaking and showing, is to be found the essential ‘mystical dynamic’ the therapist is seeking. Here the therapist aids the journey of the client by assisting with the formulation of metaphors, similes and symbols as they articulate the client’s process: ‘it seems to me it is like a slow dark stream moving under ice’, ‘perhaps at the centre of this process is a cold, hard diamond’, etc. This will be aided by the metaphors and symbols of dreams, as well as poetry, music and art—all essential components of the process of image formation. As Hillman, again, put it:

Psychological faith begins in the love of images, and it flows mainly through the shapes of persons in reveries, fantasies, reflections and imaginations. . . (the ego’s) trust is in the imagination as the only uncontrovertible reality, directly presented, immediately felt. (Hillman 1975, p. 50)

For analysis goes on in the soul’s imagination and not just in the clinic:

Essential to soul-making is psychology-making, shaping concepts and images that express the needs of the soul as they emerge in each of us. (Hillman 1975, p. xviii)

We let imagination speak for itself without interpretation. From this perspective, psychology becomes a peculiar art, taking its *Weltbild* to view the ‘foundation of possible *Weltanschauungen*’: the foundations of possible buildings (Wittgenstein 1993a, 8.459).

Which, incidentally, was also how Wittgenstein saw the value of Freud’s contribution to our understanding of the mind. For Wittgenstein, Freud’s observations were not those of a pseudo-scientist but of someone who ‘changes the perspective’ of their interlocutor:

When a dream is interpreted, we might say that it is fitted into a context in which it ceases to be puzzling. In a sense the dreamer re-dreams his dream in surroundings such that *its aspect changes*. . .

In considering what a dream is, it is important to consider what happens to it, the way its aspect changes when it is brought into relation with other things remembered, for instance. (Wittgenstein 1989, pp. 45–46)

In this respect, the task of the therapist becomes one of insight into the process that embraces that of the frontier of speech and non-speech, particularly, as we have seen, in the working with images, dreams and symbols. As Hillman puts it:

Insight would no longer mean translation, no longer mean the reformulation of imaginal speech into psychological language, mainly through understanding our fantasies, interpreting our dreams. We would let the insight contained within the fantasy appear of itself, in its own ‘intrinsically intelligible’ speech. (Hillman 1972, p. 201)

In this move beyond rational categories the therapist thus becomes second cousin to the artist as they point and show the way ‘of the fly out of the fly bottle’. As Otto Rank put it in 1930: ‘the basic problem of all psychology: is it physics or metaphysics?’ (Rank 1930, p. 6). For, as he elaborated later in his American lectures that same year:

Psychology does not deal primarily with facts as science does but only with the individual’s attitude toward facts. In other words, the objects of psychology are

interpretations—and there are as many of them as there are individuals. (Rank 1996, p. 222)

The consequence of this approach, as Wittgenstein recognised so clearly, was the ‘temptation’ to go beyond the boundary of speech/showing as we transcend the limits of human understanding. As he put it in his notes in 1931: ‘In so far as people think they can see “the limit of human understanding” they believe of course that they can see beyond it’ (Wittgenstein 2023, p. 88).²³ Thus, the therapist must constantly be ‘on guard’ against this transgression of this boundary. Accordingly, in the therapeutic situation the primordial ‘sin’ is to stretch beyond the unknowing limits of language into the unknown of the other, as Wilfrid Bion put it:

When we are in the office with a patient, we have to dare to rest. It is difficult to see what is at all frightening about that, but it is. It is difficult to remain quiet and let the patient have a chance to say whatever he or she has to say. It is frightening for the patient—and the patient hates it. We are under constant pressure to say something, to admit that we are doctors or psychoanalysts or social workers to supply some box into which we can be put complete with a label. (Bion 1980, p. 11)

Thus, the mystical therapist has to accept the ‘unknowing’ before them rather than try and fit someone into the box they interpose on the client, or leap into this unknowing armed with explanation and interpretation. This also includes letting the symptoms speak for themselves, letting them ‘read’ us, both the client and the therapist. In this respect the mystical therapist has to resist the temptation of dualist, materialist or other ‘concrete’ notions of mind, mental health, etc. that we saw Wittgenstein rejecting earlier. We enter the symbolic world as described by medieval theologians such as Dionysius the Areopagite. In this respect the symptom itself becomes a symbol in the rich sense delineated by these medieval writers or recent writers such as Hillman.²⁴ In practical terms this will have implications in treating patients displaying negative responses to adversity. For the ‘symptom’ now becomes a ‘symbol’ rather than an adversity to battle. Writing in 1975 in *Revisioning Psychology*, James Hillman stated:

Today we have rather lost this difference that most cultures, even tribal ones, know and live in terms of. Our distinctions are Cartesian: between outer tangible reality and inner states of mind, or between body and a fuzzy conglomerate of mind, psyche and spirit. We have lost the third, middle position which earlier in our tradition and in others too, was the place of soul: a world of imagination, passion, fantasy, reflection, that is neither physical and material on the one hand, nor spiritual and abstract on the other, yet bound to them both. (Hillman 1975, pp. 67–68)

Hillman waged a life-long war against what he termed the ‘nominalism’ of medical terminology applied to psychic states (or what he would refer to as ‘soul-states’, see *inter alia*, Hillman 1983, pp. 40–43).²⁵ The choreography of labelling the ‘sickness’ of ‘depression’, ‘anxiety’, ‘paranoia’, etc. possesses, he argued, its own sickness:

The ‘real’ sickness is probably less in the style—paranoid, depressed—and more in the fixedness, the literalism with which the style is taken by the patient and the doctor. (Hillman 1983, p. 42)

Rather, he encouraged the counsellor/psychologist/therapist to work with the symptoms, to ‘befriend’ and explore them, to enable them to do the work they have to do for the person at that time in their life. What Hillman calls ‘staying with the mess’: ‘we try to follow the soul wherever it leads, trying to learn what the imagination is doing in its

madness. By staying with the mess, the morbid, the fantastic, we do not abandon method itself, only its medical model. Instead, we adopt the method of the imagination' (Hillman 1975, p. 74).

In a similar fashion, Wittgenstein's admonition to respect the boundaries of our understanding of the 'other' suggests that we resist the temptation to rush into a world dominated by the grey symptomology of pathological psychology but rather tentatively play on the richly coloured shore that unfolds before us.

In this respect, then, our words, carefully chosen, are of paramount importance in the 'talking cure' of mystical therapy. Wittgenstein again: 'it is not a matter of the words one uses or what one is thinking when using them, but rather of the difference they make at various points of life. . . Practices give words their meaning' (Wittgenstein 1977; Spring 1950, §317).

All of this work, if successfully pursued, will lead to what Wittgenstein will term in his later work 'a change of aspect'. He developed this idea as he lived in virtual isolation at a farmhouse in Rosro near Connemara, Ireland in the late 1940s (having resigned his professorship in Cambridge and effectively withdrawn from academic life). In his final writings published as *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, he returns continually to this concept, as he mused on Jastrow's famous 'duck-rabbit' diagram and how an aspect is changed in our thought and life. What fascinated him was how 'nothing and yet everything' is changed with the change of aspect. As he wrote in 1948 at Rosro:

What is incomprehensible is that *nothing*, and yet *everything*, has changed, after all. That is the only way to put it. Surely *this* way is wrong: It has not changed in *one* respect, but has in another. There would be nothing strange about that. But 'Nothing has changed' means: Although I have no right to change my report about what I saw, since I see the same things now as before—still, I am incomprehensibly compelled to report completely different things, one after the other. (Wittgenstein 1980, 2.474)

In this respect therapy, then, is about 'seeing the world anew'—in a way nothing has changed, all that has changed is, as Rank reminds us, our *interpretation* of events. For, as Wittgenstein reminded us in the mystical remarks from the *Tractatus* which we quoted earlier: 'not *how* the world is, is the mystical, but *that* it is' (*Tractatus* 6.44), for the 'mystical' frontiers are those which 'show themselves' for they are in themselves 'inexpressible'. As Janik and Toulmin put it: 'his philosophy aims at solving the problem of the nature and limits of description. His world-view expresses the belief that the sphere of what can only be *shown* must be protected from those who try to *say* it' (Janik and Toulmin 1973, p. 195).

7. Conclusions

So, in conclusion, the present article has been an invitation to 'reboot', or perhaps better, 'remove the boots' of psychotherapeutic and counselling practice in the light of the insights of both the mystical tradition of *theologia mystica* and the writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein. Once the boots of speculative psychology are removed, the practitioner is able to feel the sand of the littoral that lies between saying and showing under their toes. In the words of the contemporary mystical writer Thomas Moore: 'the purpose of therapy is not to come to a rational, logical solution to a problem, but to explore it in different ways so that eventually a new perspective arises, and a solution appears out of the intense reflection' (Moore 2017, p. 873). That perspective, I have argued here, comes into existence as the therapist and client play 'the language game' of mystical therapy on the warm sands that lie between saying and showing, knowing and unknowing, the rational and the mystical.

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Notes

- 1 *‘Man muß manchmal einen Ausdruck aus der Sprache herausziehen, ihn zum Reinigen geben.—und kann ihn dann wieder in den Verkehr einführen’.*
- 2 For a good recent review of the debates see *Christian Mysticism: An Introduction to Contemporary Theoretical Approaches* ed. L. Nelstrop, K. Magill and B. Onishi (Nelstrop et al. 2009).
- 3 James Strachey, in his usual idiosyncratic fashion, translates Freud’s *‘besonderes Gefühl’* here with the English *‘peculiar feeling’* in the Standard Edition which really misrepresents the thrust of Romain’s phenomenology which expressly points to the fact that the feeling never leaves him—surely a *‘peculiar’* feeling would not come under that category (see Freud 1991, p. 251; 1982, 9.197 for the original text).
- 4 See, inter alia, Vaughan ([1856] 1895); Inge (1899); James (1902) and Underhill ([1910] 1993). For more on the evolution of this category see Tyler (2011).
- 5 *‘The idea of thinking as a process in the head, in a completely enclosed space, gives him something occult’.* Zettel 606 in (Wittgenstein 1967a, p. 105).
- 6 Although happy journeys in recent years to the Indian Subcontinent has enabled me to explore some of the comparative similarities in *Sprachspiele* within the Buddhist and Hindu traditions, see for example (Tyler 2024).
- 7 *‘Cognitio Dei per theologiam mysticam melius acquiritur per penitentem affectum, quam per investigantem intellectum.’*
- 8 Sermon *‘Blessed are the Poor in Spirit’* (Quint 32) in Eckhart (2009, p. 271).
- 9 As translated from the Greek into Latin by the early 12th/13th French schools mentioned above. See (Tyler 2011).
- 10 See also (Louth 1989, p. 25) where Louth also draws the parallel with Aristotle’s distinction within the Eleusian mysteries that the initiate does not *learn (mathein)* anything but *experiences or suffers (pathein)* something.
- 11 See, for example, Meister Eckhart Sermon 56 in (Eckhart 2009, pp. 292–94).
- 12 I have used here the German text in Wittgenstein (1993a), Vol. 1 and referred to the English translation in Wittgenstein (1961) which I have adapted.
- 13 Also, incidentally, using a cross-credal ontological view of what I called earlier *‘modern mysticism’* in his own analysis of the phenomenon.
- 14 Although, see the recent work of the Brazilian philosopher, Rodrigo Lima, who turns this standard interpretation on its head, one of whose essays is included in the present publication.
- 15 Of the other literature on Wittgenstein and *‘the mystical’* we can mention Sontag’s (2000) study. Of the writing on this subject his is the most intriguing, however the book assumes an understanding of what the author means by *‘the mystical’* or *‘the mystic’*. In so far as Sontag does define his terms he seems, like so many commentators, to be preoccupied with the mystical as an ontological cross-credal entity. An approach (which many of the philosophers of religion who tackle the question of Wittgenstein and *‘the mystical’* adopt) which I have not adopted here, the arguments for which can be found in full in (Tyler 2011). See also McGuinness (2002), Barrett (1991) and Weeks (1993) for some other alternative approaches.
- 16 On recent fascinating endeavours to reintroduce the *‘therapeutic’* into Wittgensteinian interpretation see especially Cavell (1976, 1979), Crary and Read (2000) and Genova (1995).
- 17 Written as a draft foreword to *Philosophische Bemerkungen* in 1930. See also Zettel 464: *‘The pedigree of psychological phenomena: I strive not for exactitude but an over-view (Übersichtlichkeit).’* (Wittgenstein 1967a, p. 83).
- 18 c.f. *Philosophical Investigations* § 435: *‘For nothing is concealed... for nothing is hidden...’*
- 19 C.f. *The Tractatus* 4.1212: *‘What can be shown, cannot be said.’*
- 20 A good overview on current philosophical assessments of Freud’s anthropology is found in (Tauber 2010).
- 21 I have amended the translation slightly.
- 22 Michael Eigen, mentioned earlier, writes well on Bion’s *‘mystical dimension’* in his 1998 work *The Psychoanalytic Mystic*.
- 23 C.f. *‘My whole tendency and I believe the tendency of all who ever tried to write or talk Ethics or Religion was to run against the boundaries of language. This running against the walls of our cage is perfectly, absolutely hopeless.’* Lecture on Ethics given in 1929 in (Wittgenstein 1993b, p. 44).

- 24 Might we perhaps say that the ‘symptom’ becomes the (post)-modern equivalent of the liturgical or scriptural symbol that carried the medieval speculative theologian towards the mystical theology? So, perhaps, is the contemporary speculative psychologist led to a mystical psychology?
- 25 Although, as someone with very little time for Christianity and monotheism generally, I hope the brilliant American will forgive my co-opting some of his methodology through my own ‘mystical’ lens.

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