

“TO BE GOD WITH GOD”: THE AUTOTHEISTIC SAYINGS OF THE MYSTICS

JAMES A. WISEMAN, O.S.B.

The Catholic University of America

WHEN THEOLOGIANs of the late 20th century reflect on the nature of their discipline and on the way it differs from the theology of the past, they frequently refer to contemporary theology's need to be in dialogue, not only with philosophy but with many other branches of learning.¹ Perhaps few would disagree with the general validity of that suggestion, but one might still legitimately ask just how such dialogue could prove valuable in particular cases. One of the main purposes of this article is to show how insights from contemporary psychiatry and psychology can help elucidate a phenomenon which theologians and ecclesiastics of the past tended to find at best puzzling, at worst heretical.

The phenomenon in question is the tendency of many mystical writers to use language that sounds pantheistic or, more properly speaking, autotheistic, i.e. language that bespeaks a strict identification of oneself with God. Throughout the history of the three great monotheistic religions that began in the Near East—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—such language has at times been a source of much tension and debate among the constituted religious authorities and the mystics. This identification of oneself with God has been relatively rare in Judaism, with its strong affirmation of the divine transcendence, but even here the phenomenon is not unknown. Abraham Abulafia (b. 1240), the outstanding representative of ecstatic kabbalism, once wrote that anyone who has truly felt the divine touch and perceived its nature “is no longer separated from his Master, and behold he is his Master and his Master is he; for he is so intimately adhering to Him that he cannot by any means be separated from Him, for he is He.”²

In Islam such claims have been more frequent, especially among the Sufis. The martyrdom of al-Hallaj in the tenth century was occasioned by his insistence that ultimately he and God were one. The tradition

¹ See, e.g., Karl Rahner, “Theology: II. History,” in *Sacramentum mundi: An Encyclopedia of Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970) 6:244; Walter Principe, C.S.B., *Thomas Aquinas' Spirituality* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1984) 8.

² Abraham Abulafia, *The Knowledge of the Messiah and the Meaning of the Redeemer*, Ms. Munich 285, quoted by Gershon G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1954) 140.

about his life includes the well-known account of his return to Baghdad after a year's stay in Mecca. On approaching the home of his former master, knocking at his door, and hearing from within the question "Who is there?", Hallaj is said to have uttered the sentence that has become the most famous of all Sufi claims: "I am the Absolute Truth," or, as it later came to be translated, "I am God."³ So, too, in his poetry he wrote such lines as the following:

I am He whom I love, and He whom I love is I;
We are two souls dwelling in one body.
If thou seest me, thou seest Him,
And if thou seest Him, thou seest us both.⁴

On the basis of such texts the judicial processes that led to his condemnation and death included the charge that "Hallaj has preached that he was God."⁵

Some Christian mystics have used similar language and have often provoked vigorous criticism of their words, whether during their lifetime or posthumously. To focus briefly on only a few authors of the late medieval period, one of the passages culled from Meister Eckhart's writings and condemned as heretical by Pope John XXII in the bull *In agro dominico* (March 27, 1329) was the following: "The tenth article. We shall all be transformed totally into God and changed into him. In the same way, when in the sacrament bread is changed into Christ's Body, I am so changed into him that he makes me his one existence, and not just similar. By the living God it is true that there is no distinction there."⁶ Thirty years later Jan van Ruusbroec, the most important of the medieval Flemish mystics, completed his treatise *A Mirror of Eternal Blessedness*, which includes an instructive passage on what he considered the most virulent heresy of his day. After first condemning those Christians who deny the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, he goes on:

There are other diabolical persons who say that they themselves are Christ or God, that their hand created heaven and earth, that heaven and earth and all things depend on their hand, and that they have been raised above all the sacraments of the holy Church, so that they neither need nor desire them. . . .

³ Quoted by Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1975) 86. The basic study of al-Hallaj by a Western scholar is Louis Massignon, *La passion d'Al-Hosayn ibn Mansour Al-Hallaj* (2 vols. Paris: P. Geuthner, 1922).

⁴ Quoted in R. A. Nicholson, *The Mystics of Islam* (London: G. Bell, 1914) 151.

⁵ Joseph Maréchal, S.J., "The Problem of Mystical Grace in Islam," in his *Studies in the Psychology of the Mystics* (New York: Benziger, 1927) 257.

⁶ Meister Eckhart: *The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, tr. and ed. Edmund Colledge, O.S.A., and Bernard McGinn (New York: Paulist, 1981) 78.

This is the greatest error and the most perverse and foolish heresy that has ever been heard. No one should give the blessed Sacrament to such persons, neither during their lifetime nor at the time of their death, nor should they be given a Christian burial. Rather, they should rightly be burned at the stake, for in God's eyes they are damned and belong in the pit of hell, far beneath all the devils.⁷

Ironically, for all of Ruusbroec's vehemence against such persons (whom he never names, but who may well have included Eckhart because of definite similarities between the above text and the 13th article of *In agro dominico*), his own works were to receive similar, posthumous criticism by Jean Gerson, chancellor of the University of Paris and the most influential theologian of the early 15th century. Gerson directed his attention to the third and last book of Ruusbroec's major treatise, *The Spiritual Espousals*, and quoted directly the passages which he considered most suspicious. The first is Ruusbroec's description of how the spirit of a true contemplative receives the divine resplendence, which is identical with God, "in the empty idleness of the spirit, where the spirit has lost itself in blissful love and receives God's resplendence without intermediary. The spirit ceaselessly becomes the very resplendence which it receives." Another text singled out by Gerson is that in which Ruusbroec claims that contemplatives "become one with that same light with which they see and which they see."⁸ While granting that the mystic's intentions may well have been orthodox and that such texts might be given acceptable interpretations by trained theologians, Gerson feared the deleterious effect that these passages would have on the many persons of all ages and conditions who were reading them.

During the same years that Ruusbroec was beginning his literary activity, an anonymous author in the Rhineland produced a treatise which has come to be known as *Sister Catherine*, from the title it bears in some manuscripts. Written in the Alemmanic dialect in the form of a dialogue between a mysterious woman and a priest confessor, the treatise includes the following exchange:

She says: "I am established in the pure Godhead, in which there never was form nor image."

He says: "Are you there permanently?"

⁷ In *John Ruusbroec: The Spiritual Espousals and Other Works*, tr. and ed. James A. Wiseman, O.S.B. (New York: Paulist, 1985) 229, 231. In subsequent citations this volume will be abbreviated *John Ruusbroec*.

⁸ A critical edition of the Latin documents in which Gerson expressed his misgivings can be found in André Combes, *Essai sur la critique de Ruysbroeck par Gerson 1: Introduction critique et dossier documentaire* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1945). The passages cited are on pp. 620-21.

She says: "Yes!"

He says: "Let me tell you, dear daughter, I am glad to hear it. Please continue."

She says: "Where I am, no creature may enter in its creatureliness."

He says: "Explain it better."

She says: "I will. I am where I was before I was created; that [place] is purely God and God. There are neither angels nor saints, nor choir, nor heaven, nor this nor that. . . . Realize that in God is nothing but God. You must also understand that no soul may come into God before it has become God as it was God before it was created."⁹

Not surprisingly, this passage has been considered heterodox by a number of 20th-century scholars like Gordon Leff and Michael Lerner,¹⁰ and yet it does not go beyond some of the more daring statements of another Catherine who has been canonized by the Church—Catherine of Genoa (1447–1510). Among the autotheistic sayings of this mystic are the following: "My *me* is God, nor do I recognize any other *me* except my God Himself," and "My being is God, not by some simple participation but by a true transformation of my being."¹¹

TRADITIONAL UNDERSTANDINGS OF GRACED UNION WITH GOD

Before we turn to the question of how contemporary psychiatry and psychology can help elucidate such language, it should be noted that Christian theology has from its very beginnings taken up the issue of how best to understand the reality of our participation in God's own life and the sense in which we might accordingly be said to be one with God. Already in the second century Clement of Alexandria was writing that "the Word of God became a human being in order that you might learn from a human being how a human being can become God,"¹² and in this he was followed by other Fathers of the Church in both East and West. The language of divinization (*theopoiēsis*, *theōsis*, *deificatio*), so prominent in many patristic texts, was retained by the medieval scholastics. St. Thomas, e.g., writes that "God alone deifies [us], by imparting a share in the divine nature through a certain participated likeness."¹³ Careful theologian that he was, Thomas emphasizes that this sharing in God's

⁹ Appendix to *Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher*, tr. and ed. Bernard McGinn et al. (New York: Paulist, 1986) 361.

¹⁰ Gordon Leff, *Heresy in the Later Middle Ages* (2 vols. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1967) 1:401–4; Michael Lerner, *The Heresy of the Free Spirit in the Later Middle Ages* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California, 1972) 215–21.

¹¹ *Vita mirabile e dottrina santa della Beata Caterina da Genova* (Genoa, 1551, 1847) 50b, 36b, quoted in Friedrich von Hügel, *The Mystical Element of Religion as Studied in Saint Catherine of Genoa and Her Friends* (2 vols. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1908) 1:265.

¹² *Protreptikos* 1.8.

¹³ *Sum. theol.* 1–2, q. 112, a. 1.

nature in no way nullifies the ontological distinction between creature and Creator: if Scripture calls us "gods" (Ps 82:6), this is true only by way of participation.¹⁴ Thomas' modern disciples have been equally insistent on maintaining this distinction in their studies of grace and mystical experience.¹⁵ Thus Ambroise Gardeil, who in the early part of this century wrote about mystical experience from a Thomistic perspective, was always careful to note that the graced person remains very much in the order of creation: "God cannot unite Himself to the substance of the soul to modify it in its very being in the way He modifies it through grace; otherwise the soul would be God."¹⁶

Not surprisingly, theologians and ecclesiastics, understandably desirous of maintaining the transcendence of God, have traditionally tended to be reserved, if not hostile, toward any text in mystical literature which appears to compromise that transcendence. Augustin Poulain, author of one of the longest and most widely used treatises on mystical prayer in the first half of this century, has almost nothing to say by way of clarifying such autotheistic texts as those quoted earlier in this article. He simply writes them off as "exaggerations" and is able to defend the authors only on the grounds that they usually came around to correcting what was, after all, only "a manner of speaking":

The mystics have fallen at times into exaggerations of speech by reason of their inability to describe all the sublimity of this participation. They speak of thinking by the eternal thought of God, loving by His infinite love, willing by His will. They seem to confuse the two natures, the divine and the human. They thus describe what *we believe* ourselves to feel; like the astronomers, they speak the language of appearances. As a rule, they finish by correcting any such exaggerations of language into which they have fallen.

So, too, they sometimes go so far as to say that they not only feel *union* with

¹⁴ Ibid. 1-2, q. 3, a. 1, ad 1.

¹⁵ In accordance with contemporary theological usage, the term "mystical" in this article refers to a profound, lived awareness of that saving union with God which is the lot of everyone in "the state of grace" but which is more or less hidden from those we do not call mystics. The Greek term *mystikos* in fact means "hidden, secret" and in early Christian usage referred to a God-given ability to discern Christ's "hidden" presence in the Hebrew Scriptures and the sacraments; it later came to refer as well to the subjective, personal experience of those gifted with such discernment. Obviously, there can be no utterly precise and unambiguous dividing line between "mystics" and "ordinary" Christians, but the basic distinction is the one alluded to by Ruusbroec in *The Spiritual Espousals*: "This meeting and unity which the loving spirit attains in God and possesses without intermediary must take place in the essential ground of our being. . . . All good persons possess this, but its nature remains hidden to them all their lives if they are not interiorly fervent and empty of all creatures" (*John Ruusbroec* 119).

¹⁶ Ambroise Gardeil, O.P., "La structure de la connaissance mystique," *Revue thomiste* 29 (1924) 120.

God in this state, but that there is *oneness with Him*. This is only a manner of speaking.¹⁷

But is this all that can usefully be said about such mystical texts? If one does theology without entering into dialogue with other sciences in the way that many contemporary theologians have urged, then perhaps nothing more is possible. After all, a theologian will rightly want to avoid even the appearance of impugning God's transcendence, so language which seems so blatantly to do just that will tend to be dismissed as an exaggeration, an embarrassment, a heresy. It is my contention, however, that responsible collaboration between theologians and practitioners of the psychological sciences can open up new ways of understanding the experience and language of the mystics. As W. W. Meissner, clinical professor of psychiatry at the Harvard Medical School, has written, "even the phenomena of the most exalted mystical states do not take place in vacuo but find their expression and their realization within the human psyche; further, they are substantially an expression of dynamic mental forces and functions."¹⁸ For this reason, if a theologian studies such states only with the tools of traditional rational psychology, the resulting analysis will tend to be much more static and impoverished than if the resources of the contemporary psychological sciences are also brought into play. It is not that what Poulain and Gardeil have to say is wrong: of course the mystic is not ontologically identical with God. But what further questions can be asked, and what further answers are available?

TWO SPECIFIC QUESTIONS TO BE ADDRESSED

In reading autotheistic passages in the writings of Eckhart, Ruusbroec, *Sister Catherine*, and Catherine of Genoa, as well as many similar texts throughout the corpus of Christian mystical literature, one feels called above all to seek the answer to two questions: (1) What is the genesis of these autotheistic claims? (2) Are there any reliable criteria by which their orthodoxy can be determined? The first question would not necessarily arise if we were dealing with mystical writers in the tradition of Vedantic monism. There, where it has traditionally been taught that Atman, the inmost self, is Brahman, the ultimate principle of the universe, the devout follower of this path will readily tend to express this belief in personal terms: not simply the famous "Thou art That" (*tat tvam asi*) but also "I am That." But in the Judeo-Christian tradition the

¹⁷ Augustin Poulain, S.J., *The Graces of Interior Prayer*, tr. from the sixth French edition by Leonora Smith (London: Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1912) 288 (=chap. 19, par. 14).

¹⁸ W. W. Meissner, S.J., M.D., *Psychoanalysis and Religious Experience* (New Haven: Yale University, 1984) 7. See also idem, *Life and Faith: Psychological Perspectives on Religious Experience* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University, 1987).

repeated insistence that God's ways are not our ways, the fear and trembling that often overcame the prophets when confronted with the Holy One, and the entire scriptural narrative of creation and redemption by a God "whose throne is in heaven" have tended to make any claims to identity with God suspect. Few today would go as far as Anders Nygren in asserting that the mystical element in the Christian tradition is simply alien to the New Testament, an unwarranted intrusion of Hellenism,¹⁹ but it seems undeniable that such statements as those quoted above from Eckhart, Ruusbroec, *Sister Catherine*, and Catherine of Genoa do not fall easily upon Christian ears. At best, they tend to provoke the response "And just what does *that* mean?" This is the first question—that of the genesis and meaning of such passages—to which this article will seek to give at least a partial answer.

The question of criteria must also be raised, not least because the kinds of statements under consideration have in fact met with such diverse judgments on the part of theologians and ecclesiastics. The condemnation of certain articles drawn from or summarizing Eckhart's thought might seem at first glance completely understandable. While he always denied any heretical intent and claimed that his accusers were obtuse and spiteful, he did himself deplore the condemned articles "insofar as they could generate in the minds of the faithful a heretical opinion."²⁰ In our own time there seems to be a growing consensus that the condemnation was at least in part unsound. Scholars like Hugo Rahner, Kurt Ruh, and Bernard McGinn have demonstrated continuities in Eckhart's thought with much in the earlier tradition (especially the tradition of Christian Platonism), and the general chapter of the Order of Preachers in August 1986 formally petitioned the Holy See to declare his works to be "an expression of authentic Christian mysticism and trustworthy guides to Christian life according to the Gospel."²¹ There has been similar difference of opinion about the teaching of Ruusbroec. While Gerson's critique unquestionably had much to do with making that mystic's writings suspect in the French-speaking world for centuries, Louis Cognet, the great 20th-century French historian of spirituality, considered Ruusbroec's work to be "one of the most exceptional achievements that

¹⁹ Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953). The original Swedish version was published in two parts, 1930 and 1936.

²⁰ *In agro dominico*, in *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons* 81.

²¹ Hugo Rahner, "Die Gottesgeburt: Die Lehre der Kirchenväter von der Geburt Christi aus dem Herzen der Kirche und der Gläubigen," in his *Symbole der Kirche* (Salzburg: Müller, 1964) 13–87; Kurt Ruh, *Meister Eckhart: Theologe, Prediger, Mystiker* (Munich: Beck, 1985); Bernard McGinn, "Theological Summary," in *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons* 24–61. On the request of the Dominican general chapter, see Peter Hebblethwaite, "Eckhart No Heretic after All?" *National Catholic Reporter*, Aug. 15, 1986, 1.

Western mysticism has produced."²² The fact that the Vatican in 1909 declared Ruusbroec a *beatus* is another indication that Gerson's reservations have not been universally shared. So, too, in the case of the treatise *Sister Catherine*, there has been a marked diversity of opinion. The negative judgment of Gordon Leff, who finds in the treatise "outright pantheism," has already been noted, but Bernard McGinn suggests that the work, while containing many of the "daring ideas and formulations of Meister Eckhart," should not be dismissed as clearly heretical.²³

Here, then, arises our second question: Are there any criteria which would allow one to determine the orthodoxy or heterodoxy of statements all of which claim some kind of personal identity with God? Can Eckhart rightly be considered heretical for claiming that "I am so changed into him [God] that he makes me his one existence, and not just similar" when Catherine of Genoa was canonized a saint even though she uttered the equally bold claim "My *me* is God"? Is there any essential difference between Blessed Jan van Ruusbroec's assertion that for a true contemplative "to comprehend and understand God as he is in himself . . . is to be God with God, without intermediary or any element of otherness"²⁴ and the statement in *Sister Catherine* that "no soul may come into God before it has become God as it was God before it was created"?

To answer both these questions fully—how such statements come to arise within Christian mystical literature, and how one is to judge their orthodoxy—would require a multivolume study. Among much else, it would call for a thorough investigation of the earliest manifestations of autotheism among Christian authors, of the various currents both within and without the Christian tradition which influenced these writers, and of the various kinds of approbation or condemnation that have been directed at their works by popes, bishops, councils, theologians, and other mystics. This is not possible here. Nonetheless, what follows is meant to provide some useful hypotheses that could point the way toward a fully adequate response. This will involve looking with some care at the teaching about union with God provided by one of the mystics in question, Ruusbroec, and asking what light might be shed on this teaching by some of the most recent studies on the psychology of love. All this will lay the foundation for the promised hypotheses about why Christian mystics so often tend to speak of themselves as identical with God and how the reader of their works might separate authentic Christian doctrine from spurious teaching, wheat from chaff.

²² Louis Cognet, *Introduction aux mystiques rhéno-flamands* (Paris: Desclée, 1968) 281.

²³ Bernard McGinn, *Introduction to Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher* 14.

²⁴ *The Spiritual Espousals*, Bk. 3, in *John Ruusbroec* 146.

RUUSBROEC ON UNION WITH GOD

A number of reasons make it appropriate to select Jan van Ruusbroec for this kind of examination. Not only is he the most important of all the Flemish mystics, but he is generally regarded as one of the pre-eminent mystical writers within the entire Christian tradition. New editions of his works and recent studies of his teaching have been extending knowledge of this mystic beyond a narrow circle of specialists.²⁵ What, then, does this mystic say about the nature of union with God?

An important clue for the proper interpretation of Ruusbroec's claims about oneness with God appears in his treatise *A Mirror of Eternal Blessedness*, where he says: "Now whenever I write that we are one with God, this is to be understood as a oneness in love and not in being or nature, for God's being is uncreated and ours is created, so that God and creatures are immeasurably different."²⁶ This theme of union in love is also very pronounced in what is generally regarded as his major work, *The Spiritual Espousals*, built as it is around the Gospel image of Christ as the divine Bridegroom. As we follow this clue, i.e. examine carefully what Ruusbroec writes about encountering God in love, comparisons will be drawn with what psychologists of our own day have been writing about the nature of love, especially love between two human beings. The justification for this kind of comparison has been enunciated succinctly by the English theologian Rosemary Haughton in the final chapter of her book *Love*. After quoting a series of poetic passages dealing either with love of God or with love of a human being, she continues:

Whether in the anguish of parting, or in the discovery of a union which yet creates the self more perfectly, these lovers are clearly describing experiences that have the same human character. Whether the object be human or divine, if either is love, both are love. The same thing is going on in both cases. . . .

. . . There is a great deal of overlapping in the kinds of emotions and experiences that make up all the kinds of relationships mentioned in this book. What they have in common is this thing called love, and it has a constant quality which, when pointed out, can be recognized anywhere.²⁷

²⁵ A critical edition of Ruusbroec's works is appearing in the series *Corpus christianorum: Continuatio mediaevalis*, Vols. 101-10 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1988-); this edition includes not only the original Middle Dutch text but also the influential 16th-century Latin translation of Laurentius Surius and a modern English translation. The earlier-cited volume *John Ruusbroec* in the series *Classics of Western Spirituality* contains four of his major treatises. Important recent studies include Paul Mommaers and Norbert De Paepe, eds., *Jan van Ruusbroec: The Sources, Content, and Sequels of His Mysticism* (Louvain: Leuven University, 1984), and Louis Dupré, *The Common Life: The Origins of Trinitarian Mysticism and Its Development by Jan Ruusbroec* (New York: Crossroad, 1984).

²⁶ In *John Ruusbroec* 247.

²⁷ Rosemary Haughton, *Love* (London: C. A. Watts, 1970) 179-81.

"The Interior Life": Yearning for God

To turn to Ruusbroec's own description of the encounter in love between a human being and God, there are three basic phases. The first of these corresponds exactly to what is true of the course of any love: it begins with a quest, a search. This is portrayed above all in what Ruusbroec terms "het innighe leven," which could be literally translated "the interior life," provided that one bears in mind that the Middle Dutch word "innich" had definite connotations of "desiring" or "yearning." This phase of yearning for God, the divine Beloved, is powerfully described at many places in the Ruusbroeckian corpus. I simply note some of the relevant passages about "the interior life" in his major treatise, *The Spiritual Espousals*.

According to Ruusbroec's anthropology, influenced by that of Augustine, three levels are to be distinguished in the human person. The first is that of the "heart," including all that is corporeal, sensible, affective. In describing a religious person's encounter with Christ the Bridegroom on this level, Ruusbroec uses a number of images and similes to express the fervent agitation and yearning which can here occur. One such image is that of fire: "Interior fervor is a perceptible fire of love which God's Spirit has enkindled and fanned to a flame. Such fervor burns, drives, and urges a person from within in such a way that he does not know whence it comes or what is happening to him."²⁸ The same image is later used in conjunction with that of boiling water: "The interior fire of the Holy Spirit . . . drives, urges, and impels the heart and all the powers of the soul up to the boiling point, that is, up to the giving of thanks and praise to God in the way I have already described."²⁹ Again, Ruusbroec at times simply describes how a person overcome with longing for God will even desire to be freed from temporal existence:

Sometimes a person in this state falls into a restless longing and desires to be freed from the prison of this body in order to be united with the one whom he loves. He therefore opens his interior eyes and contemplates the heavenly palace full of glory and joy, where his Beloved is crowned in its midst. . . . This often causes him real tears and a great yearning.³⁰

The same intensity of yearning is to be found on the next level, that of the "higher powers" of the memory, understanding, and will. It is particularly in his treatment of the third of these powers that Ruusbroec again takes up the theme of love's yearning for God:

²⁸ *The Spiritual Espousals*, Bk. 2, pt. 2/3, in *John Ruusbroec* 79.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 81.

³⁰ *Ibid.* 86-87.

God wishes to be loved by us according to his nobility, and in this all spirits fail. Love thereby becomes devoid of particular form or measure, for no spirit knows how to accomplish this or bring it about, since the love of all spirits is finite. . . . For the enlightened reason it is a source of great delight and satisfaction that its God and its Beloved is so sublime and rich that he transcends all created powers and is loved as he deserves by no one except himself.³¹

Finally, at the level of our inmost being, where we are preserved from utter annihilation only because of the "essential" unity we have with God, Ruusbroec uses powerful images of hunger and struggle to depict the intensity of a lover's desire for the Beloved. This, he writes,

is an interior craving and striving on the part of the amorous power [the will] and of the created spirit to attain an uncreated good. Because the spirit desires to enjoy God and has been called and invited to this by him, it constantly wishes to fulfill this desire. Here begin an eternal craving and striving which can never be satisfied. . . .

In this storm of love two spirits struggle—the Spirit of God and our spirit. . . . Each demands of the other what it is, and each offers to the other and invites it to accept what it is. This makes these loving spirits lose themselves in one another. . . . In this way the spirit is consumed in the fire of love and enters so deeply into God's touch that it is overcome in all its striving and comes to nought in all its works.³²

If one keeps in mind Rosemary Haughton's observation that there is a constant quality in love, whether its object be human or divine, it should be obvious how this quality is manifested in what Ruusbroec calls "the interior life." The images of fire and storm that he uses to describe the yearning for God, the painful sense of being unable to love the Beloved as much as one feels called to do, the expressed willingness to die for love of the Beloved—such language can be found in the love literature of all ages and all cultures. Dante's yearning simply to behold the young Beatrice, as described in the opening pages of *La vita nuova*, is one obvious parallel to the kind of sentiments expressed in this part of *The Spiritual Espousals*. William Wordsworth's letters to his wife provide another, as when he writes: "How I long (again must I say) to be with thee; every hour of absence now is a grievous loss, because we have been parted sufficiently to feel how profoundly in soul and body we love each other."³³ There is scarcely need to belabor the obvious. As one scholar writes, "If the course of love, whether mystical or existential,

³¹ Ibid. 103–4.

³² Ibid. 114–15.

³³ William Wordsworth to Mary Wordsworth, June 3–4, 1812, in Beth Darlington, ed., *The Love Letters of William and Mary Wordsworth* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University, 1981) 229.

ends, ideally, in an encounter long desired, it always begins as a search."³⁴ This quest is clearly the first phase in what we could properly call Ruusbroec's phenomenology of mystical love.

"The Contemplative Life": To Be God with God

For our present purposes the next phase is the most important, because it is the one which has perennially elicited most suspicion toward the mystics. For Ruusbroec this phase occurs in what he terms "the contemplative life" and is characterized above all by a union so intimate that there seems to be no longer any distinction between oneself and God. One key text has already been quoted, from the introductory section to the third and final book of *The Spiritual Espousals*: "To comprehend and understand God as he is in himself, above and beyond all likenesses, is to be God with God, without intermediary or any element of otherness which could constitute an obstacle or impediment." Ruusbroec is aware how daring such words sound, for he warns that no one can understand them without having had the experience itself; he begs others "not to take offense at it but simply to let it be as it is." Elsewhere in this final book he focuses on a complementary aspect of this ultimate union, i.e. its utterly restful character:

All the richness which is in God by nature is something which we lovingly possess in God—and God in us—through the infinite love which is the Holy Spirit. In this love a person savors all that he can desire. By means of this love we have died to ourselves and through a loving immersion of ourselves have gone out into a state of darkness devoid of particular form. There the spirit is caught up in the embrace of the Holy Trinity and eternally abides within the superessential Unity in a state of rest and blissful enjoyment.³⁵

Here, too, the descriptions of identity with the Beloved and of resting blissfully in the Beloved's embrace find parallels in the expressions of love which human beings extend to one another. At first hearing it may indeed sound pantheistic to find Ruusbroec saying that the genuine contemplative is able "to be God with God," that such a person's spirit "ceaselessly becomes the very resplendence which it receives," and that contemplatives "are transformed and become one with that same light with which they see and which they see," but in the final analysis this is very much the language of love. Recent studies make this quite clear.

One of the most highly regarded of these was written by Willard Gaylin, a practicing psychiatrist and a cofounder of the Hastings Center,

³⁴ Ralph Harper, *Human Love: Existential and Mystical* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1966) 12.

³⁵ *The Spiritual Espousals*, Bk. 3, pt. 3, in *John Ruusbroec* 148.

an institute for research on ethical issues in the life sciences. In his recent book *Rediscovering Love* Dr. Gaylin summarized the results of years of study, reflection, and professional and personal experience. Among the capacities he has found essential in human love is a "capacity for fusion," that is "the merging of the self with another person or ideal, creating a fused identity."³⁶ Decades earlier Sigmund Freud had observed the same phenomenon, which he described in the following way: "At the height of being in love the boundary between the ego and the object threatens to melt away. . . . A man who is in love declares that 'I' and 'You' are one and is prepared to behave as if it were a fact."³⁷

If one reads carefully the actual accounts which some persons have written describing the intensity of their love for another, this element of fusion will often be found. Consider the following passage from a letter written toward the end of the 18th century by a woman named Mary Wollstonecraft, addressed to her beloved and occasioned by her observing their young daughter:

I have been playing and laughing with the little girl so long that I cannot take up my pen to address you without emotion. Pressing her to my bosom, she looked so like you . . . , I began to think that there was something in the assertion of man and wife being one—for you seemed to pervade my whole frame."³⁸

Closer to our own time is the account the columnist Sheila Graham wrote of her love for F. Scott Fitzgerald. She gives the following graphic description of her desire to be totally immersed in his being: "I looked into his face, searching it, trying to find its mystery, its wonder for me, and I said, almost prayerfully, 'If only I could walk into your eyes and close the lids behind me, and leave all the world outside.'³⁹

Equally significant are the expressions found in some well-known works of literature in which a lover declares an almost absolute sense of identity with his or her beloved. Perhaps the most striking is in the ninth chapter of *Wuthering Heights*, where Catherine describes to her nurse and confidante Nell her love for Heathcliff:

My great miseries in this world have been Heathcliff's miseries, and I watched

³⁶ Willard Gaylin, M.D., *Rediscovering Love* (New York: Viking, 1986) 100.

³⁷ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (Standard Edition, London: Hogarth, 1955) 21:64–65. Commenting on this passage, Gaylin (113) suggests that Freud was nevertheless unable "to accept fusion as a normal possibility" and consequently "never understood the nature of love."

³⁸ Mary Wollstonecraft to Gilbert Imlay, Sept. 23, 1794, in Antonia Fraser, ed., *Love Letters: An Anthology* (New York: Knopf, 1977) 181.

³⁹ Sheila Graham and Gerold Frank, *Beloved Infidel: The Education of a Woman* (New York: Bantam, 1959) 166.

and felt each from the beginning: my great thought in living is himself. If all else perished, and *he* remained, *I* should still continue to be; and if all else remained, and he were annihilated, the universe would turn to a mighty stranger: I should not seem part of it. . . . My love for Heathcliff resembles the eternal rocks beneath: a source of little visible delight, but necessary. Nelly, I *am* Heathcliff! He's always, always in my mind: not as pleasure, any more than I am always a pleasure to myself, but as my own being.⁴⁰

Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* likewise contains a passage which provides the clearest possible expression of a lover's sense of being somehow identical with the beloved, even though this very conversation between the characters Robert and Maria also includes his protest against her claim to such identity:

"Now, feel. I am thee and thou art me and all of one is the other. And I love thee, oh, I love thee so. Are we truly one? Canst thou not feel it?"

"Yes," he said. "It is true."

"And feel now. Thou hast no heart but mine."

"Nor any other legs, nor feet, nor [part] of the body."

"But we are different," she said. "I would have us exactly the same."

"You do not mean that."

"Yes I do. I do. That is a thing I had to tell thee."

"You do not mean that."

"Perhaps I do not," she said speaking softly with her lips against his shoulder. "But I wished to say it. Since we are different I am glad that thou art Roberto and I Maria. But if thou should ever wish to change I would be glad to change. I would be thee because I love thee so."⁴¹

In these texts from actual lovers as well as from well-known novels, there are truly striking parallels with the kinds of expressions found in the third book of Ruusbroec's *Spiritual Espousals*. Even as the mystic writes of a contemplative's experience of "loving immersion" in God, a similar sense of fusion is evident in Mary Wollstonecraft's assertion that her beloved "seemed to pervade my whole frame." Ruusbroec's claim that a contemplative will "be God with God" is mirrored in Catherine Earnshaw's lyrical outburst, "I *am* Heathcliff!", as well as in Maria's words to Robert, "I am thee and thou art me and all of one is the other. . . . Are we not truly one?" This is not to say that what Ruusbroec is describing is "nothing but" some kind of sublimation of love between the sexes, as a strict Freudian might claim, but the evident parallels in the language used do offer a far more accurate interpretation of the mystic's autotheistic texts than would be obtained by reading such passages as a literal avowal of *ontological* identity with the Godhead. Something that Simone

⁴⁰ Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights* (New York: Modern Library, n.d.) 94.

⁴¹ Ernest Hemingway, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (New York: Scribners, 1940) 262-63.

Weil once wrote to her spiritual mentor Fr. Perrin—for all its inadequacy as a complete criterion for interpreting mystical texts—comes close to the heart of the matter:

When genuine friends of God—such as was Eckhart to my way of thinking—repeat words they have heard in secret amidst the silence of the union of love, and these words are in disagreement with the teaching of the Church, it is simply that the language of the market place is not that of the nuptial chamber.⁴²

“The Common Life”: Love Reaching Out to Others

It might seem that with this keen sense of union, even identity, with the beloved, whether that be God or a human being, one has reached the ultimate goal of the course of love. In Ruusbroec’s terms such union is so ineffably “blissful” and “fathomless” that no further growth or development might seem possible. And indeed, if one were to read only his major treatise, *The Spiritual Espousals*, this does seem to be his message, for the final lines of that work speak of this union as “an eternal state of rest in a blissful embrace of loving immersion” and “that dark stillness in which all lovers lose their way.” This, and this alone, is what he urges the contemplative to pray for in his concluding sentence: “May the divine love grant us this, for it turns no beggar away. Amen. Amen.”

In the light of those concluding remarks it is especially significant that in his very next treatise, *The Sparkling Stone*, Ruusbroec made a major modification in his teaching about Christian perfection. Whereas the *Espousals* had spoken of only three “lives”—(1) the active, which he calls “the life of beginners” and which focuses on growth in the basic Christian virtues; (2) the interior, characterized by yearning for God; and (3) the contemplative, marked by the fulness of union described above—the later treatise speaks not of three but of four. The very first sentence of *The Sparkling Stone* reads: “A person who wishes to live in the most perfect state within the holy Church must be someone who is zealous and good, who is interiorly fervent and spiritual, who is lifted up to the contemplation of God, and who goes forth to all in common.”⁴³ The first three of these points clearly correspond to the three “lives” treated in the *Espousals*. That Ruusbroec adds the fourth point, about going forth to all in common, can only be interpreted as an implicit correction of the way he concluded the former treatise. In the concluding section of the *The Sparkling Stone* he spells out what he means by this “common life”:

A person who has been sent down by God from these heights into the world is

⁴² Simone Weil, “Letter IV: Spiritual Autobiography,” in *Waiting for God* (New York: Harper, 1951) 79.

⁴³ *The Sparkling Stone*, Introduction, in *John Ruusbroec* 155.

full of truth and rich in all the virtues. He seeks nothing of his own but only the glory of the one who sent him. . . . He will therefore always flow forth to all who need him, for the living spring of the Holy Spirit is so rich that it can never be drained dry. Such a person is a living and willing instrument of God with which God accomplishes what he wishes in the way he wishes. Such a person . . . stands ready and willing to do all that God commands and is strong and courageous in suffering and enduring all that God sends him. He therefore leads a common life, for he is equally ready for contemplation or for action and is perfect in both.⁴⁴

This is not to imply that there is nothing in *The Spiritual Espousals* about this ideal of uniting contemplation and action. Especially in Book 2 of that treatise, Ruusbroec has much to say about this ideal as comprising the very apex of the interior life, as when he writes that a truly righteous person not only strives toward God through fervent activity and “enters into God with his blissful inclination toward eternal rest,” but also “goes out to creatures in virtue and righteousness through a love which is common to all.” This, he continues, “is the highest point of the interior life. Anyone who does not possess both rest and activity in one and the same exercise has not attained this righteousness.”⁴⁵ Nevertheless, when Ruusbroec proceeds to describe the contemplative life in Book 3 of the same treatise, there is no mention of this same ideal; the contemplative life there seems quite removed from any involvement with other human beings, something of a Plotinian flight of “the alone to the Alone.” Hence the significance of the correction made in the subsequent treatise, where the full flowering of the contemplative life is shown explicitly to reside in this going out to all in common, in being “equally ready for contemplation or for action and . . . perfect in both.”

This third and final phase of the course of love can likewise be found in the writings of many who have experienced and/or reflected upon love for another human being. One of the major themes in Erich Fromm’s *The Art of Loving* is that an attachment to one person that is indifferent to others cannot truly be called love, but is merely a symbiotic attachment or an enlarged egotism: “One can often find two people ‘in love’ with each other who feel no love for anybody else. Their love is, in fact, an egotism à deux.”⁴⁶ This is also a point made often and emphatically by Evelyn and James Whitehead in their important book *Marrying Well*. In a section entitled “Generativity beyond Parenthood” they write: “Whether with children or without, our marriage is generative to the extent that we are willing to give ourselves to persons and interests that

⁴⁴ Ibid. 184.

⁴⁵ *The Spiritual Espousals*, Bk. 2, pt. 4, in *John Ruusbroec* 135.

⁴⁶ Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving* (New York: Harper & Row, 1956) 55.

go beyond ourselves."⁴⁷ Later in their book, when treating "The Limits of the Nuclear Family," they give further details about what this movement outward entails:

As spouses, as parents, we pour ourselves out for people and concerns that go beyond us. We find ourselves challenged to contribute to projects, the benefits of which are not chiefly ours to enjoy. . . . We come to care for a world beyond us, a future in which we shall not directly share. . . . And, as we become more broadly generative, even our experience of "us" is expanded. More than our immediate family, more than those "like me" as white, or Catholic, or middle-class, "us" comes to mean all of us. This expanded awareness of who is "like me" will have differing results. . . . In every case it is an expansion of our concern beyond ourselves, and even our nuclear family, to care for others and the future.⁴⁸

The same point was made more succinctly and with memorable imagery in a letter which Professor Gopal Puri sent from Karachi to his fiancée Kailash in 1942: "Won't you agree this is the test of our love? Love does not lie only in gazing towards each other, but it is looking into our future together with four eyes."⁴⁹ Here, then, just as in the first two phases—yearning for God and the experience of union, even identity, with God—there is a marked correspondence between the teaching and experience of the mystic Ruusbroec and that of men and women who have written of love for another human being. In both cases a love which does not reach outward in what Ruusbroec calls "the common life" is seriously deficient and does not really deserve the name of love.

CONCLUDING HYPOTHESES

Now that these correspondences have been traced, we can focus directly on suggesting answers to our two major questions: How best explain the genesis of claims to identity with God in the writings of some Christian mystics, and how best judge the soundness of such claims, the orthodoxy of such language? From all that was written above about the linguistic similarity between the autotheistic language of Ruusbroec and the language of human lovers who claim to "be" the one whom they love, it seems reasonable to accept as a working hypothesis the conclusion that the mystics' autotheistic claims can often be best explained as their attempts to put into words the intense experience of loving union with God which they have undergone, since, as psychiatrists like Freud and Gaylin have indicated, a sense of fusion or "merging of the self with another person or ideal, creating a fused identity," tends to be an integral

⁴⁷ Evelyn Eaton Whitehead and James D. Whitehead, *Marrying Well: Stages on the Journey of Christian Marriage* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Image Books, 1983) 239.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 342.

⁴⁹ Gopal Puri to Kailash Puri, Aug. 15, 1942, in Fraser, *Love Letters* 153.

aspect of all love on the part of a human being.

As a way of providing further verification of this hypothesis, it is instructive to turn briefly to the life and writings of the Gerson who was Ruusbroec's most persistent critic. For centuries scholars assumed that Gerson's position about the nature of mysticism remained virtually the same throughout his life. Accordingly, the treatise *De mystica theologia* (whose first edition appeared in 1408) and the two *Epistolae ad Bartholomaeum* (containing his critique of Ruusbroec and dating from the same first decade of the 15th century) have regularly been taken to represent Gerson's final position. In 1963-64, however, André Combes of the Pontifical Lateran University published a meticulously researched study of the evolution of Gerson's mystical theology which shows that at the beginning of October 1425, less than four years before his death, Gerson underwent a mystical experience which led him to alter profoundly the positions he had taken earlier and move close to the kind of expression he had once castigated in Ruusbroec. Combes writes:

No longer fearing either an excess in his language nor an aberration in his thought, nothing seemed to him adequate for expressing this mystical union in which the Holy Spirit plays the same role as in the heart of the Trinity. Union? That was the least that one might say. Unity? Yes indeed! In fact, one day, when he in his turn had been carried away by the desire to say too much in order to have his reader comprehend just enough, this man who had formerly written the *Epistolae ad Bartholomaeum*—and might he not at times have laughed at himself?—went so far as to speak of identity.⁵⁰

Gerson would now even write of a *defectio* of love on the part of the human partner, not because mystical union is loveless but because of his experience that the initiative comes entirely from the divine Spouse and is perceived by the mystic as an infusion (*illapsum*). Thus Gerson says in his *Anagogicum de verbo et hymno gloriae* (1428) that we are made righteous in our human spirit "through the infusion of the Holy Spirit, who is poured forth into our heart," and that at length one might no longer know God through one's own powers, only to be "raised up by the spirit of Christ through the infusion of love (*per dilectionis illapsum*)."⁵¹ The love thus infused is, for Gerson, the Holy Spirit, and it was his experience of this love that led him in the final four years of his life to

⁵⁰ André Combes, *La théologie mystique de Gerson: Profil de son évolution* (2 vols. Paris: Desclée, 1963-64) 2:611. For an example of Gerson's speaking of identity with God, see his *Collectorium*, tract. 12, where he says that one's own Godlike spirit (*spiritus deiformis*) can govern one's thoughts and affections "in place of the Holy Spirit, having become identical with him (*vice Sancti Spiritus, factus idem cum eo*), for 'whoever is united with God is one spirit' (1 Cor 6.17)" (in Combes 2:611).

⁵¹ Jean Gerson, *Anagogicum 2* (ibid. 2:634-35).

begin using terminology which signified not only union with God, but unity and even identity. The fact that this well-trained and highly regarded theologian, who for the greater part of his scholarly career had not only avoided such terminology but criticized its use by others, took it up himself after he had undergone an experience of mystical conversion lends great weight to the first hypothesis advanced in this article: *the autotheistic expressions of Christian mystics might best be understood as attempts to enunciate their experience of loving union with God.*⁵²

There remains the further question of how one might judge the soundness of any such expression. If the autotheistic passages are considered expressions of that "capacity for fusion" which scholars like Gaylin consider integral to all genuine love, does that mean that all such passages in Christian mystical literature are equally valid? If not, what is to differentiate them one from another? If Gaylin's study of the nature of human love was helpful in addressing the question of the genesis of autotheistic expressions in the mystics, another recent work about love will be used in exploring this latter question. In 1975 the psychiatrist Stanton Peele published *Love and Addiction*,⁵³ in which he pointed out that much of what is commonly called love is in fact far closer to that kind of addiction which is usually associated with alcohol or other drugs. Although Peele's work—especially his still more recent book *The Meaning of Addiction*—has been criticized by some of his peers as being too polemical toward those who use a biological model in understanding and treating addiction,⁵⁴ the earlier book has been generally well received as containing many important insights about spurious forms of love.

As an introduction to Peele's approach, let us consider some of the examples of human love I used earlier to illustrate the sense of fusion or identity with the beloved. Sheila Graham wrote of desiring to "walk into your [Fitzgerald's] eyes and close the lids behind me, and leave all the world outside." One hardly has to know the sad way in which this relationship eventually ended to sense that here was something radically unhealthy. This desire to lose oneself utterly in another, to the exclusion of everyone and everything else, is a vivid illustration of what Peele means by addiction, i.e. a state in which "a person's attachment to a sensation, an object, or another person is such as to lessen his apprecia-

⁵² This is not to deny that other factors may give rise to such expressions. In certain mystics other factors may well predominate. The relative importance of such factors could be determined only on a case-by-case basis.

⁵³ New York: Taplinger, 1975.

⁵⁴ See, e.g., Ovide Pomerleau's review of *The Meaning of Addiction* (Lexington, Mass.: Heath, 1985) in *Contemporary Psychology* 31 (1986) 505-6, in which he charges Peele with too sharply dichotomizing psychosocial and biological approaches to addiction.

tion of and ability to deal with other things in his environment, or in himself, so that he has become increasingly dependent on that experience as his only source of gratification."⁵⁵ In the realm of fiction one perceives the same unhealthy exclusion in the way Catherine Earnshaw experiences her relationship to Heathcliff—another “great love” doomed to futility from the start.

If we turn now to re-examine Ruusbroec’s criticism of those who were claiming personal identity with God, the focus of his attack appears to be precisely this kind of addictive attachment to a sensation that not only lessens but practically obliterates concern for anything else in one’s environment. In one of his final treatises, *The Little Book of Clarification*, Ruusbroec characterizes his opponents in the following way:

These persons have gone astray into the empty and blind simplicity of their own being. . . . At the highest point of their introversion they feel nothing but the simplicity of their own being, dependent upon God’s being. They take this undifferentiated simplicity which they possess to be God himself, because they find natural rest in it. They accordingly think that they themselves are God in the ground of their simple oneness, for they lack true faith, hope, and love. Because of this bare emptiness which they experience and possess, they claim to be without knowledge and love and to be exempt from the virtues. . . . They ignore all the sacraments, all the virtues, and all the practices of the holy Church, for they think they have no need of these, believing that they have passed beyond them all.⁵⁶

In the more technical language of theology, such persons were not only pantheists or autotheists (in expression) but also quietists (in behavior). One of the principal suggestions of this article is that the two tendencies, far from being disparate, may in fact be intimately related, inasmuch as the quietism—the extreme introversion, the complacency in “natural rest” that will not be disturbed by involvement with other persons or with liturgical practices—seems to grow out of a sense of union with God so intimate that those experiencing it “accordingly think that they themselves are God in the ground of their simple oneness.” If this is true, then one cannot judge the orthodoxy of a Christian mystic simply by examining what he or she says about union with God. The key distinction is not whether one says “My *me* is God” instead of “merely” saying “I *feel* that my *me* is God.” In the third book of *The Spiritual Espousals* Ruusbroec does at times make the latter kind of statement, writing, e.g., that the true contemplative “*feels* and finds himself to be nothing other than the same light with which he sees.”⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Peele, *Love and Addiction* 61.

⁵⁶ *The Little Book of Clarification*, pt. 1, sec. B, in *John Ruusbroec* 254.

⁵⁷ *The Spiritual Espousals*, Bk. 3, pt. 1, in *John Ruusbroec* 147; emphasis mine.

In one sense a formulation of this sort (and there are several others in the same third book of the *Espousals*) might seem to provide adequate defense against the objections Gerson later raised against Ruusbroec. After all, one might argue, the Parisian chancellor was quoting snippets out of context and ignoring other statements which modified what would otherwise appear as outright autotheism. But in another, more important sense Gerson was correct in sensing that something was amiss here, even though he was not aware that Ruusbroec himself had made the necessary correction in his next treatise, *The Sparkling Stone*. The problem at the end of the *Espousals* is not that the mystic says that the true contemplative is able "to be God with God," but that he does *not* at that point say that the person enjoying this state of union must not simply rest in it but must allow that blissful enjoyment to "flow forth to all who need him," being "equally ready for contemplation or for action and . . . perfect in both."⁵⁸ But if one looks at his later writings on "the common life" and also at his own manner of life—at the way he was at the disposal of the many visitors who came to seek his advice at his monastery at Groenendaal, at the way he served his religious community for many years as its prior and took upon himself many of the most unpleasant and laborious tasks, at the care with which he composed treatises of spiritual direction for particular persons or groups within the Church—then one can confidently say that his orthopraxis was a strong warrant for the orthodoxy of even his most daring expressions about union with God. One can say the same about Catherine of Genoa, who knew that claiming "My *me* is God" in no way exempted her from the years of humble service she provided for the sick at the hospital of Pammatone.

This, then, seems the most basic criterion for evaluating the autotheistic statements of Christian mystics. The intensity of the union they experience with God will indeed often lead to the kind of bold claims I have discussed, claims which seem altogether in accord with the very nature of love as that has been studied by scholars in our own time. *The crucial question is whether one remains fixated in that phase of love or allows the love itself to move outward to others.* Psychologist Evelyn Whitehead has encapsulated this criterion of orthopraxis:

A love that is not for more than itself will die—the wisdom of Christian tradition and the best we know from psychology both assure us of this truth. It is often

⁵⁸ *The Sparkling Stone*, Conclusion, in *John Ruusbroec* 184.

very appropriate at the early stages of a relationship that the energy of romance and infatuation exclude the larger world from our vision. But over the long haul an intimate relationship . . . which doesn't reach outward will stagnate.⁵⁹

The same criterion was also once stated still more succinctly: "By their fruits you shall know them."

⁵⁹ Evelyn Whitehead and James Whitehead, "Christian Marriage," *U.S. Catholic* 47, no. 6 (June 1982) 9.