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## The Language of Inner Experience in Christian Mysticism

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**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

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The Language of Inner Experience in Christian Mysticism

"Inner experience" at first sounds like a simple enough term, but the more we think about it, the more complex the linguistic and philosophical problems it raises.<sup>1</sup> Anyone who thinks that "experience" has a commonly agreed-on definition should take a look at the way the word has been used in the study of mysticism, let alone in wider philosophical discourse. When we talk about *inner* experience, furthermore, we refer not only to how something is perceived by a subject, but we also seem to suggest that this perception takes place in the absence of observable external sensations or testable stimuli. Recent philosophical and theological reflection on the nature of experience, especially experience of God, emphasizes how important, yet problematic, the issue remains.<sup>2</sup>

The nature of inner experience, specifically the kind of experience many mystics describe, is not what I want to analyze here—if, indeed, it would be possible to say anything meaningful on such a topic in a short compass. What I want to investigate, if only in summary fashion, are the modes of communicating what the verbal marker "inner experience" points to, that is, the ways in which mystics have presented their teachings about God's action in the transformation of consciousness, whether they put it in autobiographical or in more objective forms. Briefly, I want to sketch how mystics' accounts of inner "experience" of God (in itself an abstraction) become concrete and communicable by being fixed within modes of symbolic discourse that are presented as forms of affective intentionality. In other words, insofar as mystical self-consciousness seeks to constitute itself as communicable, if always imperfectly, to others, it often does so by utilizing language that tries to fuse feeling and knowing—*amor ipse intellectus est*, as a well-known expression of medieval Latin Christian mysticism puts it.<sup>3</sup>

There are many particular forms of such discourse created by Christian mystics, in the manner of individual languages like English, German, or Yiddish. But there are also language families and branches, that is, broader groups such as the Indo-European family, and the Germanic branch of this. In the history of Christian mysticism, one of the most important branches of discourse about inner transformation has been the language of the spiritual senses. The purpose of this essay is to investigate aspects of how this language came to be used, modified, and criticized.<sup>4</sup> **[End Page 156]**

## Origen and Gregory of Nyssa

At the beginning of his homilies on the Song of Songs, one of the masterpieces of patristic mysticism, Gregory of Nyssa gives advice to the soul seeking God that seems paradoxical to say the least.<sup>5</sup> According to Gregory, in order to master the Song of Songs, the textbook of mysticism, the soul must undergo three inner transformations. The first, moral transformation through following the teaching laid down in the Bible and epitomized in the book of Proverbs, is preliminary. Reading the Song, however, effects two stranger changes. The soul who is addressed as "son" in Proverbs must become the female bride of the Song, just as the feminine Divine Wisdom of Proverbs 8 transmutes into the male Bridegroom, that is, Jesus, the Incarnate Word. This gender reversal is accompanied by a mutation in the language of passion found in the Song. Unrestrained desire is reprehensible in human eros, Gregory holds, but "passion for bodiless things is passionless," so we should love as strongly and as madly as possible in this arena. Gregory explains:

The most acute physical pleasure (I mean erotic passion) is used as a symbol in the exposition of these teachings [i.e., in the Song]. It teaches us the need for the soul to reach out to the divine nature's invisible beauty and to love it as much as the body is inclined to love what is akin to itself. The soul must transform passion into passionlessness so that when every corporeal affection has been quenched...

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BERNARD MCGINN

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