

**The making of an aesthetic and ineffable ‘mysticism’
in Victorian poetry and poetics**

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The candidate confirms that the work submitted is her own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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ABSTRACT

Relying on a constructivist framework of analysis drawn from the disciplines of Philosophy, Religious Studies, and History, this thesis examines the contribution of Victorian poetry and poetic theory to the modern construction of ‘mysticism’ as an aesthetic and ineffable category. My analysis is guided by the Foucaultian notion that any definition of a given concept reflects issues of authority, which I use to propose that, in the increasingly secularized milieu of nineteenth-century culture, many Victorian intellectuals sought to assert the ineffability and aesthetic character of mysticism as part of a larger nineteenth-century search for an authoritative place for poetry. With a special focus on the writings of Thomas Carlyle and James Thomson (B. V.), the problematization of mysticism I offer here spans the period between the mid-1820s and 1880s, a relatively broad context that allows me to draw connections among various poets, critics and their works, and weave these into a readable narrative where mysticism figures as a key player in the collective aesthetic consciousness of an age.

Chapter I of this thesis establishes the conceptual and theoretical parameters of the debate informing the constructivist method I employ, with the aim of offering a critique of previous literary scholarship on Victorian poetry that adopts mysticism as a primary analytic category. I argue that such scholarship largely bases its analysis on essentialist definitions, and often ends up being ideologically exclusionary. Chapter II provides a detailed look at the conceptual overlap between mysticism and poetry in both Modernist and Victorian discourse for the purpose of establishing that modern mysticism is fundamentally a poetic and aesthetic construct, one that was shaped by the nineteenth-century discourse on poetry and art. Situating Carlyle’s discourse on mysticism within that of other contemporary figures, Chapter III examines his leading role in the nineteenth-century conceptual transformation of ‘mysticism’ from a term that was pejoratively used to signify ‘unintelligibility’ to one that was used to denote the transcendental legitimacy of poetry. Chapter IV traces Thomson’s career-long engagement with mysticism along his religious and intellectual development from a theist to a self-proclaimed atheist, arguing that it reflects on a larger scale the history of mysticism’s development in the second half of the Victorian age: how its Romantic appropriation in the mid-nineteenth century was especially freighted with religious meanings, and how this would gradually change at the turn of the century, where it would become more open to secular and naturalistic interpretations.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In *T. S. Eliot: Mystic, Son and Lover*, Donald Childs argues that ‘in response to the scientific, materialist rationalism of the nineteenth century, the variety of phenomena gathered into the term “mysticism” at the beginning of the twentieth century offered an alternative epistemology – opposing the material with the spiritual, the intellectual with the intuitive, the external with the internal’. ‘A tide of mysticism’, Childs states, ‘was coming in after the ebbing of Arnold’s Sea of Faith’, and the century was witnessing a general diffusion of the taste for it: as ‘an alternative epistemology’, it appealed to many philosophers, including Henri Bergson and William James; to several Roman Catholic and Anglican theologians; and to a wide variety of poets, including T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, William Butler Yeats, the Georgian poet Rupert Brooke, as well as the Imagists Richard Aldington and John Gould Fletcher. According to Childs, ‘mystical experience seems as important to these ostensible modern poets as it was to such romantic precursors as Wordsworth and Shelley’.¹ A somewhat similar view has been articulated in *The Beginning and End of ‘Religion’* by religious historian Nicholas Lash, whose genealogical account of the term ‘mysticism’ suggests that ‘the word flared up’ at the onset of the seventeenth century, and ‘flourished for little more than half a century, then died away’ until the early modernist period, where ‘it became the focus of intense discussion’.² The similarity between the two views lies in the fact that both Childs and Lash construe most of the nineteenth century as constituting a period marked by a discontinuity in the kind of intellectual fervour for mysticism that characterized the periods that both predate and follow it. The only difference is that Childs frames this gap along the customary temporal bounds of the Victorian era, whereas Lash extends its beginning back to the second half of the seventeenth century.

Donald Childs’s argument demonstrates, in fact, the traditional critical trend in Modernist studies that has been increasingly coming under question for its conception of Modernism as representing an essential break from Victorianism. A growing body of scholarship in Victorian and Modernist Studies alike is now drawing attention to

¹ Donald J. Childs, *T. S. Eliot: Mystic, Son and Lover* (London: Bloomsbury, 1997), pp. 2-4.

² Nicholas Lash, *The Beginning and the End of ‘Religion’* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 167.

how such a view has ‘fetishized’ an ‘ideology of rupture and opposition’ in its depiction of the cultural and aesthetic transition between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. With its aim to ‘suture’ the long-held ‘Victorian/Modernist divide’, this revisionary perspective particularly faults the traditional view for ‘overemphasizing’ Modernist ‘innovation in ways that elide the contributions of Victorian predecessors’.³ As Leigh Schmidt has proposed in ‘The Making of Modern “Mysticism”’, moreover, the tendency to underestimate the cultural legacies of the nineteenth century to the twentieth is also a problem in the historicist strand in Religious Studies. It can be particularly felt in the cultural constructivist works of religious scholars investigating the historical development of mysticism as a modern construct, of which Nicholas Lash’s analysis is one example. Reviewing this literature, Schmidt points out that such studies have overwhelmingly focused on the cultural dynamics of the ‘boom’ of academic and popular interest in mysticism at the beginning of the twentieth century, rarely ‘taking seriously’ its indebtedness to the religious and intellectual world of the preceding era.⁴ This is to say that the majority of religious scholars in this line of research have done one of two things: they have either remained silent on the Victorians’ role in the modern construction of the mystical, implying its insignificance; or they have declared, as Lash has done, that the Western interest in mysticism – which can be traced back to an early period in its intellectual history – laid dormant during the nineteenth century, until its revival at the hands of Modernist philosophers, religionists and aesthetes.

But any serious estimation of the nineteenth-century’s relationship to

³ Lisi Schoenbach, *Pragmatic Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. xiv; ‘Call for Papers: Making It New: Victorian and Modernist Literature and Periodicals 1875-1935 Conference, 28 February 2015, Leicester, United Kingdom’, in *British Association for Modernist Studies*, ed. by Deborah Mutch, (De Montfort University, 15 Oct 2014) <<http://bams.ac.uk>> [accessed 10 February 2016]; and ‘Call for Papers: Beyond the Victorian and Modernist Divide Conference, 27-28 March 2014, Normandy, France’, in *British Association for Modernist Studies*, ed. by Anne Besnault-Levita and Anne-Florence Gillard Estrada, (Rouen University, 20 June 2013) <<http://bams.ac.uk>> [accessed 10 February 2016]. For other examples that belong to this literature, see Jessica R. Feldman, *Victorian Modernism: Pragmatism and the Varieties of Aesthetic Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Adam Piette, ‘Modernist Victorianism’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Poetry*, ed. by Matthew Bevis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 273-90; H. M. Dalesky, ‘Thomas Hardy: A Victorian Modernist?’, in *The Challenge of Periodization: Old Paradigms and New Perspectives*, ed. by Lawrence Besserman (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 179-96; Elizabeth Miller, *Slow Print: Literary Radicalism and Late Victorian Print Culture* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), p. 7; and ‘Call for Papers: The Oak and the Acorns: Recovering the Hidden Carlyle Conference, 6-8 July 2016, Oxford, United Kingdom’, in *British Association for Modernist Studies*, ed. by Marylu Hill and Paul E. Kerry, (TORCH, 6 January 2016) <<http://bams.ac.uk>> [accessed 10 February 2016]

⁴ Leigh Schmidt, ‘The Making of Modern “Mysticism”’, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 71.2 (2003), 273-302 (p. 273, 275), hereafter ‘MMM’.

mysticism would reveal that, despite the fact that the mystical seemed anathema to some of the dominant modes of Victorian thought and culture, the century proved to be one of the most fertile grounds in which an interest in mysticism would take root and flourish. This is why a writer in *The Fortnightly Review* would state in 1884 that ‘I shall seem to many readers to utter a paradox if I say that one of the most remarkable notes of this nineteenth century is its mysticism’.⁵ Remarkable it was, indeed, and it resounded far and wide. Be it in the most intimate (or even casual) correspondences of the period’s writers, or their more rigorous intellectual expositions, one can hardly miss the imprint of an interest in mysticism that had preoccupied some of the most eminent minds of the century. It is there, for instance, in the ‘ecstasies’ reported by Elizabeth Barrett Browning upon receiving her first letter from the ‘king of the mystics’, the title she gave to Robert Browning, who, on his part, would later attest to ‘the mystical part’ of his love for her in one of their famous letters of courtship.⁶ It is also there in reports relating to ‘the vexed question of the Carlyle domestic relations’, which mention how Browning – siding with Thomas Carlyle – was often delighted to tell the ‘little anecdote’ of ‘the deep offence he had given Mrs. Carlyle’ for ‘absently’ placing a ‘smoking kettle’ on her new hearth-rug: the embarrassing incident, we are told, occurred while he was ‘excitedly explaining some point of mystical philosophy’.⁷ Intimations of the Victorian preoccupation with mysticism are likewise there in the ‘The Holy Grail’ Idyll (1869) of Lord Alfred Tennyson, who, we have it on record, had ‘dwelt on the mystical treatment of every part of his subject’ while discussing the poem on more than one occasion.⁸ This preoccupation is also why even a philosopher like John Stuart Mill, so

⁵ W. S. Lilly, ‘Modern Mysticism’, *Fortnightly Review*, 36 (1 September 1884), 292-308 (p. 292).

⁶ Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning: Edited with Biographical Additions*, ed. by Frederic G. Kenyon, 2 vols (London: Macmillan, 1897), I, p. 236; and Robert Browning, *The Love-Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett*, ed. by V. E. Stack (Heinemann: London, 1969), p. 73. See also my reference to two of Thomas Carlyle’s love letters to his wife on p. 103.

⁷ Alexandra Sutherland Orr, *Life and Letters of Robert Browning*, 2 vols (New York: Houghton, Mifflin, 1891), II, p. 531; Anne Ritchie, *Records of Tennyson, Ruskin, Browning* (New York: Harpers & Brothers, 1893), pp. 156-7; G. K. Chesterton, *English Men of Letters: Robert Browning* (London: Macmillan, 1919), pp. 26-27; Rosaline Orme Masson, *Poets, Patriots, and Lovers: Sketches and Memories of Famous People* (London: James Clarke, 1933), p. 30; and Robert Browning, *More Than Friend: The Letters of Robert Browning to Katharine De Kay Bronson* (Waco, TX: Armstrong Browning Library of Baylor University, 1985), pp. 168-9. For an account of how Browning’s relation to Jane Welsh Carlyle was never ‘a happy one’, which also mentions this incident, see Charles Richard Sanders, ‘The Carlyle-Browning Correspondence and Relationship’, *The Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester*, 57.1 (autumn 1974), 213-46 (pp. 223-5).

⁸ On one occasion, as mentioned in a report by Hallam Tennyson (part of which I quote above), we learn that Tennyson indulged in a long discussion on the mysticism of the poem, pointing out ‘the

closely associated with the positivist utilitarianism of the century, would earn the reputation of being ‘a mystic’.⁹

This thesis intervenes in the on-going critical conversation that seeks to highlight ‘the existence of overlaps and unexplored continuities’ between the Victorian and Modernist periods, with the overall aim of complicating the ‘narrative’ of Modernism as marking an innovative break from the aesthetics and ideologies of the nineteenth-century.¹⁰ The area of overlap or continuity that I should like to cast some light on is in the two periods’ notions of mysticism, but this, needless to say, is a vast topic. Relying on a constructivist framework of analysis drawn from philosophical and religious disciplines, I am particularly interested in examining the contribution of Victorian poetry and poetic theory to the modern construction of mysticism as an aesthetic and ineffable category. The main thrust of my argument is based on the Foucaultian notion that any definition of a given concept (in this case, mysticism) reflects issues of authority. I use this to propose that, in a world where long-revered religious beliefs and institutions were gradually being eroded by the secular forces of scientific materialism, many Victorian intellectuals sought to aestheticize mysticism and/or assert its ineffability as part of a larger nineteenth-century search for an authoritative place for poetry. Arguments about the nineteenth-century’s post-Romantic conceptions of what poetry was doing and the kind of knowledge it hoped to create are, I acknowledge, nothing new to the field of Victorian

difference between the five visions of the grail, as seen by the holy Nun, Sir Galahad, Sir Percival, Sir Lancelot, Sir Bors’. Another occasion is reported by James Knowles in his account of how the idea of the Metaphysical Society was proposed by Tennyson on 13 November 1868, following a long discussion on the mystical aspects of ‘The Holy Grail’:

While King Arthur was being so much and so frequently discussed between us the mystical meanings of the Poem led to almost endless talk on speculative metaphysical subjects – God – the Soul – free will – Necessity – Matter and spirit – and all the circle of Metaphysical enquiry. Tennyson said how good it would be if such subjects could be argued and debated by capable men in the manner and with the machinery of the learned Societies.

See Hallam Tennyson, *Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Memoir by His Son*, 2 vols (New York: Greenwood Press, 1969), II, p. 63; and *The Letters of Alfred Lord Tennyson*, ed. by Cecil Y. Lang, and Edgar F. Shannon Jr., 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, II (1987), p. 517.

⁹ William D. Gairdner, ‘Poetry and the Mystique of the Self in John Stuart Mill: Sources of Libertarian Socialism’, *Humanitas*, 21 (2008), 9-33 (p. 19).

¹⁰ My use in this thesis of such traditional terms of periodization as ‘Victorian’ and ‘Modernist’ is a tentative one, therefore. It is informed by this growing interest in ‘the problematics of periodization’, one that particularly seeks to emphasize the ‘cultural and aesthetic complexities’ that characterize the transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, acknowledging the ways in which they ‘dovetailed and overlapped’: ‘CFP: Beyond the Victorian and Modernist Divide Conference’, in *BAMS*, ed. by Besnault-Levita and Estrada <<http://bams.ac.uk>> [accessed 10 February 2016]; ‘CFP: Making It New Conference’, in *BAMS*, ed. by Deborah Mutch <<http://bams.ac.uk>> [accessed 10 February 2016]; and Lawrence Besserman, ed., ‘Introduction’, in *The Challenge of Periodization: Old Paradigms and New Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. xi-xxiv (p. xi).

Studies. What I propose is new, however, because my discussion primarily intends to underscore how the period's post-Romantic definitions of mysticism were a constitutive discourse in nineteenth-century formulations of poetic theory, and this whilst also seeking to indicate the significant role played by Victorian poets and critics in the formation of mysticism as a modern category that still persists today.

Mysticism as a subject of enquiry is a capacious one, and any study that incorporates it as an analytic category must acknowledge the fact that it may be impossible to limit it in a systematic way. I agree with William Harmless that, as far as the phenomenon called 'mysticism' is concerned, epistemological certainty is impossible, and that 'formulating a coherent and convincing theory of mystical experience is singularly daunting'.¹¹ This introduction will delimit as much as possible what I mean by mysticism, and, in doing so, ultimately aims to offer a critique of previous, non-constructivist literary-critical research that has explored the question of mysticism in relation to Victorian poetry. I believe this is a useful undertaking, as it would allow me to point out one of the profound and enduring difficulties in much of the literary scholarship that engages with this category, as well as to make some suggestive remarks on how it may be rectified.

I begin my discussion with a few notes on the difficulty of defining mysticism, leading to an overview of the essentialist and constructivist definitions, which together constitute the dominant debate in scholarly studies attempting to define this category, especially in the fields of Philosophy and Religious Studies. Following this is a review of previous research on the cultural construction of mysticism, a substantial section that broadly traces the category's discursive history from its earliest use in the mystery cults of Graeco-Roman culture to its essentialist definition in the twentieth century. This is done in order to draw attention to mysticism's historical instability as a conceptual category, paying special attention to how the various transformations in its meaning through history correspond to changes in sociohistorical structures of power that are deeply implicated in issues of culture and ideology. In addition to providing a better understanding of the study's key term, this genealogical sketch is also meant to lay the groundwork for my research, given that my analysis of the Victorian context is, in part, an attempt to contribute an additional building block in the reconstruction of mysticism's genealogy. Reviewing previous constructivist work done in this area,

¹¹ William Harmless, *Mystics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 258.

therefore, including that conducted in literary studies, will help in articulating the scope of the research gap I intend to fill. This is not to mention that this genealogical account is also useful in highlighting the fact that mysticism was not always defined in the experiential and psychological terms that were used to characterize it at the turn of the twentieth century, and that its modern essentialist definition is ‘only one in a series of social constructions of mysticism; and, like the others, is implicitly bound up with issues of authority’.¹² This is significant for my critique of previous literary scholarship on Victorian poetry that adopts mysticism as a primary analytic category, because I argue that this scholarship largely bases its analysis on essentialist definitions, and often ends up being ideologically exclusionary. The final part of the introduction provides a brief discussion of the theoretical assumptions underpinning the constructivist method I employ in my analysis, and an outline of the scope and structure of the thesis, the latter of which includes a rationale for my choice of the two main writers around which my discussion of other writers will revolve.

1. What is Mysticism?

Brian Bocking, a contemporary scholar in the study of religions, has not long ago noted how a colleague of his joked to him that a more appropriate spelling of ‘Mysticism’ would be ‘Mistycism’, reflecting, as Bocking suggests, ‘a general scepticism about rational efforts to clarify such a topic’.¹³ Indeed, the opinion that ‘mysticism’ is an intrinsically ambiguous and slippery term is something that has been variously reiterated in the scholarly literature that has attempted to grapple with the problem of defining it. In 1978, for instance, Louis Dupré argued that ‘mysticism’ resists straightforward definition because it had developed into an umbrella term to designate a wide array of religious phenomena: ‘No definition could be both meaningful and sufficiently comprehensive to include all experiences that, at some point or other, have been described as mystical’.¹⁴ Dean Inge stated the case more strongly in *Christian Mysticism* (1899) to include other aspects of the term’s meaning:

¹² Grace Jantzen, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 12, hereafter *PGCM*.

¹³ ‘Mysticism: No Experience Necessary?’, in *Diskus 7*, ed. by (BASR: British Association for the Study of Religions, 2006) <<http://basr.open.ac.uk/diskus/bocking.htm>> [accessed 25 September 2015]

¹⁴ ‘Mysticism’, in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. by Mircea Eliade, 16 vols (New York: Macmillan, 1987), X, pp. 245-61 (p. 245).

No word in our language – not even ‘Socialism’ – has been employed more loosely than ‘Mysticism.’ Sometimes it is used as an equivalent for symbolism or allegorism, sometimes for theosophy or occult science; and sometimes it merely suggests the mental state of a dreamer, or vague and fantastic opinions about God and the world.¹⁵

This is what William Harmless has recently dubbed the term’s ‘conceptual hyperinflation’, particularly contending that ‘its currency value has spiraled out of control’,¹⁶ which echoes the following words of an 1896 unsigned essay in the *Edinburgh Review*:

There are certain terms of general classification that seem predestined to breed confusion in criticism and thought; and among these the term Mysticism might be almost considered one of the most pre-eminently bewildering. [...] The epithet, indeed, is one of those of which the significance embraces such varying characteristics that no dictionary can keep pace with the subtle developments it is perpetually acquiring.¹⁷

To highlight this definitional impasse, moreover, Josiah Moses declared in 1906 that the term ‘has almost as many different definitions as it has definers. We look in vain for agreement as to its meaning’.¹⁸ This conveys something of the meaning of Frank Whaling’s argument in 1985 that ‘mystical theory has become a minefield of conflicting interpretations’.¹⁹ Nonetheless, despite the breadth and incongruities of the term’s semantic field, it is safe to say that the views that have largely dominated the academic study of ‘mysticism’ from the turn of the twentieth century onwards can be classified into two broad theoretical schools: the essentialist, and the constructivist.²⁰

¹⁵ *Christian Mysticism* (London: Methuen, 1899), p. 3.

¹⁶ William Harmless, *Mystics*, p. 260.

¹⁷ Schmidt, ‘MMM’ (p. 276).

¹⁸ *Pathological Aspects of Religions* (Westchester, MA: Clark University Press, 1906), p. 69.

¹⁹ Frank Whaling, ed., ‘Comparative Approaches to the Study of Religion’, in *Contemporary Approaches to the Study of Religion: The Humanities*, 2 vols (New York: Mouton, 1984), I, pp. 165-296 (p. 278).

²⁰ Other popular but less influential theories are those that seek to provide a naturalistic explanation of the experiences reported by mystics, the conclusions of which are vigorously debated, with one group of scholars relying on them as a way of explaining away religious experiences, and another arguing that they are not incompatible with the veridicality of the mystical. These explanations come from a variety of disciplinary quarters, including neuroscience, psychoanalysis, socio-biology and psychology. For some of the most prominent literature on the subject, see William Alston, *Perceiving God* (London: Cornell University Press, 1991); James Austin, *Zen and the Brain: Toward an Understanding of Meditation and Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998); C. Daniel and Ventis Batson, W. Larry, *The Religious Experience: A Social-Psychological Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University

2. Essentialist Theories of Mysticism

An essentialist theory of mysticism – also known as the ‘common-core’, ‘perennialist’ or ‘universalist’ perspective – holds that there is a universal essence that pervades all mystical experiences across time periods and world traditions, and irrespective of linguistic, cultural or creedal differences. The proponents of this position argue that any variation in the reports given by mystics owes merely to the different interpretations that are placed upon the mystical experience, and not to the nature of the experience, which is the same everywhere and at all times. They explain that, during a mystical experience, the phenomenon itself is unmediated by the cultural categories and subjective biases of the individual undergoing the experience, but that, later, at the post-experiential stage of describing the mystical event, the individual will interpret it according to the expectations and norms of his/her own background. A Hindu will, therefore, speak of it in terms compatible with Hinduism, a Christian in terms compatible with Christianity, a Sufi with Sufism, and so on. Implicit in this is the belief that there is such a thing as a pure, contentless mystical state of consciousness (disengaged from all linguistic and conceptual categories), and that, to get to its true essence, it is the task of the religious scholar to ‘strip’ the mystic’s account of any post-experiential interpretation that he/she may have applied to it.²¹

Press, 1982); Kenneth Dewhurst, and Beard, A.W., ‘Sudden Religious Conversions in Temporal Lobe Epilepsy’, *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 117 (1970), 497–507; Eugene G. D’Aquili and Andrew Newberg, ‘Religious and Mystical States: A Neuropsychological Model’, *Zygon*, 28 (1993), 177–200, *The Mystical Mind: Probing the Biology of Religious Experience* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), and ‘The Neuropsychology of Aesthetic, Spiritual, and Mystic States’, *Zygon*, 35 (2000), 39–51; Evan Fales, ‘Scientific Explanations of Mystical Experiences, Part I: The Case of St. Teresa’, and ‘Part II: The Challenge to Theism’, *Religious Studies*, 32 (1996), 143-163, and 297-313; Peter Fenwick, ‘The Neurophysiology of Religious Experiences’, in *Psychiatry and Religion: Context, Consensus, and Controversies*, ed. by Dinesh Bhugra (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 167–177; John Heaney, *Psyche and Spirit* (NY: Paulist Press, 1973); R. W. Hood, Jr., ‘Mysticism, Reality, Illusion and the Freudian Critique of Religion’, *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 2 (1992), 141-159, ‘The Empirical Study of Mysticism’, in *The Psychology of Religion*, ed. by B. Spilka and others (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), and *Dimensions of Mystical Experience: Empirical Studies and Psychological Links* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001); Jeff Jordan, ‘Religious Experience and Naturalistic Explanations’, *Religious Studies*, 17 (1991), 158-64; Philip Kitcher, *Vaulting Ambition: Sociobiology and the Quest for Human Nature* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985); Patrick McNamara, ed., *Where God and Science Meet: The Psychology of Religious Experience* (London: Praeger, 2006); Kai Nielsen, ‘Naturalism and Religion: Must Naturalistic Explanation Explain Religion Away?’, *Philo*, 1 (1998), 45-62; W. B. Parsons, *The Enigma of the Oceanic Feeling: Revisioning the Psychoanalytic Theory of Mysticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Michael Persinger, *Neuropsychological Bases of God Beliefs* (New York: Praeger, 1987); William Wainwright, ‘Natural Explanations and Religious Experience’, *Ratio*, 15 (1973), 98-101, and *Mysticism: A Study of Its Nature, Cognitive Value, and Moral Implications* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1981); David M. Wulff, ‘Mystical Experience’, in *Varieties of Anomalous Experience: Examining the Scientific Evidence*, ed. by Etzel Cardena and others (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2000), pp. 397–440.

²¹ Harmless, *Mystics*, p. 255.

The American philosopher and psychologist William James – son of Swedenborgian theologian Henry James, Sr., and brother of novelist Henry James – is considered a seminal figure in the development of this position, particularly for his influential book *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902). Other key figures include Evelyn Underhill (1912/1920), Rudolf Otto (1917), Aldous Huxley (1946), R. C. Zaehner (1957), W. T. Stace (1960), Mircea Eliade (1957), Ninian Smart, and Robert Forman (1990/1998/2000).²²

In order to do justice to the complexities of the debate within this camp, it is important to note that, beyond a certain point of agreement, these scholars have differed on several fronts. In terms of the goal of the mystical experience, for example, some have contended that it is the direct encounter or union with a Divine principle (Underhill, 1912; Otto, 1857; Zaehner, 1957), while others have defined it as attaining a spiritual state of ‘undifferentiated unity’ (Stace, 1960), or as merely being the subject of a ‘pure consciousness event’ (Forman, 1990/1999). On the question of the core characteristics of mysticism, moreover, we find a clear case of disparity between the ones listed in William James’s definition (‘ineffability’, ‘noetic quality’, ‘transiency’ and ‘passivity’) and those identified by Rudolf Otto (‘creature feeling’, ‘awfulness’, ‘overpoweringness’, and ‘energy’ or ‘urgency’), and this is to name but one example. There has also been disagreement on whether or not there can really be only one ‘core’ experience underlying the various accounts of mystics the world over, with some scholars arguing for two types (or more), as in Stace’s differentiation between an ‘introvertive’ and ‘extrovertive’ mysticism, or Zaehner’s threefold model

²² For their most significant contributions toward advancing this ‘common-core’ approach to mysticism, see Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man’s Spiritual Consciousness*, 4th edn (New York: P. Dutton, 1912), and *The Essentials of Mysticism and Other Essays* (London: Dent & Sons, 1920); Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*. trans. by John W. Harvey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1923; repr. 1958 [German original 1917]); Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1946; repr. 1947); R. C. Zaehner, *Mysticism Sacred and Profane: An Inquiry into Some Varieties of Praeternatural Experience* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957); Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*. trans. by W. R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, 1957); W. T. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy* (London: Macmillan, 1960); Ninian Smart, *The Science of Religion and the Sociology of Knowledge: Some Methodological Questions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), and ‘Interpretation and Mystical Experience’, in *Understanding Mysticism*, ed. by R. Woods (London: Athlone Press, 1980), pp. 78-91; as well as Robert K. C. Forman, ed., *The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), ‘Introduction: Mystical Consciousness, the Innate Capacity, and the Perennial Philosophy’, in *The Innate Capacity: Mysticism, Psychology, and Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 3-42, his ‘Mystical Knowledge: Knowledge by Identity’, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 61.4 (1993), 705-738, and *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1999).

of mystical phenomena (the ‘theistic’, the ‘monistic’, and the ‘panenhenic’).²³ However, it is key to bear in mind that, notwithstanding all their differences, these scholars do have one overriding attribute in common, and that is how they eschew placing any importance on the historical and socio-political contexts of mystical texts, believing that these should not distract us from recognizing the substantial commonalities behind the mystics’ multiform expressions of their experiences.

3. Constructivist Theories of Mysticism

While it can be fairly said that the essentialist paradigm had exercised an almost undisturbed hegemony over the academic study of mysticism for six decades since the beginning of the twentieth century, in the mid-1960s, it came under intense and repeated critical scrutiny. It is particularly in the wake of Greshom Scholem’s studies of the culturally specific aspects of Jewish mysticism in the late 60s and early 70s²⁴ that critics of essentialism found themselves hovering on the cusp of the paradigm shift that was to be set in motion by the 1978 publication of *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, a collection of essays edited by Steven Katz, a student of Scholem.²⁵ The shift would be toward constructivism, which has since been a staple of theoretical investigations of mysticism in the field of Religious Studies, leading to the gradual decline in the status of the perennialist model. It is necessary to note, though, that the constructivist discourse on religious experience came in two waves, the first of which was philosophical in its emphasis, while the second – and now the more popular of the two – focuses on the socio-political aspects of the subject under study.²⁶

3.1. The First Wave

The constructivist – also referred to as the ‘contextualist’ or ‘linguistic’ – turn in the philosophical study of mysticism arose in reaction to the long-held essentialist thesis

²³ Robert H. Sharf, ‘The Rhetoric of Experience and the Study of Religion’, *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 7.11–12 (2000), 267–87 (pp. 269-70).

²⁴ See, for example, Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*. trans. by R. Manheim (New York: Schocken Books, 1969); and ‘The Name of God and the Linguistic Theory of the Kabbala: Part 1’, *Diogenes*, 79 (1972), 59-80, and ‘Part 2’, *Diogenes*, 80 (1972), 164-94, all of which extend and develop the discussions on mysticism proposed in his much earlier *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1941).

²⁵ Louis Komjathy, ed., ‘Approaching Contemplative Practice’, in *Contemplative Literature: A Comparative Sourcebook on Meditation and Contemplative Prayer* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2015), pp. 3-51 (pp. 14-5).

²⁶ Benjamin Y. Fong, ‘On Critics and What’s Real: Russell Mccutcheon on Religious Experience’, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 82.4 (2014), 1127–1148 (p. 1128).

that mystical experiences are fundamentally transcultural, trans-historical and trans-linguistic. Steven Katz's emphatic contention that '*there are NO pure (i.e. unmediated) experiences*'²⁷ is the central epistemological plank of this approach, whose early leading theorists also include Robert Gimello (1978), Hans Penner (1983), Wayne Proudfoot (1985), and Philip Almond (1982).²⁸ Influenced by the change in the philosophical climate that produced the linguistically-oriented works of Bertrand Russell, Martin Heidegger, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida,²⁹ the constructivists stress – in diverse ways and to various degrees – 'the significance of public language over private experience in the study of religion',³⁰ and how mysticism should be interpreted '*in context*, or rather in many overlapping contexts – historical, literary, religious, theological'.³¹ They are unanimous in their belief that a mystical experience should not be accorded a special, *sui generis*³² status, arguing that all experiences (and mystical ones are no exception) are inevitably shaped by the language, culture and psychological background of the experiencer. Accordingly, constructivists reject the essentialist premise that linguistic and contextual elements only influence the way individuals interpret a mystical phenomenon post-experientially, proposing instead that these elements also play a formative role in shaping the experience while it is taking place. This means that variations in the accounts given by mystics in different times and places are understood to reflect, not merely a difference of interpretation, but a difference in the actual experience, so that a Hindu mystical experience, for example, is believed to be

²⁷ Steven Katz, ed., 'Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism', in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp. 22-74 (p. 26). Emphasis is from the original. Unless otherwise noted in this thesis, all forms of emphasis in quoted texts are from the original.

²⁸ For their most significant contributions, see Steven Katz, ed., *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (1978), *Mysticism and Religious Traditions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), *Mysticism and Language* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), and *Mysticism and Sacred Scriptures* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); Robert Gimello, 'Mysticism and Meditation', in Katz (1978), pp. 170-99, and 'Mysticism in Its Contexts', in Katz (1983), pp. 61-88; Hans Penner, 'The Mystical Illusion', in Katz (1983), pp. 89-116, and 'The Encyclopedia of Religion', in *Critical Review of Books in Religion* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), pp. 1-21; and Philip Almond, *Mystical Experience and Religious Doctrine* (New York: Mouton Publishers, 1982).

²⁹ Jorge N. Ferrer, and Jacob H. Sherman, eds., 'Introduction', in *The Participatory Turn in Spirituality, Mysticism and Religious Studies* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2008), pp. 1-80 (p. 2); and Robert C. Fuller, *Religious Revolutionaries: The Rebels Who Reshaped American Religion* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 216.

³⁰ Ferrer and Sherman, eds., 'Introduction' (pp. 2-4).

³¹ Harmless, *Mystics*, p. 257.

³² A Latin term which literally translates to 'of one's or its own kind', referring to something that is unique and constitutes a class of its own: '*sui generis, n.*', in *OED Online* (Oxford University Press, September 2015) <<http://www.oed.com/>> [accessed 25 October 2015]

genuinely distinct from a Buddhist or a Christian one. Again, as in the case of the essentialists, the similarity between theorists of this approach should not be overemphasized, given that they are divided on several questions, the chief one being the extent to which mystical experiences are context-dependent: some lean toward what has been variously termed ‘complete’, ‘hard’ or ‘extreme constructivism’, the view that mystical experiences are entirely the product of one’s cultural, religious and social conditioning; others alternatively favour what has been called ‘incomplete’, ‘soft’ or ‘partial constructivism’, which posits the contextually-mediated (but not contextually-determined) nature of mysticism on the grounds that ‘contextual determinism’ cannot account for those novel elements in a mystical experience that are not part of the mystic’s prior conditioning.³³

3.2. The Second Wave

What distinguishes the second-wave constructivist approach to mysticism from the first is that, with its advent, ‘the emphasis of the discourse on religious experience shifted from the philosophical to the sociopolitical’.³⁴ This is to say that, while the first wave is partly preoccupied with phenomenological questions about how mystical experiences are culturally constructed, the second wave strictly locates its work ‘within the history of ideas’, directing its constructivist thrust, not at mystical experiences as such, but at mysticism as a conceptual category.³⁵ Indeed, although it is true that both constructivist positions are suspicious of the experiential emphasis of the perennialist approach,³⁶ the first wave is not completely free of its own theorizing on questions of experience; as Robert Sharf explains, it operates on the assumption

³³ Jerome Gellman, ‘Mysticism’, in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Edward N. Zalta, rev. edn, (Stanford University, Spring 2014 Edition) <<http://plato.stanford.edu/index.html>> [accessed 10 October 2015]; Robert Forman, ed., ‘Introduction: Mysticism, Constructivism and Forgetting’, in Forman (1990), pp. 3-52 (p. 13); Jess Byron Hollenback, *Mysticism: Experience, Response, and Empowerment* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), p. 9.

³⁴ Benjamin Fong, ‘On Critics’ (p. 1128).

³⁵ Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and "the Mystic East"* (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 1, hereafter *Orientalism*.

³⁶ For a representative example of this from the work of an early constructivist, see Steven Katz’s ‘Mystical Speech and Mystical Meaning’, in *Mysticism and Language*, pp. 3-41, where he stresses the ‘textual’ – as opposed to the ‘experiential’ – aspect of mysticism. Katz namely contends that what constitutes the mystics’ chief heritage is their ‘writings and related linguistic creations’ in the sense that what we normally refer to as the world’s ‘mystical traditions’ are nothing but a chain of documents and texts written within these traditions: no scholar or theorist has any ‘privileged’ access to ‘the original mystics’ experience outside its textual incorporation’ (p. 4). This ‘hermeneutic of suspicion’ against ‘experience’ as an analytic category is much more pronounced in the works of second-wave constructivists: Grace Jantzen, *PGCM*, p. xiv.

‘that since the historical, social, and linguistic processes that give rise to the [mystic’s report] are identical with those that give rise to the experience, the former, which are amenable to scholarly analysis, provide a transparent window to the latter’.³⁷ On the other hand, second-wave constructivist analysis – better known as ‘social constructivism’, or the ‘critical turn’ – usually shows little interest in the phenomenological and ontological status of mystical experiences, unless it is to negate ‘experience’ as an ‘empty category’.³⁸ It is more interested in problematizing and unmasking the concept of mysticism that is said to be itself the product of a specific set of historical and socio-political conditions.

The difference between the two constructivist positions is perhaps better understood by referring to their critique of the *sui generis* discourse on mystical experience, and how they differ in their corrective approaches to it. Both hold that no universalist model of mysticism can be universally applicable, because it is inevitably tainted by the theorist’s own ideological or theological assumptions that ‘will do little to convince those whom do not share his [or her] particular religious beliefs and affiliation’. Attendant to this is the argument that perennialist models are too often based on a conspicuously Western and Christian point of view, as in the ‘theological violence’ committed by Underhill, Otto and Zaehner, for example, who uncritically privilege, as normative, the theistic type of mystical experiences – those involving a spiritual union with a Creator who is distinct from creation – over other mystical phenomena, a view that necessarily excludes the non-theistic, and atheistic mysticisms of the East, or regards them to be of an inferior order.³⁹ There are, of course, many essentialist scholars who did voice these objections, endeavouring on their part to develop other models that are ‘explicitly non-theological’, but constructivists have shown that, even in such models, ‘half-disguised theological presuppositions persistently distort the analytical pitch’ that many times proves to be an extension of a liberal-humanist Christian theology.⁴⁰ As for how the two constructivist positions attempt to avoid the pitfalls of the perennialist model, scholars of the first wave embrace postmodern cultural relativism, proposing a pluralist understanding of

³⁷ Sharf, ‘Rhetoric of Experience’ (p. 285).

³⁸ King, *Orientalism*, p. 248.

³⁹ Richard King, ‘Mysticism and Spirituality’, in *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion*, ed. by John Hinnells (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 306-322 (pp. 315, 318). See King’s discussion, in this source, of Otto’s and Zaehner’s models (pp. 312-18), as well as his commentary on Underhill in *Orientalism*, p. 7.

⁴⁰ Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. x, 3, 16; and Benjamin Fong, ‘On Critics’ (pp. 1128, 1133).

mysticism that accepts a variety of religious phenomenologies as equal, in the sense that no type of mystical experience is seen as superior to any other; in their ‘rejection of universal “grand narratives”’, therefore, they seek to safeguard the integrity of the world’s diverse religious traditions, and ‘to respect’, in Katz’s terms, ‘the richness of the experiential and conceptual data’. For scholars of the second wave, however, a corrective approach to essentialism must address not only how its ‘experiential bias’ often pejoratively misrepresents mystical Eastern traditions, but how it even ‘misrepresents pre-modern usage of the term within the Christian tradition’.⁴¹

To explain, social constructivists are convinced that the universalist concept of mysticism as an ‘intense and private experience’ is not viable, because it is a relatively modern invention. Drawing on the constructivist work that was already being done on the broader category of ‘religion’,⁴² they argue that, if one examines the semantic history of ‘mysticism’, one finds that it has not always been understood in this sense, that its definition has undergone several major changes over time,⁴³ and that no definition of it has ever been ‘innocent’ or ‘apolitical’: that is, like the category of religion, it has always developed within a specific socio-cultural context to serve the ideological, political or personal interests of those who needed it.⁴⁴ In this sense, they believe that essentialism’s ‘exclusive emphasis upon the experiential dimension of “the mystical” ignores the wider social, ethical and political dimensions of the subject matter’.⁴⁵ The alternative approach they propose is a deconstructive one, perhaps not in the ‘technical sense’ of deconstruction that is associated with the work of Derrida, but more loosely as ‘an approach that takes meanings that are unreflectively taken as

⁴¹ King, *Orientalism*, pp. 168-70, 24, 161.

⁴² For classics in this literature, see Jonathan Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1982), and ‘Religion, Religions, Religious’, in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. by Mark C. Taylor (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Robert Alan Segal, *Explaining and Interpreting Religion: Essays on the Issue* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992); Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Disciplines and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Russell McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), and *Critics Not Caretakers: Redescribing the Public Study of Religion* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2001); Timothy Fitzgerald, ‘A Critique of ‘Religion’ as a Cross-Cultural Category’, *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, 9.2 (1997), 91-110, and *The Ideology of Religious Studies*; Donald Wiebe, *The Politics of Religious Studies* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999); William Arnal, ‘Definition’, in *Guide to the Study of Religion*, ed. by Willi Braun and R. McCutcheon (London: Continuum, 2000); and Daniel Dubuisson, *The Western Construction of Religion: Myths, Knowledge, and Ideology* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

⁴³ King, *Orientalism*, p. 9; and Grace Jantzen, *PGCM*, p. 12.

⁴⁴ Kevin Schilbrack, ‘Religions: Are There Any?’, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 78.4 (2010), 1112–1138 (p. 1116).

⁴⁵ Richard King, *Orientalism*, p. 161.

real and seeks to reveal them as conceptually unstable, historically emergent, and ideologically motivated'. Barbara Johnson's commentary on Derrida's method applies here:

[The approach] reads backwards from what seems natural, obvious, self-evident or universal, in order to show that these things have their history, their reasons for being what they are, their effects on what follows them, and that the starting point is not a given but a construct, usually blind to itself.⁴⁶

This is why, throughout their studies, many social constructivists use scare-quotes around the terms 'mystic', 'mystical' and 'mysticism' (or at least ask that they be implicitly understood whenever the terms appear), a strategy that is meant to guard against 'importing universal or essential conceptions' of the category into their own analyses.⁴⁷

Needless to say, there are significant variations in the views of social constructivists of mysticism regarding their hermeneutical distrust of the category of 'experience'. Most notably, there are those who go beyond challenging the credibility of the sui generis discourse on 'religious experience' and take up an epistemological position that altogether rejects its ontological reality. Russell McCutcheon and Robert Sharf are the first and most recognized advocates of this view, the former through his book *Manufacturing Religion* (1997), in which he argues that 'religion' – including 'religious experience' – exists only as a 'conceptual tool', possessing at best a 'phantom objectivity', and that it should not be mistaken as an 'ontological category actually existing in reality'.⁴⁸ In his 2000 essay on the religious 'rhetoric of experience', Sharf similarly writes that 'the term experience cannot make ostensible a *something that exists in the world*', calling for a reconsideration of one of the field's main questions:

The question is not merely whether or not mystical experiences are constructed, unmediated, pure, or philosophically significant. The

⁴⁶ Kevin Schilbrack, 'Religions: Are There Any?' (p. 1113).

⁴⁷ Ra'anan S. Boustán, *From Martyr to Mystic: Rabbinic Martyrology and the Making of Merkavah Mysticism* (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), p. viii. See, for example, Leigh Schmidt's 'MMM'. I should note here that my own use of these words throughout the thesis is also intended to be in 'fictive quotation marks,' to borrow Peter Schäfer's expression: that is, in a way that acknowledges only their culturally acquired meanings, without attaching to them any a priori essentialist definition of the phenomenon: Peter Schäfer, *The Origins of Jewish Mysticism* (Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), p. 23.

⁴⁸ McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion*, pp. viii, 23.

more fundamental question is whether we can continue to treat the texts and reports upon which such theories are based as referring, however obliquely, to determinative phenomenal events at all.

Sharf concludes his essay with the bold statement that ‘all attempts to signify “inner experience” are destined to remain “well-meaning squirms that get us nowhere”’,⁴⁹ With its aim at ‘clearing the ground of the clutter of “experience” talk’,⁵⁰ this view has been called the ‘deflationary’, ‘abolitionist’, or ‘pure’ account of social construction.⁵¹ However, there is another prevalent form of social constructivism that does not go that far, and for which a repudiation of the sui generis stance does not entail making the epistemological leap toward a complete rejection of the reality of experiences. Scholars who hold this view are also wary of the phenomenologist’s appeal to experience, but this suspicion is a ‘practical’ rather than an epistemological one, in the sense that it seeks to establish a hermeneutical distance from any ideologically laden concept, while steering clear of making final decisions about its ontological status.⁵² Those who take this position agree with other social constructivists that an ‘unreflective’ essentialism is ‘indefensible’, and that it is necessary to introduce ‘reflexivity into one’s study’ by looking into ‘the history and politics of one’s concepts’.⁵³ Unlike abolitionist constructivism, however, this view maintains that ‘to show that a concept is a social construction says nothing about whether or not that concept identifies something real’. More will be said about this in section 5, where I explain why I side with this view in my own approach to the study of mysticism in Victorian poetry and poetics.

3.3. Mysticism and Power: A Genealogical Account

I have mentioned in the previous section – but perhaps not emphasized enough – the social constructivist belief that no conceptualization of mysticism is ever divorced from issues of authority, whether they are ideological, social, political, or even personal. As Richard King argues in his instructive book *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and ‘The Mystic East’*, a constructivist analysis should

⁴⁹ Sharf, ‘Rhetoric of Experience’ (pp. 282, 285-86). The quote in his closing statement is a phrase of Samuel Beckett: see Brian Bocking’s ‘Mysticism: No Experience Necessary?’ [accessed 25 September 2015]

⁵⁰ Bocking, *ibid.*

⁵¹ Kevin Schilbrack (pp. 116-7); and Benjamin Fong (p. 1132).

⁵² Fong (p. 1130).

⁵³ Schilbrack (pp. 1113, 1121).

take ‘seriously not only the social location of the concepts under examination but also their involvement in a wider cultural field of power relations’. King particularly argues for an understanding of mysticism that shows ‘an awareness of the mutual imbrication of religion, culture and power as categories’, or what has become known as ‘the politics of knowledge’.⁵⁴ He builds his argument on the equally estimable work of Grace Jantzen, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*, one of the first studies of its kind in terms of its deconstructive approach to the categories under investigation. Both Jantzen and King broadly follow the Foucaultian brand of social constructivism, based on the work of the French historian and philosopher Michel Foucault, which principally holds that ‘knowledge and power are interconnected, and that an investigation of what is allowed to count as knowledge can never be far removed from an investigation of power relations’. ‘Foucault believed’, says Jantzen, ‘that any form of defined knowledge has an ideological function’, which means that knowledge is neither ‘raw’ nor ‘pure’, but ‘reflects the interests of the knower’. When applied to definitions of mysticism, it would follow that ‘what counts as mysticism’ in any given sociocultural and historical context will be influenced by the vested interests of those who have the power to define it in that context.⁵⁵ The result, then, is a discourse that invents or constructs the object it claims to explain.

This brings me to Foucault’s genealogical approach to conceptual analysis, in which social constructivists of ‘mysticism’ find an apt analytical tool for the delegitimation of the essentialist definition of the term. For an explanation of this, I defer once again to Jantzen and King. According to Jantzen, ‘the genealogy of knowledge’, as Foucault has called it, is especially attentive to the idea that ‘those who have the power to define knowledge have not remained the same’. With this in mind, she offers a very rough sketch of the major alterations in Western regimes of power and knowledge from the medieval to the modern period: ‘In the medieval era powerful monks and abbots gave way to bishops; gradually the authority of the church gave way to the authority of kings and secular princes; in modern society philosophers and theologians in universities are characterised as “the ones who know”’. Both Jantzen and King explain that, because mysticism is a social construct that ‘inevitably contains and conceals issues of power and authority’, it is reasonable to assume that the category has undergone considerable changes in meaning that correspond with

⁵⁴ King, p. 1.

⁵⁵ Jantzen, pp. 2, 12-4.

these (and other) broad changes in Western structures of power.⁵⁶ A genealogy of the concept of mysticism, therefore, is, as King notes, ‘a history of the idea that pays specific attention to the power dynamic involved in the way in which it has been defined in various historical circumstances’. From a deconstructive perspective, its aim is to reveal that what modernist Jamesian philosophers have often conceived as a reified, universal, trans-historical and apolitical category is, in fact, a precarious and contingent one.⁵⁷ As it may be expected, this approach has opened up numerous areas of research on the subject, and, although a full genealogical account of the modern construction of mysticism has yet to be achieved,⁵⁸ the rich body of scholarship that has so far been produced under its auspices illuminates much of the category’s history, and the dynamics of its development.⁵⁹ It is beyond the scope of this chapter to provide an overview of the significant findings of this body of literature in anything but an elliptical manner. My intent here is merely to sketch out, in very broad terms, some of the historical transformations in the semantic field of ‘mysticism’ from its

⁵⁶ Jantzen, pp. 12-3, 25.

⁵⁷ King, pp. 8, 2.

⁵⁸ Amy Hollywood, ed., ‘Introduction’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism*, ed. by A. Hollywood and Patricia Z. Beckman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 1-34 (p. 6); and Peter Tyler, *The Return to the Mystical: Ludwig Wittgenstein, Teresa of Avila and the Christian Mystical Tradition* (London: Continuum, 2011), p. 4.

⁵⁹ The historical problematizations of the category of mysticism that I am aware of can be found in Hal Bridges, *American Mysticism: From William James to Zen* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970); Michel de Certeau, *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, trans. by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), pp. 80-100, *The Mystic Fable: The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. by Michael B. Smith, 2 vols (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992-2015), and ‘Mysticism’, *Diacritics*, 22 (1992), 11-25; Eric J. Sharpe, *Nathan Söderblom and the Study of Religion* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), pp. 113-115; T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp. 142-215; Grace Jantzen, ‘Feminists, Philosophers, and Mystics’, *Hypatia*, 9 (1994), 186–206, and *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism* (1995); Robert H. Sharf, ‘Buddhist Modernism and the Rhetoric of Meditative Experience’, *Numen*, 42.3 (1995), 228-83; Don Cupitt, *Mysticism after Modernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), pp. 12-28; Steven M. Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin at Eranos* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 239-241; Richard King, *Orientalism*, ‘Mysticism and Spirituality’, and (coauthored with Jeremy Carrette) *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion* (London: Routledge, 2005); Leigh Schmidt, ‘MMM’, and *Restless Soules: The Remaking of American Spirituality*, 2nd edn (London: University of California Press, 2012); Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom: Eroticism and Reflexivity in the Study of Mysticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Carl W. Ernst, ‘Between Orientalism and Fundamentalism: Problematizing the Teaching of Sufism’, in *Teaching Islam*, ed. by Brannon Wheeler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 108-23; William Harmless, *Mystics*, pp. 260-262; Hans G. Kippenberg, *Discovering Religious History in the Modern Age*, trans. by Barbara Harshav (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), pp. 176-182; Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern*, new edn (London: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Niklaus Largier, ‘Mysticism, Modernity, and the Invention of Aesthetic Experience’, *Representations*, 105.1 (2009), 37-60; Amy Hollywood, ‘Introduction’ (pp. 4-6), and *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Joy R. Bostic, *African American Female Mysticism: Nineteenth-Century Religious Activism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

first-known use to the modern period, so as to give an idea of its historical instability as a category of thought, and how this was determined, in part, by an ever-changing matrix of power relations.

Indeed, a look at the etymological origins of the term reveals that it had quite a different meaning from what it had come to signify by the turn of the twentieth century. It is important to point out, though, that the noun form ‘mysticism’ is a relatively late development in the history of the category, first emerging in seventeenth-century France, and then moving from French to other European languages.⁶⁰ Previously, the term had been in use in the adjectival forms ‘mystic’ and ‘mystical’, both of which are derived from the Greek adjective *μυστικός*, which was used to describe the secret rites of initiation into the mystery religions of pre-Christian, Graeco-Roman antiquity. The adjective itself is a derivative from the verb *μύω*, the Greek for ‘to close’, particularly ‘to close one’s eyes’ or ‘one’s lips’ in the figurative sense of ‘keeping a secret’.⁶¹ It was meant to signify an imperative to those who have been initiated into the mystery cults to keep silent about the secret process of their initiation, the secret being ‘the ritual itself which must not be divulged to the uninitiated’.⁶² In other words, as Louis Bouyer explains in ‘Mysticism: An Essay on the History of the Word’, with its connotation of secrecy, the category of mysticism in its earliest forms was used to refer not to any kind of experiential or divine knowledge, but simply to what happens in a communal rite of initiation.⁶³

In the same essay, Bouyer also offers what is arguably the most insightful exposition of the earliest uses of the term in the Christian tradition,⁶⁴ maintaining that when ‘the mystical’ was first adopted into the Christian vernacular, it was applied to ‘the least Greek thing about Christianity: the Bible’. According to him, in early and medieval Christian culture, ‘the mystical’ continued to refer to what is ‘secret’ or ‘hidden’, but its earliest connection with pagan ritualistic realities was largely superseded by its association with ‘the most difficult theological problems presented by Christianity’, that is, ‘scriptural exegesis’: the scriptures were claimed to have an ‘inner’ or ‘hidden’ meaning beyond their literal signification. Bouyer believes that this is when ‘the mystical’ began to acquire ‘truly supernatural splendor’, because the

⁶⁰ Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable*, I, p. 76.

⁶¹ Louis Bouyer, ‘Mysticism: An Essay on the History of the Word’, in *Understanding Mysticism*, ed. by Richard Woods (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1980), pp. 42-55 (p. 43).

⁶² Grace Jantzen, *PGCM*, p. 27.

⁶³ Louis Bouyer, ‘Mysticism: An Essay’ (p. 43).

⁶⁴ Richard King, *Orientalism*, p. 15; and Amy Hollywood, ‘Introduction’ (p. 5).

veiled meaning of a sacred text was believed to be nothing other than the supernatural or divine reality of Jesus Christ, a meaning that can be uncovered only through the allegorical interpretation of the Bible. Although it would still be a long way before the modern psychologization of mysticism (the conception of it in terms of private, universal, and intensely psychological states of consciousness), the employment of the term in this sense represents a clear development toward that direction, something that has been pointed out by Amy Hollywood:

This usage [...] marks a shift toward the experiential. The *process* by which one comes to know hidden things is designated as mystical rather than the things uncovered themselves. In uncovering the hidden meaning of scripture, by moving from what Origen calls the body (the literal meaning) of the text to its soul and spirit (both aspects of the allegorical), one is lifted up through the body to the soul.⁶⁵

Of course, it should be kept in mind that, for early Church fathers, such as Origen and Clement, the allegorical meaning of biblical texts was not confined to that which inheres in their literary or linguistic forms, but extended to what can be read in the events of Christian history reported in them, which were said to represent the divine presence in action.

In addition to the hermeneutical aspect of its application, Bouyer's essay also makes a case for the significance of another aspect of the early Christian usage of the adjective 'mystical', and this is in connection with the Church's liturgical life. He contends that, just as in the case of scriptural allegory, the symbolic practices of the sacraments in pre-modern Christianity were thought to be imbued with a 'mystical' or 'hidden' significance, whose meaning is also nothing other than the recognition of the divine reality of Christ.⁶⁶ Speaking of the spiritual meaning given the Eucharist, for example, Richard King explains this from the perspective of the early Church fathers:

The mystical is that which transforms a mundane activity (consuming bread and wine) and sacramentalizes it, i.e. transforms it into an event of cosmic and eternal significance. It is through the Eucharistic celebration that the Christian may enter into communion with the timeless realm of God.⁶⁷

William Harmless is of the opinion that, if this – or the mysticism of an allegorical

⁶⁵ 'Introduction' (p. 5). My italics.

⁶⁶ Bouyer (pp.).

⁶⁷ *Orientalism*, p. 23.

interpretation – could be described as a ‘mystical experience’ at all, the early Church fathers would have spoken of it as ‘the ordinary faith experience of *all* baptised Christians’. This is not to say that a preoccupation with the experiential aspect that is now associated with our modern understanding of mysticism was not found in early Christianity. ‘It clearly was’, Harmless explains, ‘but the desert fathers and later monastic thinkers spoke of their experience not as “mystical experience,” but as “contemplation”; they spoke of themselves not as “mystics,” but as “contemplatives”’.⁶⁸

Feminist scholars working on the deconstruction of early and medieval Christian mysticism have contended, and rightly so, that this conception of the mystical was a thoroughly patriarchal construct, one that served the power interests of male ecclesiastics toward the systematic exclusion of women from public religious life. Where the mystical meaning of scripture is concerned, the argument goes that the marginalization of medieval women can be discerned not only in the fact that they were denied formal theological training, and were indeed discouraged from pursuing such study privately, but also in how their fulfilment of the societal ‘expectations of marriage and child-bearing’ meant that ‘the leisure [...] for the study of scripture was unequally distributed’ among men and women of the time.⁶⁹ To define the mystical as the allegorical interpretation of the Bible, therefore, was to ensure that women were excluded from the category, given that the category was being associated with the highly abstract and speculative scholarship that was ‘overwhelmingly the domain of male intellectuals within the Church’.⁷⁰ That such an exclusion had philosophical presuppositions is not overlooked by Grace Jantzen, who explains this in reference to the spiritual hierarchy outlined by ‘Dionysius the Areopagite’, the pseudonym of the anonymous sixth-century writer now known as Pseudo-Dionysius.⁷¹ Pseudo-Dionysius held that God – as Creator and the principal source of authority in the universe – presides over this hierarchy, followed by all created things in a chain of ‘descending authority’, where each creature is ranked according to the extent to which it bears God’s image and likeness: this stretches from the celestial hierarchy, with its different angelic orders, through the ecclesiastical structure of bishops, priests, and deacons, where women are notably absent from all positions of authority. As far as

⁶⁸ *Mystics*, p. 261; and Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable*, I, pp. 94-5.

⁶⁹ Grace Jantzen, *PGCM*, pp. 58, 67; and Amy Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy*, p. 147.

⁷⁰ King, *Orientalism*, p. 19.

⁷¹ Jantzen, *PGCM*, pp. 95-6.

this reflects a belief in the spiritual inferiority of women, Jantzen notes that the Pseudo-Dionysian spiritual ladder significantly bears the legacy of Plato, whose misogynistic discourse on the gender-determined nature of spirituality was assimilated very early on into the Christian tradition. The Platonic stance on gender differences was that ‘men had more of the divine elements, air and fire’ and ‘women were composed more by the grosser elements of earth and water’ so that it is only proper ‘that men participated in divinity and were capable of spirituality, while women were oriented toward procreation’.⁷²

It is not unreasonable to infer from this that medieval claims about the mystical meaning of scripture were not politically innocent, but ones with serious exclusionary implications, particularly when it is borne in mind that those who made these claims also argued that the Bible’s mystical meanings are not accessible to the masses: according to them, unlike its outward literal sense, its inner secrets are only comprehensible to ‘a religious elite’ who are, by nature and training, the most fit to receive its divine truths. ‘Not everyone is sacred’, they would insist, least of all, women with their inherent inclinations toward physicality and the earth. The same thing applies to the medieval association of the mystical with the Church’s liturgical ceremonies, which was similarly influenced by the period’s gender-biases. As Grace Jantzen explains, whereas Christian sacramental rites were a crucial dimension of what counted as ‘mystical’ during the Middle Ages, it was one of the decrees of the Church that its rituals be witnessed only by the ecclesiastical authorities and their initiates, to the exclusion of all others, an exclusion that ‘differentiates’, as Pseudo-Dionysius declares, ‘what belongs to the common crowd from the things that bind and unify a hierarchy’. Granting the already mentioned fact that there was ‘no place for women’ in the ecclesiastical hierarchy of early Church society, one of the consequences of this was that it ensured the marginalization of women from the mystical aspects of the Church’s ritual life.⁷³

However, notwithstanding the deeply patriarchal culture of the medieval religious community, the era did witness many efforts to ‘push back the boundaries of misogyny’ in ways that enabled some women (as well as a few men) to offer alternative constructions of mysticism that could be conceived as uniquely female.⁷⁴

⁷² Ibid., pp. 44-5, 96-100.

⁷³ Jantzen, pp. 67, 97.

⁷⁴ Jantzen, *PGCM*, p. 225.

In this sense, it can be said that ‘mysticism represented a source of power and inspiration’ to some of the traditionally disempowered voices of medieval religious culture.⁷⁵ Both Amy Hollywood and Grace Jantzen maintain that, in response to their exclusion from the scriptural and liturgical dimensions of the mystical, medieval women endeavoured to overturn the perceived weaknesses of their sex in a way that worked in their favour, allowing them to assert their own religious authority as spiritual instructors. In particular, it is proposed that, ‘dominated by the prevailing belief in their intellectual inferiority and their highly significant physicality’, such women sought ‘to turn this paradigm to a new use by uncovering the links between’, for example, ‘their suffering physicality and the historical bodily suffering of Jesus’.⁷⁶ It may be true, so goes the argument, that medieval women lacked scholastic training in the abstract theological and metaphysical questions of the day, as well as the necessary knowledge of ancient languages for interpreting complex biblical passages; still, these women could claim that their intrinsic emotionalism and sensuality made them naturally receptive – a privilege they had over men – to the visionary, auditory, and somatic avenues of experiencing the divine, allowing them, in turn, ‘to claim their own voices and their own authority on the basis of this spirituality’.⁷⁷

Moving from the medieval to the early modern context, the most significant scholarly attempt to unmask some of the hidden agendas that went into the construction of mysticism during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is the work of Michel de Certeau. De Certeau’s genealogical investigation into the term’s history is the first to draw attention to the fact that, up to the late sixteenth century, the category of mysticism was only used as an adjective, shortly after which it underwent a process of substantivation, where it emerged as a noun for the first time in European intellectual history – namely, in the form of the French word ‘la mystique’. De Certeau believes this development to be emblematic of the post-medieval secularization of knowledge, ‘a knowledge that defines its own scientific objects’, arguing that the period’s emerging scientific discourse ‘reified the mystical as an object of inquiry in accordance with its own categories and methodologies’. This is to say that, whereas the medieval form of the term was strictly used as a modifier ‘that qualified something else’ – for example, certain types of knowledge, objects or

⁷⁵ King, *Orientalism*, p. 18.

⁷⁶ Mark A. McIntosh, rev. of *PGCM*, by Jantzen, *Pro Ecclesia*, 7.4 (1998), 491-3 (p. 492).

⁷⁷ Jantzen, p. 87; and Amy Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy*, p. 147.

practices (exegetical and liturgical) – particularly within traditional church institutions, the term's modern form was indicative of 'a new space of knowledge' or 'field of research'. Put otherwise, one can say that the mystical acquired 'its autonomy in passing from an adjectival to a substantive position', in the sense that it was assigned 'a region of its own, with its own objects, itineraries, and language'.⁷⁸

For de Certeau, this key episode of the term's development took place during the formative period of the rise of modern science to dominance as a new paradigm of knowledge, one that sought to establish 'its own distinctiveness' by increasingly distancing itself from the theological, cosmological and ethical 'sediments of its past'.⁷⁹ As might be expected, this was not without its repercussions on the category of mysticism: de Certeau asserts that the response of mystics and their apologists to 'this recently isolated unity' conformed with the secularization process that was occurring in other newly defined (or redefined) fields of scientific research, so that the story of the development of mysticism into an isolated domain is also the story of its divestment of its traditional theological origins (This would be a very gradual and intermittent process that would continue well up to the late nineteenth century).⁸⁰ It is no coincidence, for example, that the 'chemist philosopher' of medieval culture 'disengaged himself from a cosmological philosophy' and was transformed into a 'chemist' at the same time that the 'mystic theologian' disassociated himself from a theological tradition and simply became 'a mystic'.⁸¹ It is also de Certeau's contention that an important aspect of the seventeenth-century secularization of knowledge is the emergence of a growing interest in studying the reported experiences of past saints and mystics, not with the previously-held conception of mysticism as representing a normal or acceptable dimension of divine worship, but with a new preoccupation on its psychosomatic manifestations. This often led to the conception of mystical experiences as types of 'extraordinary', or even 'abnormal' phenomena. What this suggests, de Certeau believes, is that the new scientific discourse that was progressively objectifying the mystical, was concomitantly leading to its pathologization, and, thereby, to the decline of its social and cultural status: that is,

⁷⁸ 'Mysticism', *Diacritics*, 22 (1992), 11-25 (pp. 11, 13-14); *The Mystic Fable* (1992), I, p. 76, 107; and *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other* (1986), p. 83.

⁷⁹ De Certeau, 'Mysticism', *Diacritics* (p. 14); and Richard King, *Orientalism*, pp. 15-16. An obvious antecedent to the modern natural sciences is what was known as 'natural philosophy', whose primary objective was to explain the natural universe in relation to God.

⁸⁰ 'Mysticism', *Diacritics* (p. 14).

⁸¹ *Mystic Fable*, I, p. 107.

mysticism was being pushed from the central place it had held in medieval religious culture – as a dignified form of spiritual practice that was accessible only to a religious elite – to ‘the margins of an increasingly secularized society’.⁸²

Paradoxically, however, the early modern isolation and objectification of mysticism was also, in part, an outgrowth of the diminishing status of the mystical within the Western Christian tradition during the Protestant Reformation of the early sixteenth century. De Certeau speaks of how the mysticism of scriptural exegesis had increasingly become the subject of much censure in the days of Martin Luther, who was its severest critic. Luther, as de Certeau notes, ridiculed the ‘twaddle’ of a ‘mystical theology’ on the grounds that it was more Platonic than Christian, an allegorical game of which Christian Neo-Platonists, from Origen and Pseudo-Dionysius to Gerson, were all culpable.⁸³ This can be understood in the context of Luther’s belief in the simplicity and lucidity of the Bible’s teachings, and how it is imperative that the Christian laity should not be deterred from approaching and understanding it on their own. The point to emphasize here is that mysticism as a form of hermeneutical biblical practice was on the decline since the beginning of the sixteenth century, after having been ‘one of the traditional functions of theology’ for so long.⁸⁴ Aside from this, the ecclesiastical institutions of the sixteenth century were also continually depreciative of the mystical contemplative tradition for its apparent novelty or ‘late birth’. Meister Eckhart, John of the Cross, and other contemplative writers of the late-Medieval period were, for instance, being dismissed in contemporary religious discourse with the disparaging label ‘the new mystics’, disparaging because the word ‘new’ had pejorative connotations at the time. Such mystics, it was said, ‘had neither tradition nor genealogy’, with a history dating back only three or four centuries, and whose writings were ever straying away from institutional Christian orthodoxy.⁸⁵

De Certeau argues that the prevailing strategy that apologists and defenders of the mystical employed against the general decline of the status of mysticism within the Christian Church was ‘the invention of an ancient mystical tradition within the orthodox walls of Christianity’.⁸⁶ As a consequence, Western intellectual culture

⁸² ‘Mysticism’, *Diacritics* (pp. 13, 15-6).

⁸³ *Mystic Fable*, I, pp. 95-6.

⁸⁴ Richard King, *Orientalism*, pp. 15-6.

⁸⁵ *Mystic Fable*, I, pp. 108-9.

⁸⁶ *Mystic Fable*, I, pp. 110; and Richard King, *Orientalism*, p. 18.

witnessed a proliferation of ‘mystical literature’, the production of which involved the gathering together of a sufficient body of texts already extant from the long history of the Christian tradition – such as the hagiographies and writings of saints, or the corpus of patristic and scriptural works – all of which were then reinterpreted and labelled ‘mystic’ in order to ‘distinguish them from other past and contemporary texts (theological treatises, biblical commentaries, etc.)’. To borrow de Certeau’s language, it is through the isolation of such texts, and their delimitation by ‘a *proper name* (“mystic”)', that ‘a mystic tradition was fabricated’.⁸⁷ The reinterpretation of old material involved shifting attention to new aspects of the texts which highlighted their contemplative purposes: for example, the shift could be ‘from a focus upon the virtues and miracles of the saints to an interest in extraordinary experiences and states of mind’. ‘The consequence of this’, as Richard King explains, ‘was that it tied the newly sanctified mystics and their apologists to the established tradition of the exegesis and the overarching authority of the Church, as well as binding them to a canon of acceptable and orthodox ecclesiastical literature’.⁸⁸ More importantly for the development of the conceptual category of mysticism, however, de Certeau maintains that the consequence of the formation (or fabrication) of a mystical tradition is that it further established the category as a substantive in its own right, indicating the rise of its significance as a category of thought, and a legitimate subject matter of scientific and philosophical inquiry.

Whereas the ‘grammatical promotion’ of the French adjective ‘mystique’ to its noun form ‘la mystique’ occurred sometime at the juncture of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries,⁸⁹ its parallel in English came to pass only in the mid-eighteenth century, as noted by Leigh Schmidt in an indispensable article on the modern making of mysticism in Anglo-American culture. Prior to that, and through the early decades of the eighteenth century, the English adjectival forms of the category were the words ‘mystic’ and ‘mystical’, and they were still, as Schmidt observes, ‘inextricably woven into a larger system of Christian theology, linked at the level of practice to a recognizable set of devotional and exegetical habits’. Hence, in Thomas Blount’s 1656 definition of ‘mystical theology’, for instance, we find that the category retains its medieval association with the contemplative branch of Christian worship:

⁸⁷ ‘Mysticism’, *Diacritics* (p. 13,); *Heterologies*, p. 81-2; and *Mystic Fable*, I, pp. 13-17.

⁸⁸ Richard King, *Orientalism*, p. 18.

⁸⁹ Michael B. Smith, ‘Translator’s Note’, in *The Mystic Fable*, I, pp. ix-x (p. x).

Mystical Theology, is nothing else in general but certain Rules, by the practise whereof, a vertuous Christian may attain to a nearer, a more familiar, and beyond all expression comfortable conversation with God.

Similarly, in its conceptual engagement with the category in question, Ephraim Chambers's *Cyclopædia* (1738) emphasizes 'the *mystical sense* of Scripture', which reveals the persistence of the mystical hermeneutics of scripture in Anglo-American discourse well into the eighteenth century.⁹⁰

However, Schmidt contends that, when the noun 'mysticism' first came into use in the English-speaking world, it reflected an evident shift in the semantics of the category, emerging 'as a term charged with the reproaches of misplaced sexuality, unintelligibility, pretension, and reason-be-damned extravagance'. He explains that the category's newly acquired negative connotations were related to how the term was socially located within eighteenth-century debates about the makings of a 'reasonable religion', namely, a religion that is in accordance with the Enlightenment values of rationality, public decorum, balance, proportion and moderation. More specifically, Schmidt maintains that the category's new formation was chiefly used as part of an Enlightenment critique of religious enthusiasm, which it increasingly sought to depict in sexualized terms as a form of 'false religion'. To this kind of critique belongs, for example, Ephraim Chambers's association of the mystics with 'fanatic ecstasies, and amorous extravagancies', as well as Henry Coventry's distinction between 'the seraphic entertainments of mysticism and extasy' and 'the true spirit of acceptable religion'. That Coventry's construal of mysticism is highly sexualized is evident in his view that the root cause of all mystical devotion is 'disappointed love': the individual's unfulfilled passions and desires are said to be 'transferred from mere mortals to a spiritual and divine object, and love [...] is sublimated into devotion'. This is why, addressing female mystics, Coventry attributed their suffering to 'the want of timely application from our sex', and their need to experience the physical gratifications of 'connubial love'.⁹¹

In addition to this, Schmidt identifies another significant aspect of the English Enlightenment approach to mysticism, also in relation to religious enthusiasm, and this is its attempt to limit the category's field of signification by infusing it with

⁹⁰ Schmidt, 'MMM' (p. 277).

⁹¹ Schmidt, 'MMM' (pp. 277-80).

thoroughly sectarian connotations. Mysticism, in this case, is primarily characterized, not by a specific set of recognizable features or attributes, but by being peculiar to an inconsequential number of small sects within Christianity, especially the Quietists the Quakers and the Methodists. Schmidt's evidence for this is substantial, but perhaps most pertinent to this review is the fact that, up to its seventh edition of 1842, the *Encyclopædia Britannica* showed a preference for the classification 'mystics' over 'mysticism' for its entry titles on the category, a choice that underscores the sectarian understanding of the subject matter which ran through its discussions. That is, the category was no longer principally identified with a type of theology or scriptural hermeneutics, but rather with 'a particular sect of Christians, a definable group of pious (if misguided) souls'. A case in point is the entry of the 1797 edition, which in part reads thus:

MYSTICS, [...] a kind of religious sect, distinguished by their professing pure, sublime, and perfect devotion, with an entire disinterested love of God, free from all selfish considerations. [...] The principles of this sect were adopted by those called Quietists in the seventeenth century, and under different modifications, by the Quakers and Methodists.

Schmidt further explains that such a construction of the category 'was marked by a specific Anglican politics of ecclesiastical containment', where 'mystics' were recognized as 'just one more sect, among many, prickling magisterial forms of established Christianity'. It was an argument against taking seriously the notion of mysticism's historical continuity that came with the seventeenth-century invention of a 'mystical tradition', as well as an attempt to detract from its significance as a cultural force that could lay any claims to knowledge about the true nature of religion. Therefore, the category was regularly being employed as a 'party label' for 'a singular brand of recent enthusiasts and pietists', 'an often amorous, always muddleheaded sect whose members, for all their devout fancies, were too absorbed with solitary practices to be overly dangerous'.⁹²

In his survey of the Anglo-American intellectual scene of the nineteenth-century, moreover, Schmidt identifies the 1840s and 1850s as another key turning point in the social construction of the term in Western culture. It is at this point in the history of modern Britain and America, he contends, that the category was clearly

⁹² Schmidt, 'MMM' (pp. 279-80, 282).

being extricated from the cultural matrix of its Medieval and Enlightenment origins.⁹³ No longer predominantly related to an ancient Christian exegetical or contemplative tradition, nor primarily used ‘as a stick’ with which to beat the fanatical excesses of false religious sects,⁹⁴ the mid-nineteenth-century concept of mysticism was undergoing a definitional shift from which it would ultimately emerge a romanticized construct: it would become ‘loosely’ spiritual, universal, perennial and eclectic; so argues Schmidt in his reference to the updated edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, a source that, according to him, offers a good and relevant measure for tracking the cultural construction of concepts. Indeed, in its eighth edition of 1858, the entry on ‘mysticism’ declares that ‘its main characteristics are constantly the same, whether they find expression in the Bagvat-gita of the Hindu, or in the writings of Emmanuel Swedenborg’. The entry particularly establishes the notion of the global and all-inclusive nature of the mystical through the diversity of the types of mysticism that it now covers, ranging across historical, geographical and national divides: these include the mysticisms of the Neo-Platonists, the Greeks, the Germans, the Orientals, and the Spanish. One thing becomes clear from this, and that is that, for those in Britain who undertook to review the period’s current state of knowledge (namely, the writers and editors of encyclopaedias), mysticism appeared ‘much grander than a peculiar party within Christianity’.⁹⁵

Such a conception of the term finds similar articulations across the Atlantic, especially those coming from the Protestant liberal circles of Transcendentalist New England, where Ralph Waldo Emerson was celebrated as ‘chief singer of his time at the high court of Mysticism’. It was a place, as Schmidt points out, that was crucial in producing William James’s theories. From this intellectual climate comes, for example, the 1861 statement of the Unitarian and Transcendentalist preacher, Octavius Frothingham, that mysticism is peculiar ‘to no sect of believers, to no church, to no religion; it is found equally among orthodox and heterodox, Protestants and Catholics, Pagans and Christians, Greeks and Hindoos, the people of the Old World and the people of the New’. Bronson Alcott, a member of the Transcendental Club,⁹⁶ would write, too, to the same effect that mysticism ‘is the sacred spark that has

⁹³ Schmidt, ‘MMM’ (pp. 282, 286).

⁹⁴ Erik Tønning, *Modernism and Christianity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 14.

⁹⁵ Schmidt, ‘MMM’ (pp. 282, 286).

⁹⁶ A group of New England Unitarian ministers and intellectuals who met from the early to the mid-nineteenth century to discuss questions of philosophy and religion.

lighted the piety and illuminated the philosophy of all places and times'. Also belonging to this liberal religious culture is Unitarian James Freeman Clarke, an influential figure in Comparative Religion and author of the popular *Ten Great Religions* (1871-1883). Clarke's 1880 lecture on 'The Mystics of All Religions' describes the mystic as follows:

He sees through the shows of things to their centre, becomes independent of time and space, master of his body and mind, ruler of nature by the sight of her inmost laws, and elevated above all partial religions into the Universal Religion. This is the essence of mysticism.

According to Schmidt, the essentialist overtones of this kind of discourse set the stage for William James's later reconfiguration of mysticism as an experiential category. He explains that, for James and his intellectual progenitors, the project of universalizing and de-historicizing mysticism was possible only by recasting it as 'solitary subjectivity': this involved not only defining mysticism, first and foremost, as experience, but equally characterizing it as an intensely private and interior one, which, in turn, served to disassociate it from all theologies, all doctrines, all rituals, and all institutions, and, hence, from historical and cultural particularity.⁹⁷ Of course, in the hands of William James, a chief contributor to the development of modern psychology,⁹⁸ this led to the psychologization of mysticism.

Albeit with some modifications and marked differences of opinion, this is the modern understanding of mysticism that has endured to the present century, and which current social and cultural constructivists are seeking to deconstruct. As suggested by Schmidt, the deconstruction of this category involves examining 'both the larger processes and the local peculiarities' that have contributed to its development. This means, on the one hand, that there is an overall shared narrative of the modern construction of mysticism within the larger context of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Euro-American culture; and, on the other, that a multitude of lesser narratives can be traced in how this category was formulated within more particularized contexts. To be sure, Schmidt's own study – while giving an overview of some of the larger cultural processes that went into the creation of modern mysticism in nineteenth-century Europe and America – is specifically interested in

⁹⁷ Schmidt, 'MMM' (pp. 284-85, 287-88).

⁹⁸ For William James's distinguished place in the history of modern psychology, see Erik Tønning, *Modernism and Christianity*, p. 14.

probing the dynamics of the category's modern development in the context of New England Transcendentalism. This is why, in addition to arguing that modern mysticism arose as an 'antipositivist' and 'antimaterialist tool' for the protection of religion against the general forces of Western scientific reductionism, Schmidt proposes that the construct was also a part of the more particular discourse of the American pre- and post-Civil War period, advanced by those 'seeking a religious vision to serve the national cause of political and religious union'. 'The Unitarian Transcendentalist fascination with a universalistic mysticism', he states, was geared toward 'capturing a holy union out of the rubble of rival nationalisms, North and South'.⁹⁹

Aside from Schmidt, feminist scholars Grace Jantzen and Joy R. Bostic offer other particularized narratives of mysticism's modern invention within the more specific context of feminine spirituality. Focusing on William James's notion of the ineffability (or inexpressibility) of mystical experiences, Jantzen argues that, whether aware or not, modern philosophers and psychologists reformulated mysticism into an ineffable, privatized and feminized category in a way that it ensured it remained the same patriarchal construct it had always been, one that reinforces the political suppression of women:

Whereas in the medieval era the religious in general and the mystical in particular was far too important to be left to women, in the modern era mysticism and religious experience are indeed seen as available to women, but with their feminisation, they have also been marginalized. [...] The alleged inexpressibility of mystical experience correlates neatly with the silencing of women in the public arena of the secular world: women may be mystics, but mysticism is a private intense experience not communicable in everyday language and not of political relevance.¹⁰⁰

Joy R. Bostic, on the other hand, investigates how Christian-identified African American women of the nineteenth century sought to subvert the dehumanizing gender and racial stereotypes that were an integral part of the cultural discourses of a patriarchal and white supremacist system. She argues that, in such a context, 'mysticism' and 'religious experience' figured as emancipatory constructs, ones that empowered black females to construct their own identities as 'emancipated subjects',

⁹⁹ Schmidt, 'MMM' (pp. 284, 289).

¹⁰⁰ Jantzen, *PGCM*, pp. 321, 326.

and to ‘create their own autonomous spaces for activism and agency’. The latter is what Bostic refers to as ‘mystical spaces’, contending that, within them, these women became ‘social agents’ with ‘multipositional, relational, and complex’ identities, who believed themselves rightfully capable of ‘communal political engagement’. In other words, the mystical, as Bostic insists, represented one way in which the nineteenth century African American woman ‘resisted the cultural impositions of one-note stereotypes and gendered role limitations’.¹⁰¹

Added to this, and as final examples in this genealogical overview, contemporary scholarship by Richard King and Robert H. Sharf has similarly contributed to the study of the modern construction of mysticism, offering deconstructions of the category that are predominantly positioned within the postcolonial project. In this case, the larger narrative involves the social, political and/or ideological ‘othering’ of the mystical by Western imperialist discourse (or its legacies), a narrative that follows various trajectories according to its historical particularity.¹⁰² Building on Edward Said’s thesis that ‘Orientalism is as concerned with the Occident and the preservation of Western cultural identity through the projection of an Oriental Other as it has been with the manipulation of the East’, Richard King offers an analysis of the colonial constructions of ‘the mystic East’ that leads to the following conclusion:

The representation of Hinduism and Buddhism as mystical religions has functioned to reinforce Western Orientalist stereotypes of eastern religion and culture as world denying, amoral and lacking an impulse to improve society. This has allowed the West to define itself as progressive, scientific and liberal in contrast to the

¹⁰¹ Bostic, *African American Female Mysticism*, pp. 1-3, 20.

¹⁰² Whereas King’s and Sharf’s studies focus on the Indological context, other examples of this line of research include Carl W. Ernest’s problematization of the western category of ‘Sufism’, or ‘Islamic mysticism’, as well as Jeremy Carrette’s and Richard King’s study of the place of mysticism within today’s Western capitalist consumer society. Ernest mainly argues that ‘the nonpolitical image of Sufism is illusory’, partly a product of an Orientalist conception of Sufism as a purely ‘literary’ tradition that ‘had no intrinsic relation with the faith of Islam’, and partly a product of late twentieth century attempts to de-politicize Islam in the face of media representations of Muslims as terrorists. Alternatively, Carrette and King propose that contemporary conceptions of ‘spirituality’ and ‘mysticism’ as private, psychologized experiences are ‘a means of reflecting and supporting social and economic policies geared towards the neoliberal ideals of privatisation and corporatisation’. They believe that such conceptions are a part of a discourse that reinforces an understanding of human suffering, not as a social condition that can be alleviated through social reform and political activism, but as an ‘isolated’ and ‘private reality’ that should be individually managed (or pacified) through a commodified form of religion – ‘a self-styled and custom-built spirituality purchased in the marketplace’: See Ernest, ‘Between Orientalism and Fundamentalism’ (pp. 108-10); and Carrette and King, *Selling Spirituality*, pp. 2, 80.

superstitious, tradition-bound and ‘underdeveloped’ Third World nations of Asia.¹⁰³

From the opposite side, Robert H. Sharf points out that western-educated Asian intellectuals were deeply aware of the Occidentals’ contemptuous views of Asian religions, and how these were blamed for the Asian continent’s social, political and scientific backwardness. He explains that, threatened by the continuation of the West’s cultural and political imperialism, as well as its technological and military advances, these intellectuals responded with a counter-colonial discourse that reinforced the image of the East as being mystical, and further contributed to the construction of modern mysticism as an experiential category:

Asian intellectuals [...] would not only affirm the experiential foundation of their own religious traditions, but they would turn around and present those traditions as more intuitive, more mystical, more experiential, and thus ‘purer’ than the discursive faiths of the West. In short, if the West excelled materially, the East excelled spiritually. This strategy had the felicitous result of thwarting [...] the threat of Western cultural hegemony.

Sharf not only highlights the significant impact these westernized Asian scholars had on the study of religion in the West, but also credits them with establishing ‘the romanticized image of Asian mysticism’ in Western writings.¹⁰⁴

4. Problematizations of Mysticism in the Literary Context of Victorian England: A Review of Literature

Having given a general sketch of the origins and climactic changes of meaning that ‘mysticism’ has undergone through its long history, including a few examples of the cultural agendas at play at different stages of the term’s historical development, I would like to reiterate what several scholars have suggested, that research on the ‘archaeology’ of the term is still relatively new.¹⁰⁵ Amy Hollywood has recently affirmed (2012) that ‘the story of the modern articulation of the category of mysticism is only beginning to be written’, and she seconds Leigh Schmidt’s opinion that one lacuna in the previous literature on the subject is the absence of any serious examination of the term’s genealogical inheritance from the eighteenth- and

¹⁰³ *Orientalism*, p. 33; and ‘Mysticism and Spirituality’ (p. 320).

¹⁰⁴ ‘Rhetoric of Experience’ (pp. 275-6).

¹⁰⁵ Peter Tyler, *The Return to the Mystical*, p. 4.

nineteenth centuries.¹⁰⁶ Schmidt had argued in ‘The Making of Modern “Mysticism”’ (2003) that critics and cultural historians who have investigated the development of mysticism as a modern essentialist construct have made a ‘major historical oversight’ in identifying the early seventeenth century and the turn of the twentieth century as the two key moments in this category’s modern construction, leaving ‘a gaping eighteenth- and nineteenth-century hole’ in their accounts. This view, according to Schmidt, ‘skims across many of the most important developments within the category’s modern formation’, because ‘most of the figures who actually matter in making mysticism a universal construct fall into this massive historical gap and receive little or no mention at all’.¹⁰⁷ In this sense, Schmidt’s article is an unprecedented attempt at filling this chronological lacuna, a task he takes up again in *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality* (2005); and, as Amy Hollywood observes, Schmidt’s research on the subject ‘plugs in crucial pieces of the Anglo-American story’.¹⁰⁸ It is incumbent to point out here, however, that, in both studies, Schmidt is interested in the conceptual transformations that mysticism underwent on British soil only insofar as they represent a significant stage in the term’s transatlantic migration from Europe to America, with the American context being the chief subject of his analysis. In other words, instructive and indispensable as it is, Schmidt’s discussion of the construction of mysticism in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British culture is confined to a short survey of the major developments occurring in that context, leaving much room for further research.

As far as nineteenth-century Britain is concerned, the last decade or so has witnessed the emergence of other studies that are mindful of the cultural constructedness of mysticism within this context. For example, In 2004, as part of her examination of the fin-de-siècle occultism of the last two decades of the nineteenth century, cultural historian Alex Owen locates the late-Victorian interest in mysticism (and other occult phenomena) in relation to ‘major secular developments in the understanding of mind and consciousness’, arguing that this interest ‘constituted a crucial enactment of the ambiguities of “the modern”’. She particularly explores how the mystical revival’ of the 1880s-1890s was partly involved in the fin-de-siècle construction of a psychologized subjectivity that resisted ‘a purely secularized

¹⁰⁶ Hollywood, ‘Introduction’ (p. 6).

¹⁰⁷ Schmidt, ‘MMM’ (pp. 275).

¹⁰⁸ ‘Introduction’ (p. 6).

formulation of human consciousness’ even though it embraced the medical psychologists’ view of it as an ‘invariably fragmented or multiple self, formulated through complex processes of remembering and forgetting, and one in which the conscious “I” of the moment is inherently unreliable and unstable’. Its ambiguity, as Owen observes, lies in how ‘it was centrally concerned with a renegotiation of self that sought an accommodation with a unifying and transcendental spirituality even as it understood the self’s multiplicity and contingency’.¹⁰⁹ In addition to Owen’s work, the last few years have seen similar investigations particularly in the field of literary studies. This is a welcome shift from the essentialist outlook that had dominated literary critical debates on the question of mysticism up to the eighties of the last century, and which still persists today – to which I will turn in the following section. The recent literary critical discussions that I am aware of which bear some proximity to the context of my own work, and which examine mysticism in fairly constructivist terms, are Colleen Pauza’s ‘Mysticism and the Mind: Varieties of Subjectivities in British and Irish Fiction, 1860-1940 and Beyond’ (2009),¹¹⁰ Cory Hutchinson-Reuss’s ‘Mystical Compositions of the Self: Women, Modernism, and Empire’ (2010),¹¹¹ and Anna Neill’s *Primitive Minds: Evolution and Spiritual Experience in the Victorian Novel* (2013).¹¹² As Hutchinson-Reuss notes, studies of this kind¹¹³ partake in the larger critical conversation of ‘rethinking James’ that has principally taken place in the fields of philosophy, history and religious studies, but which has no doubt furnished literary critics with ample cues for further analysis and discussion. Whether explicitly stated or not, these studies contribute to building mysticism’s genealogical narrative that aims to unhinge the category from the eternal, de-politicized and universal realm in which William James had placed it at the turn of the twentieth century, bringing it back to the ‘conditioning webs’ of culture and history.¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁹ Owen, *The Place of Enchantment*, pp. 13, 114-47.

¹¹⁰ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of California Davis, 2009).

¹¹¹ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Iowa, 2010).

¹¹² (Ohio: Ohio State University, 2013). See, for example, the chapter on ‘Medical Science and Mysticism in *The Moonstone*’ (pp. 129-134).

¹¹³ The particular studies that Hutchinson-Reuss refers to address the intersection between mysticism and literary modernism, such as the chapters on Aurobindo Ghose, Sister Nivedita, and William Butler Yeats in Elleke Boehmer’s *Empire, the National, and the Postcolonial, 1890-1920: Resistance in Interaction* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002); and Alex Owen’s discussions on mysticism in *The Place of Enchantment*, found on pages 114-47, for example.

¹¹⁴ Schmidt, ‘MMM’ (p. 274). I do not include here Sarah A. Willburn’s *Possessed Victorians: Extra Spheres in Nineteenth-Century Mystical Writings* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), because she uses the term ‘mysticism’ in a fairly loose sense to include ‘spiritualism’, or to refer to a wide range of extraordinary phenomena (both public and private) that fall under the broader category of ‘occultism’, such

Colleen Pauza's 'Mysticism and the Mind' documents the emergence of mystical narrative elements in Victorian realist fiction as early as the mid-nineteenth-century, identifying these as the source of the modernist conception of stream-of-consciousness subjectivity, both of which are said to have been shaped by the constant merging of the spiritual and the physiological in the period's psychological theories of the mind. One of the aims of Pauza's work is to trace back some features of modern mysticism to George Eliot's undogmatic construction of a 'religion of humanity' in her realist fiction, and how the latter was made possible through Eliot's innovative narrative techniques. Taking inspiration from the work of Grace Jantzen and Richard King, Cory Hutchinson-Reuss's study is an exploration of the gendered and orientalist mechanisms of authority in the mystical discourse of women writers who were conscious of the pervasive nationalist and imperialist climate of their times. Her study centres on how these writers 'turned to the internal landscapes of the self and developed new aesthetic forms to convey psycho-spiritual reality', arguing that the women writers she covers 'occupy a range of positions regarding the self's conundrums, depending upon the kind of mysticism they craft and the political issues they engage'.¹¹⁵ It should be noted, however, that Hutchinson-Reuss's focus on the nineteenth century is confined to the developments occurring in its last decade, and these are examined more in the context of Modernism than in the context of late-Victorian literature. Anna Neill's *Primitive Minds* lends support to Pauza's work in her investigation of how episodes of mystical experience correspond with the findings of nineteenth-century physiological psychology in the Victorian realist novel, and how this is especially manifested in 'the creation of a narrative first-person or omniscient, centered consciousness', one of the grounds on which this genre 'rests its claim to modernity'. Neill particularly argues that, following the lead of Victorian evolutionist mental science, nineteenth-century realist fiction views mystical states of consciousness as cases of 'temporary cerebral malfunction' or 'pathological mental events' associated with 'an evolutionary lower state' that, nevertheless, 'unlock perceptions of the "real" beyond the lens of ordinary human consciousness'. For Neill, then, a mystical state of consciousness 'opens a space in the realist narrative fabric for the supernatural', where the supernatural does not merely serve as an 'object of

as table-rapping, mediumship, mesmerism, seances, palmistry, clairvoyance, astral travel, and crystal-gazing. See Alex Owen's *The Place of Enchantment*, pp. 3-6, for the difference between 'mysticism', 'spiritualism' and 'occultism'.

¹¹⁵ Hutchinson-Reuss, pp. 4-5.

scientific curiosity', but rather forms 'the very perceptual basis by which these narratives are able to discern significant connections among characters, objects and everyday human events'.¹¹⁶

As these studies may indicate, current historical and literary research on the nineteenth-century category of mysticism generally points to a growing interest in exploring its relationship to the developing field of psychology in the second half of the nineteenth century. Within the field of Victorian literary studies, moreover, the research interest is more specifically concerned with how the category was shaped by the shift of emphasis from a philosophical to a physiological perspective in mid-nineteenth-century scientific studies of the mind,¹¹⁷ and how this played out in the Victorian realist fiction of the 1860s onward. This is indeed a valuable and rich avenue for uncovering some of the complex discursive processes through which the Jamesian definition of mysticism was constructed, offering insights that have not been previously addressed by the historical problematizations of the category that focus on its seventeenth- and twentieth-century developments. However, this attention to the interconnections of mysticism and Victorian advances in psychology cannot adequately account for the century's earlier attempt, in the 1840s, to intellectually rehabilitate mysticism from public abuse,¹¹⁸ an endeavour that clearly had firmer ties to German philosophical Idealism. Another research avenue that can better help account for this, and which I believe is just as significant and promising for charting some of the cultural contours of nineteenth-century mysticism, is to examine the place of mysticism in Victorian poetry and poetic theory. This is neither to say that mysticism's engagement with philosophical idealism, on the one hand, and the poetry and poetics of the period, on the other, was confined to the early part of the century; nor to imply that German idealism was the only conduit through which the nineteenth-century categories of poetry and mysticism overlapped, for psychology certainly constituted another one. Rather, it is simply to argue that, through their negotiation and appropriation of the philosophy of the German Romantics, Victorian poets and their critics had much to do with the century's earlier attempt at reconfiguring mysticism, and that acknowledging the significance of this begs an analysis of the larger question of their role in the modern formation of the category. *The Making of*

¹¹⁶ Neill, pp. 2-3, 5.

¹¹⁷ Gregory Tate, *The Poet's Mind: The Psychology of Victorian Poetry 1830-1870* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

¹¹⁸ Schmidt, 'MMM' (p. 282-3).

and Aesthetic and Ineffable 'Mysticism' in Victorian Poetry and Poetics is an attempt to illuminate some key aspects of this question. As the title of my thesis indicates, I am particularly interested in the Victorians' contribution to the construction of mysticism as an aesthetic (or poetic) and ineffable category, and the cultural dynamics involved in that.

Employing 'mysticism' as an analytic category in the study of Victorian poetry is, of course, nothing new. One can easily compile an extensive bibliography of the academic critical literature devoted to analysing the mysticism of various poets of the period – that is, those whose writings have been traditionally thought to manifest elements of mystical experience. Such critical assessments, however, and as hinted earlier, have been conducted from a predominantly essentialist viewpoint, which explains why any bibliography of this kind would show a general decline in the literary scholarship on the subject during the last two decades of the past century: it is a decline that, in my opinion, coincides with the falling-out-of-favour of the essentialist theory of mysticism, itself brought about by the advent of Katzian constructivism in the late 1970s. As Leigh Schmidt has declared, 'mysticism', in its essentialist sense, 'is a category in disrepair', and 'its fall from theoretical grace has been precipitous'.¹¹⁹ But the fact that the essentialist paradigm has fallen on hard times does not mean that mysticism should become an outmoded category in critical discussions of nineteenth-century poets. It certainly does not detract from the fact that the mystical, as a concept, was a crucial one in the Victorian literary and critical imagination. On the contrary, I believe that adopting a constructivist approach to the subject can do much in the way of recuperating mysticism as a viable category for the analysis of the period's poetry and its poetics. The constructivist reading that this thesis sets out to offer, therefore, is not solely for the purpose of uncovering the role of the period's poetic culture in the modern construction of mysticism, but equally to cast light on how mysticism was a constitutive discourse in the Victorian making of (and theorizing about) poetry. In the chapters that follow, then, the discussion will be principally directed towards highlighting the Victorians' preoccupation with the mystical, and how it informed their poetical output, as well as their criticism of it; concurrently, it will aim to delineate how the nineteenth-century discourses of and about poetry constituted one of the vital cultural channels that shaped the vast terrain

¹¹⁹ Schmidt, 'MMM' (p. 273-4).

mysticism would come to occupy at the turn of the twentieth century.

The Making of and Aesthetic and ineffable 'Mysticism' in Victorian Poetry and Poetics never strays far from the kind of questions that guide any constructivist deconstruction of the mystical, such as those proposed by Richard King at the outset of *Orientalism*:

In any given sociohistorical context, what is the agenda of power underlying a particular characterization of mysticism? What evaluative judgments are being made in the decision to include or exclude certain phenomena from the category? What is at stake in giving a particular definition of the subject matter? ¹²⁰

These questions, of course, do not purport to introduce us to completely new ground in the literary scholarship on mysticism and Victorian poetry, for even the essentialist readings of the past century have occasionally touched upon, in one way or another, the cultural aspects of a given poet's mystical experience/s. Nonetheless, such considerations of the nineteenth-century nexus of the mystical and the poetic from the perspective of cultural studies are mostly limited to instances of isolated discussions within studies that are primarily concerned with other topics, and seldom do more than point out the influence of the mystical on a particular poet or text.¹²¹ To my knowledge, no one has as yet undertaken a full-length study devoted entirely to the subject at hand. The problematization of mysticism that I offer here roughly spans the period between the mid-1820s and 1880s, a relatively broad context that allows me to draw connections among various poets, critics and their works, and weave these into a readable narrative where mysticism figures as a key player in the collective aesthetic consciousness of an age. It goes without saying that the approach of the present study does not aim or profess to effect a paradigm shift in the literary scholarship on mysticism, but is an attempt to explicitly define and reinforce an already emerging discourse in literary critical analyses that deal with this category. How my thesis seeks to answer the above questions will be outlined in the following section, but not before a brief look at some examples of the dominant essentialism of previous scholarship on the subject, and some of the theoretical issues that inform my approach.

¹²⁰ *Orientalism*, p. 9.

¹²¹ See, for example, Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Scrutinies: Reviews of Poetry, 1830-1870* (London: Athlone, 1972), pp. 6-7; as well as the chapter entitled 'James Thomson: Atheist, Blasphemer and Anarchist' in Armstrong's *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 449-66.

5. Moving Beyond the Essentialist/Constructivist Divide: A Critique of Essentialist Readings of Victorian Poetry

‘In aftertimes’, stated an anonymous essay of 1862, ‘when the characteristics of this century shall have been reflected upon, and chronicled, the mystic tendencies of it will assuredly not be forgotten’.¹²² This is exactly so; from the turn of the twentieth century onward, the critical literature that has noted the mystical tendencies of the Victorian period in general, and its poetry in particular, has been voluminous. With regard to the portion of it that focuses on the period’s poetry, I have earlier proposed that it has tended to cluster at the essentialist end of the spectrum, and I argue here that this is evident in its preoccupation with evaluating the phenomenological status of the ecstatic type of experiences that figure in Victorian poetry, those which have the potential of being considered mystical. Bearing in mind that the declared objective of its evaluations has often been to determine whether or not a given experience is worthy of being called ‘mystical’, the underlying premise that obviously drives the decisions of studies that belong to this literature is the belief that mysticism possesses an essential phenomenological character against which particular experiences can be judged. Of course, I exclude from this kind of criticism the substantial critical scholarship in which the terms ‘mystic’, ‘mystical’ and ‘mysticism’ are employed in a perfunctory manner, typically in a single throwaway statement, and with only a loose sense of their meaning. By this, I am referring to studies whose scholarly preoccupations are with other research questions unrelated to mysticism, and whose usage of the terms is at best incidental, showing no critical investment in the category’s essentialist/constructivist implications; such studies do not (and are not intended to) intervene in the literary critical debate over the mysticism of Victorian poets. The essentialist scholarship I have in mind, on the other hand, uses mysticism as a main analytic category and, so, directly takes part in that critical conversation. Examples from this literature are too numerous to catalogue here, but it would perhaps suffice to offer some representative examples from the literary scholarship on two Victorian poets whose writings have particularly attracted this kind of critical attention, namely, Alfred Lord Tennyson and Gerard Manley Hopkins.

¹²² ‘Modern Mysticism and Modern Science’, *The St. James’s Magazine*, 3.5 (1862), 179-189 (p. 179).

Under a section entitled ‘Theism, No Mysticism’ in an article on “‘Vision” in “The Holy Grail”” (1996), James Bennett argues for the ‘rejection of the label “mystic” for Tennyson’. Although he admits that the poet often turned to the realm of private experience for a ‘personal relationship with the divine’, he believes that Tennyson’s intuitions did not amount to the mysticism of a Suso or a Richard Rolle, because they did not reflect the renunciative and ascetic qualities of the two. For him, the trance experience and dream of lyrics XCV and CIII of *In Memoriam* (1850), as well as the ‘waking trance’ which the poet described several times to friends and acquaintances,¹²³ may be explained in psychological terms in relation to Tennyson’s troubled ‘sense of identity’. In particular, Bennett seconds Ashton Nichols’s view that these visions are probably nothing more than ‘epiphanies’, closer to Wordsworth’s ‘spots of time’ or Browning’s ‘infinite moment’ than to anything that can be properly called ‘mystical’.¹²⁴ What Nichols specifically argues in ‘The Epiphanic Trance Poem: Why Tennyson is Not a Mystic’ (1986) is not at all different from what R. C. Zaehner and other religious theorists and critics¹²⁵ have traditionally suggested in their denial of Tennyson’s mysticism: that the poet’s trances lack an ‘intense consciousness of divine otherness’, i.e. an awareness of a personal God. In place of that, Nichols finds that these visions betray an uncertainty or doubt about the nature of the experience, which he identifies as the defining feature of the modern literary epiphany.¹²⁶

That these arguments are based on essentialist models of mysticism is evident, for instance, in how Bennett justifies his verdict by recourse to the ‘features essential to mysticism’ as described by Mark Schorer (1846) in his own denial of the genuineness of William Blake’s mysticism, an argument that, in turn, takes William James to be the religious authority on the subject.¹²⁷ This is at one remove from Nichols’s position, which directly cites James’s famous definition of mystical

¹²³ See pp. 79-81 of this thesis.

¹²⁴ James Bennett, “‘Vision” in “the Holy Grail”: Tennyson's Theistic Skepticism’, *Philological Quarterly*, 75 (1996) (pp. 251-2, 246).

¹²⁵ R. C. Zaehner, *Mysticism, Sacred and Profane* (Oxford Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 37. For other examples of this view, see Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism* (1912), pp. 281-2; Carl Sonn, ‘Poetic Vision and Religious Certainty in Tennyson’s Earlier Poetry’, *Modern Philology*, 57.2 (1959), 83-93 (p. 91); Robert Preyer, ‘Comments and Queries’, *Victorian Studies*, 8.3 (1965), 302-03 (p. 303); Kerry McSweeney, ‘The Pattern of Natural Consolation in “in Memoriam”’, *Victorian Poetry*, 11.2 (1973), 87-99 (p. 97); and H. Puckett, ‘Subjunctive Imagination in “in Memoriam”’, *Victorian Poetry*, 12 (1974), 97-124 (p. 115).

¹²⁶ *Victorian Poetry*, 24.2 (1986), 131-48 (pp. 133, 135).

¹²⁷ Bennett (p. 251-2); and Mark Schorer, *William Blake: The Politics of Vision* (New York: Holt, 1946), pp. 45-57.

experience, arguing that Tennyson's descriptions of his trances do not meet the Jamesian criterion of ineffability.¹²⁸ It should be noted, moreover, that Bennett's and Nichols's studies belong to a line of criticism that is often written in response to critics who also operate from an essentialist perspective but for the opposite purpose of proving that the poet's work is 'a record of genuine mystical experience'.¹²⁹ One such critic is Stephen Grant, who, in 'The Mystical Implications of *In Memoriam*' (1962), seeks to demonstrate a connection between the phenomenological features of a Tennysonian trance and the four characteristics of mysticism outlined in James's *Varieties*.¹³⁰ Another is Carlisle Moore (1963), who refers to the *Varieties*' two lectures on 'conversion' to propose that lyric XCV of *In Memoriam* bears all the 'earmarks' of the mystical 'phenomenon of religious conversion'.¹³¹ One reason that James's *Varieties* had such a strong hold on twentieth-century critics of Tennyson is probably that the book itself documents Tennyson's trances as one example of mystical experience, an opinion cited by A. Dwight Culler (1977) in his argument that the poet's trances were induced by a transcendental 'meditative technique' akin to the ancient mantric practices of the Indian Vedic and the Chinese Zen traditions.¹³² More recently, in 'Tennyson and Zeno: Three Infinities' (2009), W. David Shaw builds on Culler's essentialist analysis to similarly argue that, 'as a mystic who is ultimately a monist', Tennyson used 'mantras to evoke God's presence', a notion that Shaw seeks to demonstrate by analytically comparing 'the yoga of breath control and incantation' with the alternations in Tennyson's poetry between an 'elliptically' and an 'expansively sublime' style.¹³³

Moving to Hopkins scholarship, whereas James's *Varieties* makes no mention of the poet, Evelyn Underhill – the second household name in the essentialist school of mysticism – describes him as being 'perhaps the greatest mystical poet of the Victorian era', and this in her book *The Essentials of Mysticism and Other Essays* (1920).¹³⁴ One of the earliest essentialist readings of the poet in literary criticism,

¹²⁸ Nichols (p. 133).

¹²⁹ Carlisle Moore, 'Faith, Doubt, and Mystical Experience in "in Memoriam"', *Victorian Studies*, 7.2 (1963), 155-169 (p. 165).

¹³⁰ *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 2.4 (1962), 481-495 (pp. 484-7).

¹³¹ Moore (pp. 157-9, 165).

¹³² James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Longmans, 1902), pp. 374-5, hereafter *Varieties*; and A. Dwight Culler, *The Poetry of Tennyson* (London: Yale UP, 1977), pp. 1-13.

¹³³ W. David Shaw, 'Tennyson and Zeno: Three Infinities', *Victorian Poetry*, 47.1 (2009), 81-99 (pp. 81, 89-90, 93).

¹³⁴ Underhill, *The Essentials*, p. 72.

however, is found in a 1933 essay by Herbert Read, who endorses the argument of Hopkins's first biographer, the American Jesuit Gerald F. Lahey, that Hopkins's 'Terrible Sonnets' are a poetic rendering of the most dreadful and sublime stage of a mystic's spiritual development, what Saint John of the Cross christened the 'Dark Night of the Soul'. Affirming with Lahey that 'Hopkins, smiling and joyful with his friends, was at the same time on the bleak heights of spiritual night with his God',¹³⁵ Read declares that 'this absence of spiritual complacency is of the very essence of Christian Mysticism', a conclusion that clearly conceives mysticism via a phenomenological emphasis on essences.¹³⁶ In addition to Underhill and Read, W. H. Auden (1964) was also in favour of viewing Hopkins as a mystic, which he does as part of advancing his own theory of mysticism. According to Auden, there are 'four distinct kinds of mystical experience', the first of which involves being 'in communion with what Gerard Manley Hopkins called the inscape of things', namely, a joyful awareness of the 'numinous significance' and holiness of the organic and inorganic objects of the material world.¹³⁷ Auden's commitment to the essentialist paradigm is evident in how he acknowledges the authority of William James, even loosely tailoring his fourfold typology according to 'the mystical ladder' outlined in the *Varieties*,¹³⁸ while departing from its theory by proposing five fundamental features of mysticism (in place of the four Jamesian characteristics).¹³⁹

Aside from this, critics who have rejected Hopkins's mysticism have also done so on the same essentialist grounds by which Tennyson critics have denied the laureate the label 'mystic-poet': that the poet's work shows no evidence that he experienced 'the immediate awareness of God's presence in the soul'. The latter words are those of John Pick (1942) in his argument that Hopkins's poetry never 'expressed that which constituted the essence of the mystic'. For Pick, 'the essence of mysticism, of "infused contemplation" (to speak of it in theologically accurate terms), is [...] the felt contact, immediate and experiential without the intrusion of images or the discursive reason, of God's presence', a contact that he believes is nowhere to be found in the work of the Jesuit poet. From this perspective, Pick also takes issue with critics who have attributed 'the aridity and desolation' which is the subject of

¹³⁵ Gerald F. Lahey, *Gerard Manley Hopkins* (London: Oxford UP, 1930), p. 143.

¹³⁶ Herbert Read, *In Defence of Shelley and Other Essays* (London: Heinemann, 1936), pp. 122-3.

¹³⁷ W. H. Auden, 'Four Kinds of Mystical Experience', in *Understanding Mysticism*, ed. by Richard Woods (New York: Image Books, 1980), pp. 379-399 (pp. 382, 384).

¹³⁸ Compare *ibid.* (pp. 384-97) with the *Varieties* (pp. 296-304).

¹³⁹ Auden, 'Four Kinds' (pp. 382-4).

Hopkins's sombre sonnets of 1885-86 to the 'Dark Night of the Soul':

Not a single line of Hopkins that is extant bears the authentic stamp of the very essence of the Dark Night of the Senses or of the Soul. He is not in any strict sense a contemplative or mystical poet. The sufferings and trials and aridities and desolations which he [...] expressed in his Dublin poems are not *the* characteristics of the mystical life.¹⁴⁰

Pick's view is along the lines of Humphry House's (1935) previous argument of why 'Hopkins was not a mystic':

There is nothing in [his] poems to show that he felt that immediate and personal presence of God, a consciousness of which is common to the mystics [...]. There is nothing of that disturbing intimacy in the love of God which is the mark of St. Teresa and of St. John of the Cross.¹⁴¹

In recent years, moreover, Jill Muller also arrived at the same conclusions after analysing the controversial sonnets against Evelyn Underhill's chapter on 'The Dark Night of the Soul'. In her 2003 book on Hopkins's Catholicism, Muller observes that, while there is a resemblance between the morbidity expressed in the sonnets and the 'purificatory sufferings of St. John of the Cross and other mystics, such a resemblance provides a flimsy basis from which to argue that the poet was himself a mystic'. Central to her argument is the notion that Hopkins's last poems, those following the 'sonnets of desolation', 'proffer little or no evidence of mystic experience' that finally leads 'to union with God', which is the expected outcome of the traditional 'Dark Night of the Soul' according to Underhill's essentialist model.¹⁴² The persistence of this critical position is likewise evident in the recent writings of Dennis Sobolev, who judges the poet's work to be no more than 'partially' mystical, because it only fulfills what he refers to as the 'minimal definition' of mysticism. According to his article 'Gerard Manley Hopkins and the Language of Mysticism' (2004), an adequate minimal definition of mystical experience is what has been articulated by the Catholic theologian, Louis Bouyer, as being 'quite simply total self-abandonment in naked faith', which may include a spiritual awareness of the divine principle in nature. What

¹⁴⁰ John Pick, *Gerard Manley Hopkins: Priest and Poet* (London: Oxford UP, 1942), pp. 130-31.

¹⁴¹ 'A Note on Hopkins's Religious Life', in *Gerard Manley Hopkins: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Gerald Roberts (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 305-9 (pp. 307-8).

¹⁴² *Gerard Manley Hopkins and Victorian Catholicism: A Heart in Hiding* (New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 97-8.

Sobolev contrarily proposes as a maximal definition requires that there ‘be an ascent toward God’, an act of the ‘transcendence of the material world whereby the soul is reunited with its Creator’, a definition that, together with the minimal one, reinforces the same hierarchal gradations of mystical experience offered by the essentialist theories of James and Underhill.¹⁴³ Sobolev, it should be mentioned, also reiterates this argument in his most recent book *The Split World of Gerard Manley Hopkins: An Essay in Semiotic Phenomenology* (2011).¹⁴⁴

Although the above-reviewed studies on Tennyson and Hopkins differ in some important respects, one thing they have in common is their preoccupation with offering a phenomenological definition of mysticism, by which its authenticity in a given text may be evaluated, or according to which a particular text can be interpreted. As indicated in this chapter’s earlier overview of the essentialist and constructivist schools, constructivists rightly point out that one of the methodological deficiencies of the essentialist phenomenology of mysticism, to which the above studies variously subscribe, is that it is implicitly theological. This, they also argue, generates an ideologically ‘exclusionary narrative’.¹⁴⁵ Indeed, in light of the literature just reviewed, a compelling argument can be made that any literary-critical study adopting this approach cannot escape making onto-theological truth claims that are many times imposed on the reader, or on the literary text itself. This is because such a study depends in its analysis on a number of ontological and phenomenological categories that it ‘unreflectively’ takes as real, self-evident, universal, and as constituting stable referents from which the meaning of the literary text can be derived, and this without addressing the problem that categories of this kind are, in fact, highly contentious.

For example, in the literary interpretations put forth by James Bennett, Ashton Nichols (in Tennyson scholarship), John Pick, Humphry House, Jill Muller and Dennis Sobolev (in Hopkins scholarship), the critic takes it for granted not only that mystical experiences are objectively real, but also that genuine mysticism must ‘essentially’ involve a spiritual merger in ‘the Other’ (that is, a personal God who is separate from creation), neglecting the fact that not all readers share these religious assumptions: some readers simply do not believe in the reality of mystical experiences, even though they subscribe to a similar theistic or ‘dualistic’ religion that

¹⁴³ *Christianity and Literature*, 53.4 (2004), 455-80 (pp. 469-70).

¹⁴⁴ (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2011), pp. 85-7.

¹⁴⁵ Benjamin Fong, ‘On Critics’ (p. 1127).

‘insists upon the distinction between the creator and the created’; some, on the other hand, do take seriously the mystics’ claims, but adhere to a ‘monistic’ religious tradition that ‘views the universe as of one substance or being’ with ‘no final distinction of kind’, as in the case of some of the atheistic religions of the East;¹⁴⁶ and yet some readers are committed to a materialist ideology that has no place for the supernatural or the divine. With their religious sources being overwhelmingly Christian, or from a Christian background, the insistence of these critics that true mysticism necessarily involves a spiritual union with a personal God is clearly an imposition (whether intentional or not) of Christian categories on their readers. It demonstrates Raymond Nelson’s observation in ‘Mysticism and the Problems of Mystical Literature’ (1976) that much of the scholarship on mysticism (including that conducted in literary studies) is based on a Western and Christian point of view that privileges a dualistic religious philosophy over a monistic one. Nelson explains that this arises from the fact that ‘the most influential studies of mysticism were written by Christians at the end of the nineteenth century when most Asian religions were still suspect’.¹⁴⁷ One would not be mistaken to assume, therefore, that arguing that the perceived monistic propensities of Tennyson or Hopkins – and, by extension, of Eastern religions – constitute a false or an inferior form of mysticism ‘suggests a kind of theological or moral coercion on the part of the critic rather than an attempt at literary analysis’, to borrow the words of Harold Bloom from a related context.¹⁴⁸

But surely Bloom’s quasi-constructivist suggestion does not only apply to critics who base their analysis on religious views that privilege Christian ontological categories. Even in the case of A. Dwight Culler and W. David Shaw, for instance, who favourably assert Tennyson’s mysticism in relation to Eastern religious traditions, their phenomenological analyses of his poetry are similarly problematic from a constructivist point of view. This is on the grounds that implicit in their interpretations is the a priori assumption that the truth-claims of Buddhist and Hindu mystics possess ontological significance, an assumption that, again, is not likely to prove meaningful to many readers. Shaw’s study, for example, discusses how ‘Tithonus’ (1833-1859) and ‘The Ancient Sage’ (1885) verbally recreate ‘the moment

¹⁴⁶ Raymond Nelson, ‘Mysticism and the Problems of Mystical Literature’, *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature*, 30.1 (1976), 1-26 (p. 7).

¹⁴⁷ Nelson (p. 7).

¹⁴⁸ *Aldous Huxley*, Bloom’s *Modern Critical Views*, new edn (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2010), p. 29.

of fugitive enlightenment that Zen calls *satori*’, arguing that the poems depict Tennyson’s ‘experience of the Absolute’ as an ‘instant of oscillation’ between ‘the blissful moment of merging with the One and the moment of abrupt awakening when the mind draws back to reflect on its dream’. This Shaw does by referring to the essentialist Buddhist scholar T. D. Suzuki, who, in *The Field of Zen* (1970), describes the spiritual phenomenology of ‘satori’ as ‘the oneness dividing itself into the subject-object and yet retaining its oneness at the very moment that there is the awakening of a consciousness’.¹⁴⁹ But, while the thematic and stylistic implications that Shaw gleans from such a reading hold much merit for those open to Buddhist philosophy, or even to religious pluralism, how seriously can they be taken by a reader whose notions of the sacred are antithetical to this, or by one who entertains a strictly secular conception of mysticism? As Robert Sharf notes in his criticism of the essentialist rhetoric of experience found in similar studies, ‘while these representations [...] assume the rhetorical stance of phenomenological description, we are not obliged to accept them as such’:

We must remain alert to the ideological implications of such a stance. Any assertion to the effect that someone else’s inner experience bears some significance for my construal of reality is situated, by its very nature, in the public realm of contested meanings.¹⁵⁰

I do not, of course, wish to hold up the social constructivist approach to mysticism as one that is ideally free of ideologically exclusionary practices. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, some constructivists, in their hermeneutical distrust of the essentialists’ emphasis on phenomenology, have gone beyond challenging the *sui generis* discourse on mystical experiences to taking up an epistemological position that completely rejects their ontological reality. The ‘abolitionists’ or ‘deflationists’, as they are sometimes called, argue that religion – including mystical experience – ‘has no ontological status’, that it exists only as a ‘conceptual tool’, corresponding to ‘nothing outside the modern Western imagination’. For them, it is a concept that ‘is so bias, so theologically and ideologically laden, that the best thing for scholars to do is to abandon it’.¹⁵¹ Not only that, they also call for entirely disbanding or revamping the academic discipline of Religious Studies, in which the essentialist discourse has

¹⁴⁹ Shaw, ‘Tennyson and Zeno’ (p. 91).

¹⁵⁰ Sharf, ‘Rhetoric of Experience’ (p. 283).

¹⁵¹ Kevin Schilbrack, ‘Religions: Are They Real?’ (pp. 1116-19).

been vindicated for so long. Not surprisingly, however, the abolitionist view has attracted many detractors, even within the constructivist camp, and they have challenged it on multiple grounds, arguing, for instance, that there is a ‘difference between saying that religious experience is *nothing* but a discursive construction and saying that it is *something* that *is* a discursive construction’; that the constructivist approach can still entertain the notion that ‘there is a *thing* called religious experience, a *phenomenon* that *exists* in a few overlapping parts of the human world without being a universal feature of human nature’; and that it is still possible for religious theorists to talk ‘positively about religious experience in a way that avoids some of the major pitfalls of the *sui generis* approach’.¹⁵² But most significantly for the present discussion, detractors of the abolitionist line of social constructivism have called attention to how its proponents operate on a discourse that is said to be itself ‘ideologically poisonous’.¹⁵³

This argument is explored in Benjamin Y. Fong’s ‘On Critics and What’s Real: Russell McChutcheon on Religious Experience’. According to Fong, the abolitionist constructivist discourse ‘wants, effectively, to cast out scholars who treat discursive constructs as realities’, and, in doing so, ‘acts in complicity with a new power dynamic’, one that seeks to denigrate the liberal humanist project within the field of Religious Studies, asserting, instead, the primacy of the ‘critical’ perspective within the more empirically oriented disciplines of History, Anthropology and Sociology. He contends that, if this brand of social constructivism were to practice some ‘reflexive application’ of its own theories, it would find that its deconstruction of religious experience, ‘which was supposed to undermine the categories by which domination is enacted’, has ‘inadvertently led to a resentful, but no less respectful, deference to authority’.¹⁵⁴ As Grace Jantzen has it, such discourse is ‘simply postmodern criticism’s imposition of its own sense of enlightenment’.¹⁵⁵ In other words, like the religious essentialists, the academic Foucaultians on the extreme end of the essentialist-constructivist spectrum are not without their own ideological agendas, which they similarly pursue by creating their own social constructs and conceptual tools, one of which is ‘western civilization’:

¹⁵² Benjamin Fong, ‘On Critics’ (pp. 1131, 1135).

¹⁵³ Schilbrack, ‘Religions’ (p. 1131).

¹⁵⁴ Fong, ‘On Critics’ (pp. 1140-44).

¹⁵⁵ Hutchinson-Reuss, p. 26; and Jantzen, p. 9.

If the humanist is guilty of helping invent and *defend* the “ahistorical, monolithic homogeneity” *cum* ideological weapon known as religion, so too is the social constructionist guilty of helping invent and *critique* the ahistorical, monolithic homogeneity *cum* ideological weapon known as “Western Civilization”, [...] a rhetorical tool that creates and sustains his own seemingly coherent social identity.

Fong believes that one of the unfortunate consequences of the abolitionist perspective is that it has led to ‘further entrenchment’ within the constructivist/essentialist divide, in which scholars on each side ‘are only too happy to have critics rather than conversation partners’, both being ‘interested in delimiting the bounds of [the] other’:

[The] investment in the unreality of discursive products, like [the] investment in the reality of a sacred essence, plays out in a certain context of which we ought to be aware: namely, the sharp split between the “scientific” treatment of “natural” phenomena and the “critical” treatment of “constructed” phenomena, two spheres within which two very different kinds of “intellectuals” now assert and affirm themselves.¹⁵⁶

This is the place to make a few important assertions about some of the intentions underpinning the critical position I adopt in this thesis. First, my choice of employing the constructivist approach here is in no way an attempt to engage with the question of the reality or unreality of mystical experiences, nor is it necessarily a refusal of one or another essentialist definition of mysticism. Also, my rejection of the critical practice found in the above-cited studies on Tennyson and Hopkins – a practice that I believe represents a pervasive critical trend in literary studies on mysticism – should not indicate that I am, *per se*, against the use of the essentialist approach in literary criticism. Rather, what I particularly find objectionable in these studies is the absence of any form of critical reflection upon one’s adopted definition of the category, how each critic’s personal beliefs about what fundamentally constitutes the mystics’ private subjective experiences are taken as self-evident, with the implicit assumption that they are ‘not open for critical scrutiny’.¹⁵⁷ On this point, I agree with Kevin Schilbrack and others that, with the substantial amount of criticism that has been leveled so far against the perennialist paradigm, it has become

¹⁵⁶ Fong, ‘On Critics’ (pp. 1140-44).

¹⁵⁷ Sheryl Reimer-Kirkham, ‘A Critical Reading across Religion and Spirituality: Contributions of Postcolonial Theory to Nursing Ethics’, in *Religion, Religious Ethics and Nursing*, ed. by Marsha D. Fowler (New York: Springer Publishing, 2012), pp. 93-112 (p. 105).

‘indefensible’ to adopt an essentialist stance that is uncritical about ‘the epistemic location’ from which it speaks, and one that displays no awareness of ‘the complexities and nuances that any adequate view of religious experience [...] has to admit and reconcile’.¹⁵⁸ Although examples of its application have been scarce in literary criticism, I do believe that critical reflexivity is not incompatible with the essentialist focus on phenomenology, and that some aesthetic value could be derived from an application of both in a critical reading of a literary text.¹⁵⁹ This is all to say that, unlike the abolitionist scholars of social constructivism, my own preference for employing the constructivist method in this thesis is not an attempt to silence the voices of contemporary literary critics who are interested in the phenomenology of mysticism.

Having said that, I also agree with the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* that we are in need of more cultural-constructivist critiques of the mystical so as to ‘help neutralize the conception of the solely private nature of mysticism’,¹⁶⁰ a conception born of the long dominance of the essentialist approach in scholarly investigations of the category, and one from which the current state of knowledge has still not fully recovered.¹⁶¹ To state this in terms more relevant to my study, I believe

¹⁵⁸ Schilbrack, ‘Religions: Are There Any?’ (p. 1113); Reimer-Kirkham, *ibid.*; and S. K. Adlakha, *Religious Mysticism: Hinduism and Islam* (New Delhi: Mittal, 2005), pp. 6-7.

¹⁵⁹ One example of the possibility of applying both is found in the essentialist readings of the literary texts of various writer (including Dante Alighieri, Jalāl ad-Dīn Rumi, Emily Dickenson, Samuel Beckett, and Franz Kafka) that William Franke offers under the new rubric of ‘mystical discourse’ in *On What Cannot Be Said: Apophatic Discourses in Philosophy, Religion, Literature, and the Arts*, 2 vols (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007). That Franke’s readings strive for a measure of critical reflexivity is evident in the argument he makes in ‘Beyond the Limits of Reason Alone: A Critical Approach to the Religious Inspiration of Literature’, *Religion & Literature*, 41.2 (2009), 69-78, which he reiterates in his most recent book, *Secular Scriptures: Modern Theological Poetics in the Wake of Dante* (Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 2015). In the article, Franke states that ‘there is, admittedly, in my readings of literature an agenda that is not strictly that of elucidating the literary text’, one that is both ‘philosophical’ and ‘theological’. He calls this type of criticism ‘speculative’, and argues for the aesthetic value of ‘a speculative interpretation of literature’. Franke suggests that, whereas such readings do not ‘aim simply to interpret the text accurately’, and in fact use the text ‘to say something else that the philosopher or religious thinker – and only this commentator – extrapolates from it’, the act of critical interpretation is not an ‘arbitrary’ one: rather ‘literature has proved indispensable to achieving the intellectual vision articulated by the philosopher or religious thinker’. It may be true that ‘such vision is not identically the same as the literary author’s’, he observes, ‘but there is nevertheless a genetic relationship: the literary work has engendered the philosophical or religious vision’, allowing some aspects of the original author’s vision to be ‘born anew’. According to Franke, ‘the fecundity of such a relationship gives a different measure of the productivity of interpretation and even a different standard of legitimacy than the usual criteria of interpretation in literary criticism’ (pp. 73-4).

¹⁶⁰ Jerome Gellman, ‘Mysticism’, in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Edward N. Zalta, rev. edn, (Stanford University, Spring 2014 Edition) <<http://plato.stanford.edu/index.html>> [accessed 10 October 2015]

¹⁶¹ Richard King, ‘Mysticism and Spirituality’ (p. 310); and Robert H. Sharf, ‘Rhetoric of Experience’ (p. 276).

that the past dominance of the essentialist method in literary critical inquiries of mysticism has led to the treatment of ‘mystical texts’ as each being nothing but a record of an intense private subjective experience that provides genuine insights into the inner world of the writer/poet; and it is my view that this perspective ought to be neutralized by turning our attention to the cultural aspects of mysticism, attending to the fact that literary discourses of and about mysticism are inevitably inscribed in public documents, with a communicative and performative function. This is prompted by my belief that the previous critical emphasis on the experiential aspects of the mysticism of a given literary text has distracted much attention from other significant aspects of mysticism that could be recognized by analysing the same material, but in a different way. In doing the latter, I seek to achieve some measure of scholarly neutrality by taking a middle way position on the essentialist-constructivist spectrum, de-ontologizing mysticism merely for interpretive purposes, while suspending judgment on questions pertaining to the philosophy and phenomenology of religion. In this sense, my application of the constructivist approach is germane to that of Richard King, who locates his work within ‘the history of ideas’, distinguishing it ‘from philosophy on the grounds that the latter involves an engagement and evaluation of ideas rather than a non-committal examination of concepts within their own cultural and historical context’.¹⁶²

6. Thesis Scope and Structure

Save for a few instances, all of the texts I refer to in support of my argument in this thesis are not by Victorian writers whose notions of mysticism held close associations to Christian theology and exegesis, nor those who ideologically regarded themselves as speaking from within a tradition of Christian orthodoxy. For example, little or nothing is said in relation to Charles Kingsley, John Keble, Christina Rossetti, or Hopkins, not for their lack of writing on the subject. This is an intentional omission, because, as Leigh Schmidt explains, the emergence of modern mysticism as an essentialist construct at the turn of the twentieth century was the product of a certain ‘Romantic universalism’ that was expressly working towards ‘shearing it of distinct practices’ in a way that could serve as a ‘basis for moving beyond theological differences’. ‘The everlasting and triumphant mystical tradition’, William James

¹⁶² *Orientalism*, p. 1.

would aver in the *Varieties*, ‘hardly altered by differences of clime or creed. In Hinduism, in Neoplatonism, in Sufism, in Christian mysticism, in Whitmanism, we find the same recurring note’.¹⁶³ I am solely interested in nineteenth-century writers who more directly contributed to this non-theological, even anti-creedal, understanding of mysticism. Moreover, while by no means exhaustive in the selection of the materials I cite, I intend to pursue my argument across a diverse range of writers, both canonical and non-canonical, so as to indicate the far-reaching nature of the intellectual process that went into the modern making of mysticism as a poetic and an ineffable construct. But these selections are also meant to contextualize the in-depth analysis I attempt to offer of two literary figures who are of particular interest to the topic at hand: that is, Thomas Carlyle, and James Thomson (B. V.). One of the rationales for structuring my analysis around a case study of these two writers is that it would allow me to convey the great extent to which mysticism had influenced the intellectual life of individual writers living in the nineteenth century, whereas the contextualizing material could serve to indicate how the mystical preoccupations of an individual writer was part of a larger preoccupation that characterized the Victorian discourse on poetry. My choice of these two particular writers – one of whom occupied the centre of Victorian literary culture, and the other its periphery – is also significant.

In a study that primarily works with an understanding of ‘mysticism’ as a term that always represents the conceptual locus of a struggle ‘for recognition and authority’,¹⁶⁴ Carlyle is of primary importance, not only for the authoritative and central place he held among the Victorian literati, nor for his own preoccupation with the question of authority,¹⁶⁵ but also for the vital part he played in the popularization of mysticism in Victorian intellectual culture, something that this thesis intends to highlight. As for James Thomson, his significance for this study partly derives from the facts that he wrote from a peripheral cultural location, and that he was conscious of his own marginality, which I believe offers a distinctive case where mysticism functions as a category of resistance to cultural marginalization. Indeed, in his case, I

¹⁶³ Schmidt, ‘MMM’ (pp. 287-8, 290).

¹⁶⁴ Richard King, *Orientalism*, p. 18.

¹⁶⁵ For this, see, for example, Chris R. Vanden Bossche, *Carlyle and the Search for Authority* (Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1991); David Riede, ‘Transgression, Authority, and the Church of Literature in Carlyle’, in *Victorian Connections*, ed. by Jerome McGann (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989), pp. 88-120; and ‘Communities in Mourning: Making Capital Out of Loss in Thomas Carlyle’s *Past and Present* and *Heroes*’ in Daniela Garofalo’s *Manly Leaders in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (New York: SUNY Press, 2008), pp. 95-111.

argue that the struggle for authority could be understood as a response not only to the general marginalization of poetry as a cultural power, but also to the intellectual relegation that Thomson himself had suffered in consequence of his association with the militant atheism and radicalism of Charles Bradlaugh's *National Reformer*. But Thomson's significance for my analysis equally derives from the fact that, throughout the development of his religious beliefs, from the theism of his early twenties to his later self-proclaimed atheism, the poet never gave up his interest in mysticism and the belief in its fundamental relationship to poetry. Tracing the modifications of Thomson's aesthetic theory along his religious and intellectual development will help underscore two central points of this study: the first is the conceptual elasticity and openness of the category of mysticism, how it may encompass a wide range of meanings according to the spiritual or cultural needs of the individual/group by which it is employed; secondly, that the one common element that lies behind all definitions of the term is the drive for authority. I especially agree with R. A. Forsyth, who has offered an account of Thomson's 'gradual loss of faith' in response to 'the rising tide of evolutionary science', notably arguing that 'he demonstrates in miniature the spiritual history of his time; and therein rests his prime importance'.¹⁶⁶ A similar thing could be said about Thomson's significance for a study of the cultural construction of mysticism in Victorian poetry and poetics: that his career-long engagement with this concept, including his later adaptations to its definition, reflects on a larger scale the history of its development in the second half of the Victorian age: how the Romantic appropriation of the term in the mid-nineteenth century was especially freighted with religious meanings and how this would gradually change at the turn of the century, where it would become more open to secular and naturalistic interpretations.

As for the structure of my argument, it will be divided into three chapters. Chapter II, "Poetry then is Our Mysticism": The Victorian Making of an Aesthetic Mysticism', begins with a discussion of the Modernist period, with the purpose of establishing that mysticism indeed figured as an aesthetic category in twentieth-century philosophical and literary discourse, showing how its notions of the mystical were closely bound up with those of the poetic. William James, Evelyn Underhill, Aldous Huxley, T. S. Eliot, John M. Murray, Hart Crane and Wallace Stevens are among the philosophers and poets discussed in this section. The chapter's main

¹⁶⁶ 'Evolutionism and the Pessimism of James Thomson (Bv)', *Essays in Criticism*, 12.2 (1962), 148-166 (pp. 148-9).

argument is that the twentieth-century aesthetic and poetic construction of mysticism finds its source in the long Victorian debate about the nature and function of poetry, particularly that which reflected the spiritual concerns of a perceived post-Christian perspective. Building on Grace Jantzen's and Richard King's premise that definitions of mysticism represent the conceptual site of a historical struggle over meaning and authority, I propose that the period's discourse on mysticism was a constitutive discourse for Victorian formulations of poetic theory, offering poets and critics alike an important means for asserting and making sense of the place of poetry in the increasingly secularized milieu of nineteenth-century culture. I support this argument by reference to a range of Victorian thinkers and literary figures, including Thomas Carlyle, John Stuart Mill, Alfred Lord Tennyson, George Eliot, Algernon Swinburne, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, all of whom show the influence of the Romantic and German Idealist traditions in their desire to stress the authority of intuitions as an ultimate source of knowledge that is comparable, if not superior, to the much venerated logic of the rationalists.

Carlyle on mysticism is the subject of Chapter III, which aims to underscore not only Carlyle's pioneering engagement with this category, but also the leading role he played in the construction of one of the essential features of mysticism in its modernist (Jamesian) sense: namely, its ineffability. This is discussed in the context of his early inclination towards 'Germanizing the public' through his early essays of the 1820s and 1830s, which culminated in his first major work, *Sartor Resartus* (1833-4).¹⁶⁷ I particularly examine his contribution to the conceptual shift in the nineteenth-century understanding of the mystical from a category that was pejoratively used to signify 'vagueness' and 'unintelligibility' to one that was invoked as an honorific title to describe the highest order of poets, and the transcendental conditions of their poetic creativity. The chapter demonstrates that Carlyle's defence against employing mysticism in the former accusatory sense involved defending the stylistic irregularities of mystical poets by positively attributing them, not to a want of eloquence on the mystics' part, but rather to the inherent incapacity of language to accommodate their intuitions of an infinite and supernatural reality. This meant conceding that mystics are indeed vague and obscure, but only to those whose

¹⁶⁷ *The Collected Letters of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle*, ed. by Kenneth J. Fielding, Ian Campbell and others, 42 vols (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1970-present) VI, pp. 227-32, in *The Carlyle Letters Online*, ed. by Brent E. Kinser <<http://carlyleletters.dukejournals.org/>> [accessed 10 February 2016]

intuitive powers of comprehension have been dulled by the empiricism and material philosophy of the period. I also explore this argument in relation to other significant Victorian poets and critics, including Tennyson, Barrett Browning, Swinburne, and Arthur Symonds. Placing Carlyle's early work in the context of a substantial corpus of other nineteenth-century writings will lead to one of the main points I intend to highlight in this chapter: that is, the crucial role that Victorian poetic theory had in the modern construction of an ineffable mysticism, in many ways making this construct an artefact of Victorian poetics.

Chapter IV picks up some of the key notions discussed in the previous two chapters and incorporates them into an elaborate analysis of James Thomson's relationship to mysticism. The analysis begins with a study of Thomson's early career, calling attention to his claims for the privileged status of poetry and its ability to supplant traditional Christianity as an authentic source of divinely inspired truth. Central to this discussion is how Thomson's claims for poetry involved defining mysticism as being the highest form of poetry. Referring to a number of Thomson's essays of the 1860s, I focus on his conception of 'poetic inspiration' as a form of mystical experience, falling back on the complex web of relations he weaves between 'Poets' and 'Mystics'. In doing so, the chapter casts light on how Thomson's early writings employ the category of mysticism to distinguish between *inspired* and *uninspired* poetry, with the former being construed as representative of 'quintessential poetry'. An analysis of Thomson's later critical position will reveal that the poet never abandoned his notions of mysticism nor his theory of poetic inspiration, only the belief in their divine origin, and that his reconfiguration of these was in such a way that allowed him to maintain his early Romantic notions about the prophetic role of the poet as the possessor of a unique and privileged insight. I argue that his later position, while not yet informed by the Romantic permutations of psychoanalysis, belongs to the pre-Freudian intellectual culture of the late nineteenth century that was witnessing attempts to 'neutralize' Romanticism's 'revelatory moments', by displacing its concept of the 'creative imagination' within a more empirical model of human subjectivity.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁸ Patricia Rae, 'Modernism, Empirical Psychology and the Creative Imagination', *Volume XXI* (2007), 405 (p. 408).

CHAPTER II

‘Poetry then is our Mysticism’:

The Victorian Making of an Aesthetic ‘Mysticism’

It is curious to observe how universally the Poet still vindicates his sway over us, how the Pleasures of Imagination are part of the inheritance of all men. In every man, there lies a *mystic* universe, which when the words, ‘Let there be light,’ are spoken, starts into visibility.

Thomas Carlyle, 1830.

Poetical Thought! – reader, light up the lamps of your spirit, and look at her. The glory of the earth, more than its glory, is burning in her eyes with a deep, *mystical*, unquenchable fire [...]. The sword of the cherubim, which drove from the world its vision of beauty, left one in her soul, and from the depths of that soul she gathers it, and spreads it over the withering land, and wailing sea, and darkening sky; and tries to call them as God called them ere the ruins came, “very good”.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 1836.

Mystics [are] all great artists, for they do but body forth, according to their diverse gifts, which they have intuitively discerned in the high reasons of their fancies: [...] because their greatest thoughts have never been the result of laborious effort, nay, nor of conscious induction, but have been apprehended by the lighting flash of genius: and also because their essential theme is connected with the one feeling only to be *mystically* apprehended, namely the relation of the individual to the Absolute.¹

W. S. Lilly,² 1884.

¹ Thomas Carlyle, *Carlyle’s Unfinished History of German Literature*, ed. by Hill Shine (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1951), p. 6; Elizabeth Barrett Browning, ‘A Thought on Thoughts’, *The Athenæum* (23 July 1836), 522-23 (p. 522); and W. S. Lilly, ‘Modern Mysticism’, *Fortnightly Review*, 36 (1 September 1884), 292-308 (pp. 305-6).

² William Samuel Lilly, a well-known English man of letters, and a barrister ‘in nothing much beyond the title’. He often contributed to the major publications of his time, including *The Fortnightly Review*, *The Dublin Review*, *The Nineteenth Century*, *The Contemporary Review* and *Popular Science Monthly*. He was a Justice of Peace for Middlesex and London, an Honorary Fellow of Peterhouse, Cambridge (since 1893), and was also elected as a member of *The Athenæum* ‘under its rule regarding distinguished men’. Writing to Thomas Huxley, Herbert Spencer described him as ‘a foeman worthy of your steel’. A ‘liberal’ Catholic, Lilly’s ‘Modern Mysticism’ (pp. 293-98, 300, 306) defines mysticism in clear essentialist terms, asserting its universalism in very sympathetic language, and tracing its historical manifestations in Hinduism, Buddhism, Neo-Platonism, Sufism, and Christianity. See ‘Death

The epigraphs chosen to open this chapter indicate a connection between two concepts upon which rests its primary concern: mysticism and art.³ I argue in this chapter that the language employed here by Carlyle, Barrett Browning and W. S. Lilly of *The Fortnightly Review* characterizes a significant strand in the Victorian debate about poetry that displayed an increasing interest in utilizing the terms ‘mystic’, ‘mystical’ and ‘mysticism’ as a way of asserting the cultural authority of poets. It is my contention that this intellectual current was particularly working to associate poetry and art with a certain conceptualization of mysticism which drew on both the Romantic and German Idealist traditions, and that underlying all this was a clear cultural and ideological agenda. It is the same agenda behind the many religious claims that were being made for poetry during the nineteenth century⁴ in the face of its ever-growing enthusiasm for the rationalist and materialist philosophies of the time. Most of these claims were from a non-Christian or post-Christian perspective, occurring at a time when it seemed that the Bible was fast losing its credibility as a cultural force, their chief aim being to transfer what can be salvaged of its spiritual and moral functions to the realms of ‘Poetry’ and ‘Art’. From a constructivist perspective, the overall aim of this chapter is to assert the role of Victorian poetic theory in the modern aestheticization of the mystical, but this first requires establishing the fact that mysticism did indeed emerge as a poetic and aesthetic construct in twentieth-century modernist discourse, something that has not received due recognition by previous cultural investigations of this category. Before exploring the category’s use in the Victorian context, therefore, I begin my analysis with a consideration of the discursive relationship between mysticism and poetry in the context of twentieth-century writing on religion and aesthetics.

1. The Aestheticization of Mysticism in Modernist Discourse

To illustrate the figuration of modern mysticism as a poetic and aestheticized construct at the beginning of the twentieth century, a good point to start with is the writings of William James and Evelyn Underhill, whose works were influential in

of Mr. W. S. Lilly’, *The Times* (1 September 1919), 13; John Vernon Jensen, *Thomas Henry Huxley: Communicating for Science* (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1991), p. 117.

³ It is useful, at this point, to cite Isobel Armstrong’s observation that, for the Victorians, ‘the category of art’ was ‘almost always poetry’: *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics*, p. 3.

⁴ David J. DeLaura, ‘The Future of Poetry: A Context for Carlyle and Arnold’, in *Carlyle and His Contemporaries*, ed. by John Clubbe (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1976), pp. 148-80 (pp. 161-3).

setting the terms and framework for the essentialist paradigm of mysticism that was to dominate academic scholarship up to the last quarter of the century. As far as James is concerned, it is compelling enough that the only experience of the mystical variety that he reports as having – and to which he actually traces the origin of his *Varieties*,⁵ as well as what he calls his ‘mystical germ’⁶ – is described as being identical to the experience of ‘the poet’. The incident itself, occurring in an 1898 mountain-hiking trip, is surprisingly of the lesser-known aspects of James’s interest in mysticism, as his account of it only appears in a letter to his wife; to readers of his *Varieties*, however, he claimed to adopt an objective approach to the subject from the perspective of an outside observer, as indicated in the following lines:

Whether my treatment of mystical states will shed more light or darkness, I do not know, for my own constitution shuts me out from their enjoyment almost entirely, and I can speak of them only at second hand. But though forced to look upon the subject so externally, I will be as objective and receptive as I can.⁷

Contrarily to this, the account in his letter eloquently details his enjoyment of ‘a state of spiritual alertness of the most vital description’, where he felt as if ‘the Gods of all the nature-mythologies’ and ‘the moral Gods of the inner life’ were ‘holding an indescribable meeting in [his] breast’. ‘The intense significance’, he declares, ‘of the whole scene’ where this occurred, ‘its everlasting freshness and its immemorial antiquity and decay’, the ‘influences of Nature, the wholesomeness of the people round’ him, as well as the thought of his wife, children and his relation to them were all intricately ‘part and parcel’ of the entire experience, ‘and beaten up with it, so that memory and sensation all whirled inexplicably together’.⁸ James emphasizes over and over again the sense of heightened ‘significance’ as the most characteristic feature of that experience, which is the exact definition he employs with regard to the first type of the mystical states of consciousness identified in the *Varieties*,⁹ showing that he did actually consider himself to be intimately familiar with the phenomena of his investigation. The interesting point to highlight here is how the conclusion of his

⁵ William James, *The Letters of William James*, ltd. edn, 2 vols (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1920), II, p. 77.

⁶ Kevin Stein, *Poetry’s Afterlife: Verse in the Digital Age* (Ann Arbor: University Of Michigan Press, 2010), p. 236.

⁷ *Varieties*, p. 379. See also p. 89, and Ralph Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1935), p. 330.

⁸ *Letters of James*, pp. 76-7.

⁹ *Varieties*, pp. 382-3.

description indicates his belief that such a mystical state necessarily underlies the creative force of the poetic mind:

It was one of the happiest lonesome nights of my existence, and I understand now what a poet is. He is a person who can feel the immense complexity of influences that I felt, and make some partial tracks in them for verbal statement.¹⁰

It is small wonder, then, that aesthetic experience, whether that of poetic creation or appreciation, occupies a definite rung on ‘the mystical ladder’¹¹ outlined in James’s theory. Although James does not necessarily consider poets to be full-fledged religious mystics,¹² he undoubtedly believed that a true poet, in the league of a Wordsworth or Shelley, for example, is one who has mystically attained a ‘higher vision of an inner significance’ in nature, what he also referred to as the ‘mystic sense of hidden meaning’.¹³ For him, the function of poetry and art is to offer a glimpse into this mysterious region, so that the failure of an audience to be moved by them indicates their own loss of an innate mystical perception:

Most of us can remember the strangely moving power of passages in certain poems read when we were young, irrational doorways as they were through which the mystery of fact, the wildness and the pang of life, stole into our hearts and thrilled them. [...] Lyric poetry and music are alive and significant only in proportion as they fetch these vague vistas of a life continuous with our own, beckoning and inviting, yet ever eluding our pursuit. We are alive or dead to the eternal inner message of the arts according as we have kept or lost this mystical susceptibility.¹⁴

It may be true that the aesthetic pleasure taken in an artwork is located, among other states of consciousness, at the lowest level in James’s hierarchy of mystical

¹⁰ *Letters of James*, pp. 77.

¹¹ *Varieties*, p. 383.

¹² In the *Varieties*, true poetry is considered the result either of a ‘sporadic’ mystical state of consciousness, or of a more religiously cultivated mystical life. The sporadic experiences are themselves of several types, ranging from the lowest intimations of a vague sense of significance, to the highest experience of ‘the immediate presence of God’, all of which are generally characterised by an optimistic denial of the reality of evil. As for the more cultivated mystical religions, these are recognized as the ‘completest’ form of mysticism, what James also refers to as the mysticism of the ‘twice-born’, or of the ‘sick soul’, in which the individual, driven by a pessimistic conviction of the essential evil of the natural world, follows a methodical path of renunciation and suffering, ultimately leading to a process of conversion. See pp. 47-52, 115-16, 129-33, 282, 296-308, 362-65.

¹³ *On Some of Life’s Ideals: On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings* (New York: Henry Holt, 1900), pp. 18-21.

¹⁴ *Varieties*, p. 383.

experiences;¹⁵ but the fact that his discussion of the ‘deeper plunges into the mystical consciousness’ up to the highest level of ‘religious mysticism pure and simple’ is dependent for illustration on the writings of poets and literary figures¹⁶ suggests the pervasive place that artists take in this hierarchy. This also reveals the extent to which mysticism was aestheticized in his work. Indeed, it is not irrelevant that the highly aesthetic approach of the *Varieties* itself has been variously noted by Jamesian scholars, who, in doing so, have indirectly pointed not only to how such modern philosophical negotiations of mysticism too often collapsed into literary discourse,¹⁷ but also to how James’s notions of the mystical were closely tethered to those of the poetic. G. William Barnard, for instance, observes:

James’s language is not that of the logician, who attempts to “elaborate a consistent system and avoid errors of technique,” but rather, it is the language of a poet, who strives to “create such a compelling interpretation of life that the reader can appropriate it as her own.” James’s philosophy not only denotes and specifies; it also connotes, evokes, stirs.¹⁸

Similarly, Charlene H. Seigfried describes the ‘ideal’ guiding James’s work as one that involves a ‘conjunction of science and poetry, of fact and theory, of exact description and flights of fancy, of accurateness and passion’.¹⁹ On the same note, Douglas Anderson contends that ‘James’s work in *Varieties* creates space not only for religion and religious experience, but for [...] our romances with poetry, art and music’.²⁰ It seems, one may argue, that the modern discourse on mysticism, even

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 382.

¹⁶ Aside from other examples that permeate his study, this discussion alone includes references to Tennyson (p. 297), J. A. Symonds (pp. 298-9, 302-4), Charles Kingsley (298), the Swiss philosopher, poet and literary critic Henri Frédéric Amiel (305-6), and Whitman (306-7).

¹⁷ An apt example for this is the writings of the French philosopher Henri Bergson, whose ‘poetic style and inclination towards intuitive knowledge’, according to Ruth Lorand, ‘won him the Nobel Prize for literature, but stood in contrast to prevalent analytical trends’: ‘Bergson’s Concept of Art’, *British Journal Of Aesthetics*, 39.4 (1999), 400-15 (p. 400). Bergson’s engagement with mysticism is most explicit in *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (1932), but his works generally display a strong strain of mysticism, giving rise to T. S. Eliot’s observation that Bergson’s statements often tend towards ‘an absolute which sees eternity in a single moment’, and that this has ‘led Bergson critics to call him mystic’, an ‘appellation’ with which he is ‘not disposed to quarrel’: Manju Jain, *T. S. Eliot and American Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 201.

¹⁸ G. William Barnard, *Exploring Unseen Worlds: William James and the Philosophy of Mysticism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), p. 2.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 2. See also *Meaning and Action* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968), by Horace Thayer, who was critical of this type of discourse, and went so far as to conceive James as being ‘anti-intellectual’, and unable ‘to see the significance of scientific method’ (p. 422).

²⁰ ‘Respectability and the Wild Beasts of the Philosophical Desert: The Heart of James’s *Varieties*’, *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 17.1 (2003), 1-13 (p. 12).

when espousing an empirically-oriented approach, could, at times, be easily read as a defence of art and poetry.

This is the case of Evelyn Underhill's chapter 'The Mystic as Creative Artist', in *The Essentials of Mysticism and Other Essays* (1920), where she maintains, with Hegel, that art 'ranks with religion and philosophy' as one of the 'the three spheres of Absolute Spirit'. Declaring that 'the business of the artist is not only to delight us, but to enlighten us',²¹ Underhill was clearly no supporter of the school of aestheticism, whose tenets were still flourishing in the early century, despite its death, as a movement, in 1896.²² She believed, instead, that a 'creative artist of the highest kind' is essentially a mystic, whose 'personal encounter with Infinite Reality' is attained, not as a 'spiritual individualist', but as 'the ambassador of the race', forever prompted 'to fulfil his duty to' it through art. 'The great artist', she states elsewhere in *The Essentials*, 'is the Door, the Way to a wider universe', redeeming 'his fellows from slavery to a lower level of colour, form, sound', towards 'new possibilities of vision and hearing'. Also, whereas, much like James, Underhill held that the mysticism of artists is normally not quite as complete as that of 'full-grown mystics',²³ she still believed that 'it is only through the mood of humble and loving receptivity in which the artist perceives beauty, that the human spirit can apprehend a reality which is greater than itself', making it indispensable for even the most cultivated mystical states of consciousness. 'The love and realization of beauty', she explains, 'makes the senses themselves into channels of Spirit', and, 'unless informed with' this, any form of religious devotion 'becomes thin, hard and sterile'.²⁴

In her treatment of the mystic as poet, Underhill cites the following much 'celebrated passage' by Henri Bergson, another early twentieth-century figure that had (albeit indirectly) a considerable impact on the aesthetic construction of mysticism – particularly through his theory of 'creative evolution' which penetrated Anglo-

²¹ *The Essentials of Mysticism and Other Essays*, p. 65.

²² Dennis Denisoff, 'Aestheticism in the Modernist Era and After', in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of British Literature*, ed. by David S. Kastan and others, 5 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), VI, pp. 17-8.

²³ Obviously informed by her own Catholic faith, Underhill's definition of the highest form of mysticism is one that privileges the contemplative Christian path to spiritual experience. She placed artists among those who have only moved to the second of the three 'traditional' stages of mysticism: the purgative, the illuminative and the unitive. The 'enormous majority of mystics', she believed nonetheless, 'never get beyond' Illumination, which, in effect, is 'an experience of Eternity, but not of the Eternal one' that marks the final unitive stage, where 'the Eternal one' represents the personal Godhead of Christianity. See *The Essentials*, pp. 15-21.

²⁴ *The Essentials*, pp. 16-17, 96.

American philosophical and literary circles, turning ‘intuition’ and ‘creativity’ into the ‘buzzwords’ of the time:²⁵

Could we enter into immediate communion with things and with ourselves – then, we should all be artists. [...] Deep in our souls we should hear the uninterrupted melody of our inner life: a music often gay, more often sad, always original. All this is around and within us: yet none of it is distinctly perceived by us. Between nature and ourselves – more, between ourselves and our own consciousness – hangs a veil: a veil dense and opaque for normal men, but thin, almost transparent, for the artist and poet.²⁶

Underhill, who, by then, had been ‘drunk with Bergson’,²⁷ likewise conveys the special authority granted here to artists and poets in her description of what is traditionally identified by religious writers as the gift of ‘spiritual Understanding’, a gift that she now defines as being available to poets, ‘and from it their power proceeds’. It ‘enables its possessor’, Underhill points out, ‘to behold life truly, that is from the angle of God, not from the angle of man’. Such a belief in the intrinsic godliness or religiosity of poetry additionally finds expression in *The Essentials* in her commentary on the place of ‘feeling’ in mystical contemplation. She suggests there that ‘religious and poetic intuition’ virtually share the same source: ‘The springs of the truest prayer and of the deepest poetry – twin expressions of man’s outward-going passion for that Eternity which is his home – rise very near together in the heart’. This is why Underhill insists that ‘faith and poetry’ should be ‘fused in one’ in the mystic’s ‘rapturous mediations’:

Nor need we fear the reproach that here we confuse religion with poetry. Poetry ever goes like the royal banners before ascending life; therefore man may safely follow its leadership in his prayer, which is – or should be – life in its intensest form.²⁸

²⁵ Paul Douglas, *Bergson, Eliot, and American Literature* (Lexington: University Press Of Kentucky, 1986), p. 2. Although Bergson never developed his thoughts into a systematic aesthetic theory, art is discussed throughout his work ‘in a manner that is clearly an extension of his philosophical system’. It serves, as Ruth Lorand argues, as ‘a major paradigm’ for illustrating his theory of time, intuition and order. His chief English disciple, T. E. Hulme, has thus stated: ‘The extraordinary importance of Bergson for any theory of art is that [...] he removes your account from the merely literary level, [...] and enables you to state it as an account of actual reality’. See Marry Ann Gillies, ‘Art’, in *Henri Bergson and British Modernism* (Quebec: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1996), pp. 19-25 (p. 19); T. E. Hulme, ‘Bergson’s Theory of Art’, in *Speculations*, ed. by Herbert Read 2nd edn (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1936), pp. 141-70 (p. 146); and Lorand, ‘Bergson’s Concept of Art’ (p. 400).

²⁶ Underhill, *The Essentials*, p. 64-66.

²⁷ Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment*, p. 136.

²⁸ *The Essentials*, pp. 93-4, 121, 114-15.

But it is, of course, Underhill's earlier published *Mysticism* (1911), more than *The Essentials*, that represents a critical text in the modern aestheticization of the mystical, being Underhill's major work, and one of the earliest academic studies of the phenomena to meet with immediate and sustained success.²⁹ Examples from the work would show that her later thought on the relationship between mysticism, art and poetry never deviated from this early model. 'Mysticism', she asserts, for instance, is 'the most romantic thing in the universe, from one point of view the art of arts, their source and also their end'. Of the artist's function in society, we find the same romantic conception of *The Essentials*: 'on him has been laid the duty of expressing something of [...] his glimpse of the burning bush, to other men. He is the mediator between his brethren and the divine, for art is the link between appearance and reality'. Moreover, in terms of where poets stand in relation to the three stages of the mystical life, Underhill writes that 'all phases of poetic inspiration' fall under 'the head of Illumination: which is really an enormous development of the intuitional life at high levels'; it includes all 'pleasurable and exalted states of mystic consciousness in which the sense of I-hood persists, in which there is a loving and joyous relation between the Absolute as object and the self as subject', as opposed to the complete unitive state of the final stage. But, then again, the final stage of the mystic's development also requires a poetic disposition:

In mysticism the will is united with the emotions in an impassioned desire to transcend the sense-world in order that the self may be joined by love to the one eternal and ultimate Object of love; whose existence is intuitively perceived by that which we used to call the soul, but now find it easier to refer to as the "Cosmic" or "transcendental" sense. This is the poetic and religious temperament acting upon the plane of reality.

The idea of the mystical religiosity of poetry – and the arts in general – also finds expression in *Mysticism* in Underhill's argument that a poetic masterpiece is conceived only in 'moments of transcendence', where the poet undergoes an 'indescribable inebriation of Reality' and becomes something of Novalis's 'God-intoxicated man'. 'In his brief moments of creation', she similarly states, the artist may cross all physical and temporal 'boundaries' to join 'the "free soul" of the great

²⁹ See Dana Green, 'Evelyn Underhill: Mysticism', in *Christian Spirituality: The Classics*, ed. by Arthur Holder (New York: Routledge, 2010), pp. 317-28 (p. 317).

mystic’, who is perpetually ‘hovering like the six-winged seraph before the face of the Absolute’. And again:

[The mystic’s] intuition of the Real lying at the root of the visible world and sustaining its life, is present [...] in the arts: perhaps it were better to say, must be present if these arts are to justify themselves as heightened forms of experience.³⁰

Moving from William James and Evelyn Underhill to other modernist intellectuals, the rest of this section will aim to show that this kind of aestheticizing discourse on the mystical continued well into the twentieth century and clearly made its impression on Anglo-American literary criticism. The examples I present here are admittedly somewhat arbitrarily chosen from the abundance of available literature, but it is reasonable to agree that they effectively demonstrate the presence of a poetic mysticism in modern poetic theory. One of the more important figures from this literature is T. S. Eliot, who had studied both works when he was absorbed in philosophy in his Harvard years,³¹ and was not immune to their suggestions later on. Although his ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ (1919) famously sought to strip literary criticism from any metaphysical trappings, proposing an impersonal, anti-Romantic theory of poetry that would ‘halt at the frontier of metaphysics or mysticism’,³² a belief in a connection between poetry and mysticism was unquestionable for him:

That there is a relation (not necessarily noetic, perhaps merely psychological) between mysticism and some kinds of poetry, or some of the kinds of state in which poetry is produced, I make no doubt.

This was stated in his discussion of the 1927 English translation of *Prière et Poésie* (1926), entitled *Prayer and Poetry: A Contribution to Poetical Theory*, by the French Jesuit and literary scholar, Henri Brémond. Despite Eliot’s reservations about the work, he commended it for examining ‘the likeness, and the difference of kind and degree, between poetry and mysticism’, and how this yielded ‘many penetrating

³⁰ Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man’s Spiritual Consciousness*, pp. 91, 84, 89, 282.

³¹ James Miller, *T.S. Eliot: The Making of an American Poet, 1888-1922* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), pp. 178-9.

³² T. S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1921), p. 53. Eliot would later thoroughly abandon this anti-mystical critical position, as William Pratt suggests, in *Singing the Chaos: Madness and Wisdom in Modern Poetry* (London: University of Missouri Press, 1996), p. 206.

remarks about the nature of poetry'.³³ The central argument of Brémond was that 'poetic activity is a profane, natural sort of preliminary sketch of mystical activity' and that 'the poet in the last resort is but an evanescent mystic whose mysticism breaks down'.³⁴ Brémond's book, in fact, spurred quite a controversy at the time, and among those who contributed to the debate was John M. Murray, who had also read Underhill,³⁵ and was in agreement with both Catholic writers on the essential kinship between mystics and poets, though with far larger views about the status of poetry:

The mystic is but halfway to the perfect poet (as he is but half-way to the perfect Christian). On the other hand, a complete mysticism and a complete poetry are all but identical. Keat's principle of "beauty in all things" and Eckhart's vision of "God in all things" are practically indistinguishable. And, in fact, the complete mystic is invariably, a great poet.³⁶

In addition to this, another notable critical work that builds on Underhill, as well as James, is Alfred Brockington's *Mysticism and Poetry on a Basis of Experience*, published in 1934, which refers to such poets and writers as Browning, Hopkins, and Newman, arguing that the first condition of both the 'poetic experience' and the 'mystical experience' is an 'intuition' that requires a complete 'abandonment in faith'.³⁷

It is probably this increased attention to mysticism in critical theory that prompted Wallace Stevens, who was particularly familiar with James's work,³⁸ to declare in 1951 that 'the theory of poetry, that is to say, the total of the theories of poetry, often seems to become in time a mystical theology or, more simply, a mystique'. For him, there were two aesthetic theories with which poets are 'constantly concerned': in the first, the imagination is felt to be 'part of a much larger, much more potent imagination', which drives the poet to live on 'the verge of consciousness',

³³ T.S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism: Studies in the Relation of Criticism to Poetry in England* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1933; repr. 1986), pp. 130-2, 137. For Eliot's reservations about this work, see, for example, pp. 132-3, 137.

³⁴ Henri Brémond, *Prayer & Poetry: A Contribution to Poetical Theory*. trans. by A. L. Thorold (London: Burns Oates, 1927), pp. 188-9.

³⁵ See John M. Murray, 'Notes and Comments', *The New Adelphi*, I.2 (Dec. 1927), 97-108 (p. 102).

³⁶ Leon Surette, *The Modern Dilemma: Wallace Stevens, T. S. Eliot, and Humanism* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008), p. 240. See also pp. 239-51, for a discussion about the critical responses to Brémond's theory.

³⁷ Brockington (London: Chapman & Hall, 1934), p. 135. See also pp. 142, 157, and 160, for Brockington's reference to James and Underhill.

³⁸ Joan Richardson, 'Wallace Stevens: A Likeness', in *The Cambridge Companion to Wallace Stevens*, ed. by John Serio (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 8-22.

often resulting in a poetry that is ‘marginal’ and ‘subliminal’; in the second, the poet regards ‘imagination as a power within him to have such insights into reality as will make it possible for him to be sufficient as a poet in the very center of consciousness’, resulting in a ‘central poetry’. And, in both cases, Stevens believed that poetry, at its root, is an emanation of the mystical:

The adherents of the [first] are mystics to begin with and pass from one mysticism to another The adherents of the [second] are also mystics to begin with But all their desire and all their ambition is to press away from mysticism toward that ultimate good sense which we term civilization.

Steven had already stated as early as 1936, in a lecture on ‘The Irrational Element in Poetry’, that it is this element that linked poetry to mysticism: ‘all mystics approach God through the irrational. *Pure poetry is both mystical and irrational*’. But unlike Murray, Brémond and Underhill, he gave equal status to the poetic and mystical phenomena. ‘It is certain’, he contended in ‘The Figure of the Youth as a Virile Poet’ (1943), ‘that the experience of the poet is no less a degree than the experience of the mystic’, and that poets are ultimately ‘the peers of saints’.³⁹

The same reliance on a notion of mysticism is also displayed in the critical and aesthetic terminology of Hart Crane,⁴⁰ who had not only drawn ‘solid satisfaction from James’s *Varieties*’, but had personally identified with ‘several experiences in consciousness’ that the book corroborated.⁴¹ Crane’s poetic theory rests on the belief that the artist’s identification with life should be ‘in the true mystical sense as well as in the sense which Aristotle meant by the “imitation of nature”’, focusing on the ‘metaphysical’ causes ‘of his materials, their emotional derivations or their utmost spiritual consequences’. This would result in what he calls an ‘absolute’ poetry, one that works ‘toward a state of consciousness’, a condition of ‘innocence’ or ‘absolute beauty’ where ‘there may be discoverable new forms certain spiritual illuminations, shining with a morality essentialized from experience directly’. These ‘moments of “illumination”’ Crane also significantly describes as ‘a sharpening of reality

³⁹ *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1997), pp. 750, 712-4, 786, 674.

⁴⁰ See, for example, *The Letters of Hart Crane 1916-1932* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965), pp. 98, 124, 127, 129, 139, 179, 240.

⁴¹ Victor Strandberg, ‘Hart Crane and William James: The Psychology of Mysticism’, *McNeese Review* 22 (1975-76), 14-25 (p. 15).

accessible to the poet, to no such degree possible through other mediums'.⁴² Poetry, in other words, had, for him, a closer affinity to the mystical than any other form of art.

The construction of an aesthetic mysticism has, of course, not been limited to poetic theory or literary criticism in the twentieth century, nor have these been the only arenas where the aestheticizing influence of James and Underhill can be felt. Of the more philosophically and psychologically oriented discussions of mysticism that display this influence is, for example, Aldous Huxley's *The Perennial Philosophy* (1946), which gives the following answer to the question of how 'the poetical use of words [is] related to the life of the spirit':

The experience of beauty [in poetry or art] is pure, self-manifested, compounded equally of joy and consciousness, free from admixture of any other perception, the very twin brother of mystical experience, and the very life of it is supersensuous wonder.

Like Underhill, however, the similarity is more of a 'qualitative' one:

The poet, the nature lover, the aesthete are granted apprehensions of Reality analogous to those vouchsafed to the selfless contemplative; but because they have not troubled to make themselves perfectly selfless, they are incapable of knowing the divine Beauty in its fullness.⁴³

A similar analogy is more conspicuously made in E. I. Watkin's *Poets and Mystics* (1953), which is another contribution to the psychology and philosophy of religion. More influenced by Underhill than James,⁴⁴ Watkin argues, in a chapter entitled 'Poetry and Mysticism', that while 'a poet may be also a mystic, a mystic also a poet', the two can rarely co-exist at once. This is because aesthetic and mystical intuitions, although similar in being 'concrete and obscure',⁴⁵ 'are wholly distinct in nature': the former is an artistic intuition of 'significant form', while the latter is an intuition of 'a Reality Formless because exceeding all forms'. Nonetheless, the meeting point between the poet and mystic is that both are endowed with an 'exceptional measure' of 'aesthetic sensibility', which transforms what Watkins terms the 'opaque'

⁴² *Letters of Hart Crane*, pp. 139, 302; and Hart Crane, 'General Aims and Theories [1925]', in *Perspectives on Modern Literature*, ed. by Frederick Hoffman (Elmsford, NY: Row and Peterson, 1962), pp. 130-4 (pp. 132-3).

⁴³ Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy*, pp. 158-9.

⁴⁴ See *Poets and Mystics* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1953), pp. 71, 71, 79, 105, 122, 254, 248.

⁴⁵ Watkins distinguishes between these and 'the abstract and clear intuitions' of discursive scientific thought, p. 12.

‘psychophysical constitution’ of the natural man into ‘a state of transparency’ that is open to spiritual activity. Without this sensibility, no conscious ‘union with God’ would be possible for the mystic, and, with it, poets like Wordsworth, or Tennyson, for instance, become accidental mystics:

Since poets, like others of exceptional aesthetic sensibility, are on the whole more likely to be transparent than those not so endowed, it is not surprising that poets [...] have been the subject of a mystic experience of a lower order, a naturally mystical experience, an experience that is to say of God’s immanence in their own spirit and beyond it in the universe.⁴⁶

The last example to be considered in this section is a book by the prolific English philosopher, novelist, and literary critic, Colin Wilson, also entitled *Poetry and Mysticism*, and published in 1970, just a few years apart from the first appearance of the constructivist theories of Steven Katz (1978), which goes to illustrate the longevity of this essentialist view of poetry and mysticism. Much similar to most of the writers discussed here, Wilson argues that while aesthetic and mystical experiences are distinct, ‘the dividing line’ is not so clear, given that ‘the psychological mechanisms are identical in each case’. The gist of the book is stated in the back cover, namely, that ‘the mystic’s moment of illumination shares with great poetry the liberating power of the deepest levels consciousness’. In making this point, Wilson primarily takes issue with the 1960s’ ‘revival of the fashion to exalt eastern modes of thought and disparage the western’. One of his central arguments was that Zen Buddhism had nothing new to tell the West that could not already be found in its literature, and that the inner workings of ‘the Zen experience’ corresponds exactly with ‘the phenomenology of the poetic experience’ involved in western poetry, particularly in its Romantic strains. To explain, Wilson argues that, through various forms of shock techniques, ranging from paradoxical questions and parables, to verbal and even physical provocation, Zen practice aims to ‘jar the mind into sudden recognition’ of one’s deeper levels of consciousness, beyond the ‘upper levels of the personality’ that are connected to habitual, everyday awareness. The result is a profound state of spiritual calm and peace. It is Wilson’s belief that the more sublime poetic utterances of the western tradition also serve as ‘a system of such shocks’, with the aim to effect the same inner shift of consciousness, delivering the ‘mind from its

⁴⁶ *Poets and Mystics*, pp. 11-8.

narrowness' and 'the triviality of everydayness' into the deep serenity of mystical insight: 'Good poetry has this power of getting straight through to the deeper level, of issuing the order "Relax" and being obeyed. There is a release of tension, a sigh of relief'. He argues, therefore, that 'the poetic experience and the mystical experience are the *same* experience in every way', even in pessimistic poets whose work offer no clear sense of affirmation. In their case, 'the poetic experience is a fragmentary mystical experience', but a mystical experience nonetheless: 'if the poet, unlike the mystic or the saint, fails to obtain his vision of pure affirmation, this is not the fault of the vision, but of the poet's clumsy attempt to grasp the essence of his "flashes of intensity"'.⁴⁷

'To look into the Victorian mind', W. E. Houghton writes, 'is to see some primary sources of the modern mind', a statement which W. David Shaw observes 'is as true of poetic theory as any other branch of knowledge'.⁴⁸ The remaining part of this chapter will specifically aim to show how the kind of conceptual engagement with mysticism in twentieth-century poetic theory that has been discussed here did not arise in a historical vacuum. Rather, it was related to developments already occurring in nineteenth-century poetics that were geared towards making sense of the place of poetry in a world that was undergoing radical change on many fronts, one of which was the religious.

2. The Victorian Making of a Poetic and Aesthetic Mysticism

Having briefly indicated in the previous section some of the ways in which modernist discourse on mysticism tends to aestheticize this category, it remains to pursue the important question of how this poetic construct finds its source in Victorian debates about poetry, particularly those that took upon them the task of defining the mystical. Before I get to that, however, let me first refer to Grace Jantzen's chapter on 'The Language of Ineffability' in *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*, which is a valuable contribution to the social constructivist scholarship surrounding mysticism. The chapter is significant in that it brings to light how this construct owes an 'enormous unacknowledged debt' to both German Idealism and Romantic philosophy, 'especially with regard to ineffability' as its 'key ingredient'. With mysticism's

⁴⁷ Colin Wilson, *Poetry & Mysticism* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1970), pp. 16-18, 42-52, 22, 216.

⁴⁸ *The Lucid Veil: Poetic Truth in the Victorian Era* (London: The Athlone Press, 1987), p. xvii.

characteristic of ineffability being the main concern of my following chapter, I shall let Jantzen's just-quoted remark on it stand here without further elaboration, focusing, instead, on her explanation of the category's debt to Germany for the *experiential* emphasis in the modernists' definition of it as a state of 'immediate consciousness of the Deity'. Jantzen specifically explains that the modern understanding of mysticism builds, in part, on the Kantian belief that while human knowledge is determined by the phenomena (objects as they are experienced by our sensory-mental apparatus), the noumena (objects as they exist in themselves) remain 'beyond our grasp'; according to Kant, therefore, we should be mentally unequipped to *experience* God, especially given his conception of God not as 'a possible object' or 'being' but as 'a transcendental *ideal*' that serves to order and unite the totality of experience. However, because such rationalist strictures debar the mind from any transcendent knowledge of God, Jantzen maintains that twentieth-century scholars of mysticism have relied, whether aware or not, on the Romantic Idealist tradition to postulate an alternative form of experience to help escape 'the excessive formalism and intellectualism' of Kant. Hence, it came about in modernist philosophy that God – although unknowable to the categories 'imposed by our own mental structure' – can be known through heightened states of 'feeling' that antecede all intellectual activity, where even subject-object differentiation has not yet taken place.⁴⁹

In discussing this experiential turn in defining the mystical, Jantzen identifies the integral roles played both by the German theologian and philosopher, Friedrich Schleiermacher, for his application of Romantic principles to the generic category of religion,⁵⁰ and by Carlyle and Emerson, for introducing William James to the Romantic philosophy, in both its Coleridgean and German versions.⁵¹ She believes

⁴⁹ Jantzen, *PGCM*, p. 307-20.

⁵⁰ Jantzen builds on Wayne Proudfoot's 1985 study, which traces the roots of the category of 'religious experience' to Schleiermacher's insistence that it is the emotional element, rather than scripture or morality, that is central to a definition of religion. See Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*, pp. xiii-xvi, 32-40.

⁵¹ Emerson and Carlyle are the only examples cited in Jantzen as being part of the 'wide circle of Henry James' friends' that have 'made an impact on the family'. It is through them, she believes, that William James developed a 'deeper acquaintance' with the Romantic German philosophy of Goethe, Schelling, Schiller and others, as well as its permutations in Coleridge: see p. 310. Eugene Taylor is of a similar opinion, pointing out that the search for 'the spiritual roots of James's *Varieties of Religious Experience*', as well as its 'literary and intellectual origins', largely leads to 'the Swedenborgian and transcendentalist milieu' surrounding Emerson in New England, and Carlyle in England, not failing to mention the two figure's personal acquaintance with William James's father, and the fact that Emerson was 'William's official God Father'. See Eugene Taylor, 'Introduction: The Spiritual Roots of *James's Varieties of Religious Experience*', in *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, centenary edn (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. xv-xxxviii (pp. xv-xvii).

that the role of the latter was made possible through their personal friendship with Henry James Sr, and his family, both being ““familiar divinities in the James household” with whom both father and son must settle their accounts’.⁵² While I agree with the essential place attributed here to Carlyle and Emerson in the modern formation of mysticism in Anglo-American discourse, I wish to add that this is not confined – as Jantzen seems to imply – to their personal acquaintance with the Jameses, but extends to their own far-reaching intellectual influence. Leigh Schmidt has pointed out the problem of how William James ‘becomes little more than a straw man in Jantzen’s critique’, and how ‘the larger culture [...] which gave birth to James, is nowhere to be found in [such] critical accounts of the category’s modern formation’. ‘The process of mysticism’s reinvention in departicularized form’, he urges, ‘needs itself to be particularized and seen in its own historical complexity’.⁵³ Given that the focus of my research is on the nineteenth-century British context, I believe that recognizing the full extent of Carlyle’s contributions to modern mysticism is a modest but important step toward addressing this problem,⁵⁴ and it is equally important to clarify that much of his contributions took place within the context of his discussions of poetry.

It is incumbent to remember that Carlyle has been variously dubbed ‘the single most important conduit of German literature and thought in the nineteenth century’,⁵⁵ and Emerson his ‘most prominent translator’, making Emerson, ‘to a large extent, the entranceway to German Idealist philosophy’ in New England.⁵⁶ That their own brands of idealism shows a distinctive involvement with mystical notions, and indeed marks them as pioneering forces in the popularization of mysticism is something that has been felt as early as 1850, by R. D. of *The Knickerbocker*, a New York monthly magazine. Hailing Emerson as a quintessential ‘Yankee Mystic’, the reviewer declares that he is no ‘harmless dreamer’, that his ‘abstract principles [...] may be becoming realities through the mind of the nation’. Such an influence, he adds, is potentially comparable only to Carlyle in England, who was finally becoming recognized for having ‘moulded earnest minds’ like no other thinker in the forties, and this after years

⁵² Jantzen, *PGCM*, pp. 310-16.

⁵³ ‘MMM’ (p. 275).

⁵⁴ For a discussion of Emerson’s influential role in the modern making of ‘mysticism’ and ‘spirituality’, refer to Schmidt’s *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality*.

⁵⁵ John R. Davis, *The Victorians and Germany* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), p. 69. See also Frederick Roe, *Thomas Carlyle as a Critic of Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1910), p. 90.

⁵⁶ Rodger Tarr, ed., ‘Introduction’, in *Sartor Resartus: The Life and Opinions of Herr Teufelsdröckh in Three Books* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), (pp. xxxi-xxxii).

of being ‘mimicked and laughed at and slashed’ as ‘a mere dreaming mystic’. Both men, he believes, have succeeded in inspiring a growing circle of admirers ‘as “idealistic,” as spiritual, ay, as noble in thought, as any ever gathered around Plato or Alexander Philo’,⁵⁷ an analogy indicating how the two writers must have stood for many of their contemporaries as leading figures in the rising wave of interest in mysticism. It is, after all, one of the contentions of the present and following chapters that many Victorians were under the sway of Carlyle’s writings when conceiving their own notions of the mystical. But before turning to how Carlyle’s definitions of mysticism were essentially formulated within the context of his poetic theory, it is worthwhile to first consider Grace Jantzen’s main argument as it relates to his and to other similar nineteenth-century notions of poetry: namely, her proposition that any concept of mysticism is ‘implicitly bound up with issues of authority’.⁵⁸ A question worth asking, in other words, is what was chiefly at stake for Victorian poets and Victorian sympathizers with poetry and the arts in adopting a Romantically-inspired, experiential definition of mysticism?

The clue to the answer lies in what David J. DeLaura describes as ‘the high and religious claims’ that were being made for poetry throughout the period, which he believes were ‘unprecedented’⁵⁹ and ‘correlative to a broadly conceived religious and spiritual crisis, seen as the central and characteristic experience of the century’. He explains that, for many Victorian critics, ‘poetry’s fate, and its role, [was] a function of what may be salvaged in the coming universal shipwreck of the older European synthesis’ of ‘philosophy’, ‘theology’ and ‘piety’.⁶⁰ Making the same point, M. H. Abrams states that one of the consequences of the ebbing tide of assurances about the factual fallibility of the Bible – itself brought about by the scientific fervour of the new era, and the triumph of rationalist inquiry – was the attempt to save the moral and spiritual functions of the ‘exploded dogmas’ by transferring them to the poetic enterprise. Poetry was now to substitute religion for men like Arnold, for instance,

⁵⁷ R. D., ‘Literary Notices’, rev. of *Essays (1st and 2nd series) and Nature: Addresses and Lectures*, by R. W. Emerson, *The Knickerbocker: Or, New-York Monthly Magazine*, 35 (1850), 254-63 (pp. 254-5).

⁵⁸ Jantzen, *PGCM*, p. 12.

⁵⁹ For how these differed from the exalted estimations of poetry by the first generation of romantic critics, particularly in how its domain was never extended to that of religion, see M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 355.

⁶⁰ ‘The Future of Poetry’ (pp. 161-3).

who, despite their misgivings about the ‘anti-poetic’ values of the times,⁶¹ spoke of its ‘immense’ future:

Our religion has materialised itself in the fact, in the supposed fact; it has attached its emotion to the fact, and now the fact is failing it. But for poetry, the idea is everything [...] Poetry attaches its emotions to the idea; the idea *is* the fact.⁶²

According to Arnold, the ‘higher destinies’ of poetry are to be realized when ‘mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us’, by becoming ‘a complete magister vitae as the poetry of the ancients did: by including, as theirs did, religion with poetry’. ‘Without poetry’, he said, ‘our science will appear incomplete; and most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry’.⁶³ Carlyle also joined in this opinion: ‘Literature is but a branch of Religion, and always participates in its character: however, in our time, it is the only branch that still shows any greenness; and, as some think, must one day become the main stem’.⁶⁴ For him, ‘the history of literature, especially for the last two centuries, is our proper Church History; the other church, during that time, having more and more decayed from its old functions and influence’. In 1831, furthermore, Carlyle wrote to Goethe that ‘literature is now nearly all in all to us; not our Speech only, but our Worship and Law-giving; our best Priest must henceforth be our Poet; the *vates* will in the future be practically all that he ever was in theory’. And, again, in his obituary for Goethe a year later: ‘The true Poet is ever, as of old, the Seer; whose eye has been gifted to discern the godlike Mystery of God’s Universe, and decipher some new line of its celestial writing’.⁶⁵ ‘A religious utility’, Robert Alfred Vaughan similarly argued, ‘is the species of usefulness possessed by poetry’:

The mind most poetical is fitted to become the most religious. The poet and the Christian have alike a hidden life. Worship is the vital

⁶¹ For other, and more extensive commentaries on the Victorian’s lofty hopes for poetry, despite unfavourable contemporary attitudes, as well as fears of its decline, see DeLaura; Dino F. Falluga, *The Perversity of Poetry: Romantic Ideology and the Popular Male Poet of Genius* (Albany: State University of New York 2005), p. 147; and Lawrence J. Starzyk, *The Imprisoned Splendor: A Study of Victorian Critical Theory* (Port Washington: Kennikat Press, 1977), pp. 155-82.

⁶² Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, pp. 334-5.

⁶³ Matthew Arnold, ‘General Introduction’, in *The English Poets: Chaucer To Donne*, ed. by Thomas H. Ward, 5 vols (London: Macmillan, 1880), I, pp. xvii-xlvi (p. xviii); and *The Letters of Matthew Arnold to Arthur Hugh Clough* (London: Oxford University Press, 1932), p. 43 (letter of 28 Oct. 1852).

⁶⁴ DeLaura, pp. 161 and 166.

⁶⁵ David Riede, ‘Transgression, Authority, and the Church of Literature in Carlyle’ (pp. 109).

element of each. Poetry has in it that kind of utility which good men find in their Bibles, rather than such convenience as they have in their railway guides. It ennobles the sentiments, enlarges the affections, kindles the imagination, and [...] cultivates those faculties within us, which the more we cultivate them, the more do we find meanness a thing impossible.⁶⁶

It would appear from this that the Victorian discourse on poetry, even when making no reference to mysticism, was itself rife with issues of authority.⁶⁷ Indeed, one must not forget that, with these grand hopes for its future, came also the louder assertions of the poet's superior mission as a divinely-inspired prophet, a 'heady doctrine'⁶⁸ encountered by Victorian poets and critics in the writings of their Romantic forebears, which many were only too happy to adopt, even amidst an increasingly anti-Romantic critical milieu.⁶⁹ Joseph Bristow, in fact, notes how this trope had been further aggrandized in the hands of the Victorians, who now claimed for the poet 'greater capabilities than either the philosopher or scientist': 'The poet is [...] the saviour of the secular age. In the Romantic period, the poet was certainly divinely inspired. Now, a generation later, the poet is God's emissary – an intermediary between finite and infinite worlds'.⁷⁰ To be sure, borrowing from Wordsworth and Shelley, as well as Goethe and Fichte, the doctrine became common currency among the Cambridge Apostles, for example, who lent eager ears to these famous words of April 8, 1828 by F. D. Maurice, the group's moral and intellectual leader:

The mind of the poet of the highest order is the most perfect mind that can belong to man [...] It is his high calling to interpret those

⁶⁶ Robert Vaughan (Snr.), *Memoir of Robert Alfred Vaughan*, 2nd and rev. edn (London: Macmillan, 1864), pp. 86-7.

⁶⁷ For similar comments on how this period's discourse on poetry was engaged in a struggle for cultural power, see, for example, Daniel Brown, 'Victorian Poetry and Science', in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Poetry*, ed. by Joseph Bristow (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 137-158 (pp. 137, 141-3); Lawrence J Starzyk, "'That Promised Land': Poetry and Religion in the Early Victorian Period", *Victorian Studies* (1973), 269-290; and Walter E. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind: 1830-1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), pp. 101-5, 152-4.

⁶⁸ Houghton, *Victorian Frame of Mind*, p. 152.

⁶⁹ Although no longer up to date, a good bibliographic review of the literature on the Victorians' indebtedness and resistance to the Romantic tradition is found in Jerome Buckley's 'General Materials: The Romantic Tradition', in *The Victorian Poets: A Guide to Research*, ed. by Frederic E. Faverty, 2nd edn (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1968), pp. 18-21. A more detailed examination and classification of Victorian antagonistic opinions toward Romanticism is also found in R. G. Cox, 'Victorian Criticism of Poetry: The Minority Tradition', *Scrutiny*, 18 (1951), 2-17; as well as R. V. Johnson, 'Pater and the Victorian Anti-Romantics', *Essays in Criticism*, 4 (1954), 42-57.

⁷⁰ John Bristow, ed., 'Introduction', in *The Victorian Poet: Poetics and Persona* (London: Croom Helm, 1987), (p. 13).

universal truths which exist on earth only in the forms of his creation.⁷¹

But Tennyson, who was a member of the Apostles by then, had already formulated this idea on his own in the much earlier ‘Armageddon’, depicting the poet’s visionary stance as almost partaking in God’s omniscience:

I felt my soul grow godlike, and my spirit
With supernatural excitation bound
Within me, my mental eye grew large
With such a vast circumference of thought,
That, in my vanity, seemed to stand
Upon the outward verge and bound alone
Of God’s omniscience.⁷² (21-27)

These and similar conceptions would prove to have a long hold on many literary minds of the century, only diminishing in force, as Bristow suggests, with the more secular and ‘elder Victorians’.⁷³ Tennyson, for example, had not only adopted this oracular role in his juvenilia and early poems (for example, ‘To Poesy’ (1828), ‘Timbuctoo’ (1829), ‘The Poet’ (1830) and ‘The Poet’s Mind’ (1830)), but was fully convinced of its truth ‘all through his life as a poet’, as reported by ‘a former intimate’:

He told me that this sense [of his divine poetic gift] was almost *awful* to him in its intensity, because it made him feel as a priest who can never leave the sanctuary, and whose every word must be consecrated to the service of Him who had touched his lips with the fire of heaven which was to enable him to speak in God’s name to his age.⁷⁴

And although Carlyle ‘certainly had a grudge against poetry’, which developed through his maturity, he had never departed from that fundamental belief, expressed in his early ‘vein of enthusiasm’,⁷⁵ that the sacred duty of the poet is to lead ‘us to the

⁷¹ Houghton, p. 152.

⁷² *The Poems of Tennyson*, ed. by Christopher Ricks, 2nd edn, 3 vols (London: Longman, 1987), I, p. 81; hereafter abbreviated as *Poems*. All references to Tennyson’s poems are to line numbers, and are from this edition.

⁷³ Bristow, ed., ‘Introduction’, p. 23. James Haydock actually goes so far as to argue that ‘the Romantic idea of the poet as prophet was never lost even among the most cynical’: *On a Darkling Plain: Victorian Poetry and Thought* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2008), p. 344.

⁷⁴ Harold Nicolson, *Tennyson, Aspects of His Life, Character and Poetry* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1925), pp. 16-7. Houghton, in *Victorian Frame of Mind*, p. 153, called my attention to this report.

⁷⁵ David E. Latane, ‘Poetry, Thomas Carlyle And’, in *The Carlyle Encyclopedia*, ed. by Mark Cumming (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2004), pp. 379-80 (p. 379).

edge of the Infinite, and let us for moments gaze into that!'.⁷⁶ This is not to mention how the London Browning Society, formed in 1881, would reaffirm and revive the vatic conception of art expressed in poems like 'Pauline' (1833), 'Fra Lippo Lippi' (1855) or 'Abt Vogler' (1864), by celebrating Browning himself 'as a teacher, a prophet, a seer, one who could remind men of spiritual realities in a world of doubt and anxiety'.⁷⁷ 'God has a few of us whom he whispers in the ear', Browning had spoken thus in mid-century of the status of the artist, whose business is to 'interpret God to all of you', and there were still many voices in the late century that enlisted poets as foremost among those 'few'. ('Abt Vogler' 87; 'Fra Lippo' 311).⁷⁸

These, clearly, are all familiar notions in the scholarship on Victorian poetry and criticism, but what concerns me here is the fact that the long Victorian debate about the nature and function of poetry, particularly that which reflected the spiritual concerns of a post-Christian perspective, was a major context for the development of the modern (Romantic) conception of mysticism. The debate, in other words, witnessed many emerging attempts to define 'poetry' and 'art' as 'mysticism', or to assert an affinity between these categories, a tendency that was ultimately underpinned, as we shall see, by the desire to stress the reliability of intuitions, as a source of truth, equal, or even superior, to rational and scientific thought. Put otherwise, one could say that as far as Victorian poets and critics are concerned, the act of defining the mystical in romantically experiential terms was, at its core, and, indeed as Grace Jantzen has contended, a struggle for power and authority; the struggle, in this case, was against nineteenth-century empirical and secular ideals that were gradually gaining cultural ascendancy. Thus, to answer my earlier question, what was at stake for poets and critics in adopting this definition of mysticism was nothing less than the preservation of belief in the religious impulse, upon which depended their high claims for poetry, not the least of it being the only answer for the moral and spiritual needs of a perceived post-Christian world. More will be said about this

⁷⁶ 'Burns', rev. of *The Life of Robert Burns*, by J. G. Lockhart, *Edinburgh Review*, XLVIII (1828), 267-312 (p. 278); *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1840), p. 78; and Joseph Bristow, 'Reforming Victorian Poetry: Poetics after 1832', in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Poetry*, ed. by Joseph Bristow (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 1-24 (pp. 14-15).

⁷⁷ William S. Peterson, *Interrogating the Oracle: A History of the London Browning Society* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1969), p. 6.

⁷⁸ Robert Browning, 'Fra Lippo Lippi', in *The Poems of Robert Browning: 1847-1861*, ed. by Daniel Karlin John Woolford, and Joseph Phelan, 4 vols (London: Routledge, 2014), III, pp. 522-551 (p. 546); and 'Abt Vogler', in *The Poems of Robert Browning: 1862-1871*, *ibid.*, IV, pp. 184-195 (p. 194).

shortly, when I come to consider Carlyle who was the most explicit on this subject, but first a few examples of how the Victorian literary scene was positing that such a mysticism, in its alleged apprehension of divine and cosmic realities, is accessible to poets at moments of poetic inspiration.

Perhaps one of the earliest and most notable contexts for the conceptual associations between poetry and mysticism that contributed to Victorian formulations of poetic theory is traceable to the second decade of the nineteenth century. This comes to light if we recall that distinct group that was formed within the society of the Cambridge Apostles in its first generation, and which went by the name of ‘the Mystics’. Of the makeup and importance of this ‘mystic clique’, Peter Allen explains that its ‘nucleus’ consisted of men including F. D. Maurice, John Sterling, John M. Kemble, William Donne, Richard Trench, and Joseph Blakesley, and that it was ‘a predominant influence in the Society and the basis for the Apostolic cult that developed around the figures of Arthur Hallam and Alfred Tennyson’ – in fact, becoming, as Tod Jones notes, ‘the largest group within the society’ by 1830.⁷⁹ Coleridge, who was himself a Cambridge man, was a major influence on the group, and they were followers of ‘his ultimate creed that, while imagination was the path to truth, fantasy⁸⁰ [or fancy] only led to illusion’. Speaking of their theological tendencies, Richard Deacon maintains that it ‘was a mishmash of evangelistic enthusiasm, Coleridgianism and mysticism plus a great deal of self-doubting and questioning’.⁸¹

As for the centrality of literature or the poetic imagination to this group’s conception of themselves as mystics (and, in turn, to their own understanding of mysticism), this is suggested by their chief maxim, that ‘social regeneration would come not through political change but through the spiritual influence of modern literature, specifically the writings of Coleridge, Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats.’ Hence, when John Kemble, for example, converted from his Benthamite views in 1828, and ‘adopted the mystics’ cause [...of] the spiritual regeneration of mankind’, and after having spent a year in Germany, consuming opium, and metaphysics, as well

⁷⁹ Peter Allen, *The Cambridge Apostles: The Early Years* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), pp. 36-7; and Tod E. Jones, *The Broad Church: A Biography of a Movement* (Lanham, MD.: Lexington Books, 2003), p. 140.

⁸⁰ Fantasy, in Coleridge’s *Biographia Literaria*, represented the mechanical and empiricist mental processes.

⁸¹ Richard Deacon, *The Cambridge Apostles: A History of Cambridge University’s Élite Intellectual Secret Society* (London: Robert Royce, 1985), pp. 10,12.

as writing poetry, he enthusiastically announced his apostolic mission in a letter to a fellow-mystic, giving religious precedence to poetry:

It is to lend my hand to the great work of regenerating England, not by Political Institutions! Not by extrinsic and conventional forms! By a higher and holier work, by breathing into her the vigorous feeling of a Poet, and a Religious man [...] Wordsworth has begun the work, he has delivered the sown field into our hand, and is not the harvest ours?⁸²

Such words reflect not only the grandiose hopes that were held for poetry at the time, but also how it was mystically elevated by this group, who believed that, through ‘the study of modern literature’, one is able to gain an understanding of nothing short of ‘the operations of the divine principle at work in the world’.⁸³

The fact that the title of this apostolic ‘mystical’ coterie, ‘the Mystics’, was self-assigned marks an interesting move from the negative attitude evinced towards this key term by the first generation of Romantic poets, who were themselves positively ‘in touch with a living tradition of European mystical writing’. Stephen Prickett points out how both Wordsworth and Coleridge ‘went out of their way to avoid the charge of mysticism’, with Coleridge openly attacking its claims,⁸⁴ in a way that ironically offered, as Kiyoshi Tsuchiya states, ‘a fairly accurate description of his own practice, personal and idiosyncratic, involving a good deal of catachresis and neologism’.⁸⁵ The coming together of the Cambridge Mystics in the mid-twenties,⁸⁶ therefore, indicates that the new era was acquiring a greater readiness to brave the accusations that the word ‘mysticism’ so often implied in the critical journals of the time,⁸⁷ along with a desire to favourably renegotiate what it means. It is true that Arthur Hallam, the Mystics’ leader in 1830,⁸⁸ was not among those to brave such criticism, informing Kemble that he had ‘no wish to earn the reputation of an Atheist

⁸² Peter Allen, *Cambridge Apostles*, pp. 36, 99-100.

⁸³ *The Age of Eclecticism: Literature and Culture in Britain, 1815-1885* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2009), p. 144.

⁸⁴ Stephen Prickett, *Victorian Fantasy*, 2nd revised and expanded edn (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2005), pp. 22, 244; and *The Romantics* (London: Methuen & Company, 1981), p. 136.

⁸⁵ Kiyoshi Tsuchiya, *The Mirror Metaphor and Coleridge's Mysticism: Poetics, Metaphysics, and the Formation of the Pentad* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2000), pp. 11-12. Tsuchiya also discusses how Coleridge was aware of this contradiction, but was never ‘able to secure his position’; ‘all he c[ould] do is just to insist’ that his own speculations differed from those of mystics, while offering no clear explanation of where the difference lied.

⁸⁶ Peter Allen, *Cambridge Apostles*, p. 36-7.

⁸⁷ Armstrong, *Victorian Scrutinies*, p. 6.

⁸⁸ Tod Jones, *The Broad Church*, p. 140.

or a Mystic'.⁸⁹ But this was not the case with Tennyson, at least, for whom the mystical held more personal implications.

Indeed, there is considerable evidence that Tennyson had always found in the word 'mysticism' a meaningful term by which to define and make sense of his 'trance' experiences, as he had called them. Not only does 'The Mystic' (1830) feature as the title of one his earliest self-reflective poems, we also find the poet contemplating a similar title as late as 1885, when he chose 'The Ancient Mystic' for the trial edition of what we now know as 'The Ancient Sage'.⁹⁰ That the persona of the mystic in these two poems represents part of Tennyson's self-image is evident in how both poems depict a trance state identical to those that the poet so often described in his conversations or correspondence with his friends. I cite here the two oft-quoted descriptions that were reported by Benjamin Blood and John Tyndall. To Blood, Tennyson wrote in a letter of May 7, 1874:

I have never had any revelations through anaesthetics, but a kind of waking trance—this for lack of a better word—I have frequently had, quite up from boyhood, when I have been all alone. This has come upon me through repeating my own name two or three times to myself silently, till all at once, as it were out of the intensity of consciousness of individuality, individuality itself seemed to dissolve and fade away into boundless being, and this not a confused state, but the clearest of the clearest, the surest of the surest, the weirdest of the weirdest, utterly beyond words, where death was an almost laughable impossibility, the loss of personality (if so it were) seeming no extinction but the only true life.⁹¹

Tyndall's report gives a similar account:

With great earnestness Tennyson described to me a state of consciousness into which he could throw himself by thinking intently of his own name. It was impossible to give anything that could be called a description of the state, for language seemed

⁸⁹ Peter Allen, *Cambridge Apostles*, p. 150. In this, Hallam could be similar to Carlyle, who often thought of himself as a 'mystic', 'yet resented the description when it was applied to him by others', which in itself indicates a desire to preserve control over the meaning of the term, to ensure that it is used in a positive, rather than a derogatory, sense. We know, indeed, that Carlyle welcomed it when the young John Mill called him 'the head of the Mystic School' in the context of admiration: Rosemary Ashton, *The German Idea: Four English Writers and the Reception of German Thought, 1800-1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 74; and Frederic Ewen, *A Half-Century of Greatness: The Creative Imagination of Europe, 1848-1884* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), p. 76. For another commentary on Carlyle's irresoluteness about being called a 'mystic', see Riede, 'Transgression, Authority, and the Church of Literature in Carlyle' (p. 94).

⁹⁰ Christopher Ricks (ed.), *Poems III*, p. 1350.

⁹¹ Cuthbert Butler, *Western Mysticism* (Whitefish: Kessinger Publishing, 2003), p. 331.

incompetent to touch it. It was an apparent isolation of the spirit from the body. Wishing doubtless to impress upon me the reality of the phenomenon, he exclaimed, 'By God Almighty, there is no delusion in the matter! It is no nebulous ecstasy, but a state of transcendent wonder, associated with absolute clearness of mind.'⁹²

This 'waking trance' which Tennyson associated with 'an apparent isolation of the spirit from the body' clearly corresponds to the state of wakeful vision of lines 36-7 in 'The Mystic': 'He often laying broad awake, and yet / Remaining from the body, and apart' (36-37).⁹³ In fact, in Hallam Tennyson's notes on the autobiographical basis of the belief and experience described in 'The Ancient Sage', he compares it to 'The Mystic', asserting that the experiential content of the earlier poem has an autobiographical origin:

Compare with this poem *The Mystic*, written in his boyhood, which records his early intimations, or indistinct visions, of the mind's power to pass beyond the shadows of the world – to pierce beyond the enveloping clouds of ignorance and illusion, and to reach some region of pure light and untroubled calm, where perfect knowledge should have extinguished doubt.⁹⁴

As a side note, it should be observed that the poet's insistence on this trance condition being 'the weirdest of the weirdest' interestingly finds expression in the 'weird seizures' of the speaker in 'The Princess', also referred to as a 'waking dream' (Section I. 12-4).⁹⁵

As for 'The Ancient Sage', the section where the poem's mystic speaks about his transcendental experiences is an 'almost word-for-word' rendering in poetic language of the visionary trance reported by Blood:⁹⁶

More than once when I
Sat all alone, revolving in myself
The word that is the symbol of myself,
The mortal limit of the Self was loosed,
And past into the Nameless, as a cloud
Melts into Heaven. I touch'd my limbs, the limbs

⁹² Hallam Tennyson, *Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Memoir by His Son*, 2 vols (London: Macmillan 1879; New York: Greenwood Press, 1969), II (1969), p. 473. Hereafter cited as *Memoir*.

⁹³ *Poems I*, p. 253.

⁹⁴ Hallam Tennyson, ed., *The Works of Alfred Lord Tennyson: Annotated by Alfred Lord Tennyson*, Eversley edn, 6 vols (New York: Macmillan, 1908), IV, p. 565.

⁹⁵ *Poems II*, p. 197.

⁹⁶ Jean Rosenbaum, 'Apples and Milkmaids: The Visionary Experience in Tennyson's the Holy Grail', *Studia Mystica*, 4 (1981), 11-35 (p. 17).

Were strange not mine—and yet no shade of doubt,
But utter clearness, and thro' loss of Self
The gain of such large life as match'd with ours
Were Sun to spark—unshadowable in words.⁹⁷ (229-38)

The lines are also strikingly close to Tyndall's description that he himself notes it with 'profound astonishment' in the chapter he contributes to Hallam's *Memoir*. Writing to Hallam, he states:

Here it [is] recorded in black and white. If you turn to your father's account of the wonderful state of consciousness superinduced by thinking of his own name, and compare it with the argument of the Ancient Sage, you will see that they refer to one and the same phenomenon.⁹⁸

In fact, recognizing that the poem might be viewed as being completely inspired by Lao Tzu,⁹⁹ Tennyson was keen on stressing that it also recorded his own intimate thoughts and experiences. Footnoted to the section on the sage's visions is the poet's ascription of that kind of experience to himself: 'This is also a personal experience which I have had more than once'. He elsewhere declares: 'The whole poem is very personal. The passages about 'Faith' and the 'Passion of the Past' were more especially my own personal feelings'.¹⁰⁰ One is not mistaken, then, in assuming that, when Tennyson was contemplating the label 'mystic' for the poem's persona, he was also closely thinking of this in connection to himself.

Returning to Tennyson's writing in the context of its relation to the 'mystical' coterie of the Apostles, it is fair to say that the group's celebrated, self-proclaimed connection to a notion of mysticism is most likely what encouraged him to publicly court the term in 'The Mystic' (1830), published within a year of his admission to the group. This poem is important for the purposes of the present chapter in the way it gives an idea of how Tennyson's views on mysticism converged with the prophetic role he conceived for himself as a poet. This becomes clear only by comparing it to 'The Poet' and 'The Poet's Mind', all published in the same volume of 1830, as well

⁹⁷ *Poems* III, p. 145.

⁹⁸ *Memoir* II, p. 478.

⁹⁹ According to Tennyson, the poem was written after he had read about the 'life and maxims' of the 'Chinese philosopher Laot-ze', but it does not reflect his philosophy (*Memoir* II, p.476). For an insightful study that challenges this denial, see Richard Benton, 'Tennyson and Lao Tzu', *Philosophy East and West*, 12.3 (1962), 233-240.

¹⁰⁰ *Memoir* II, p. 319.

as to his 1829 prize poem, ‘Timbuctoo’,¹⁰¹ given that the two personas of ‘the mystic’ and ‘the poet’ coincide on several points in these poems: both are set apart from ordinary mortals by their visionary insight into the ultimate principle, ‘the everlasting will’, that ‘investeth and ingirds all other lives’ (‘The Poet’ 7-12; ‘The Mystic’ 1-5, 41-46; ‘Timbuctoo’ 76-83, 109-12, 209-13); both have transcended temporal boundaries, and seen through the gates of ‘life and death’, with their ‘shining’, ‘burning eyes’ (‘The Mystic’ 27-34; ‘The Poet’ 5, 39; ‘Timbuctoo’ 66, 87); both must bear the ‘scorn’ and ‘sneer’ of an ‘undiscerning’ materialistic world that fails to ‘fathom’ their heavenly message (‘The Mystic’ 2-5; ‘The Poet’s Mind’ 4, 10, 32-35); and, finally, both have reached the highest state of human consciousness, on ‘the outward verge’ of the divine, which is similarly described either as the final one in a series of concentric ‘circle[s]’, or as a circle with an overwhelming ‘vast circumference’ (‘The Mystic’ 41-44; ‘Timbuctoo’ 88-94, 211).¹⁰²

One poet-critic who obviously picked up on this connection was Richard H. Horne, an admirer of ‘The Mystic’,¹⁰³ whose essay on Tennyson, in *A New Spirit of the Age* (1844), marks an early instance where the category of mysticism is explicitly incorporated in a theoretical account of poetry. This last fact did not escape the attention of its reviewers, as *Graham’s Magazine* of July 1844 declared, for example, that, in this piece, ‘a theory of poetry is invented’, one that positively recommends itself to ‘all who have been in the habit of laughing at Tennyson as a senseless mystic and professor of unreason’.¹⁰⁴ Horne, it should be noted, had objected in the essay to the ‘war-cry’ of ‘mystical mystery!’ that was reverberating through the ranks of the critical periodicals against certain species of poetry. In an attempt to favourably recast the category in question, he made clear his belief that what was intended here as a pejorative accusation could not, in fact, be closer to the truth of what he believed to be the elemental nature of poetry. According to him, poetic inspiration is essentially associated to a postulated ultimate principle of ‘mystery’ that is spiritual in nature, so that the more a poet’s verse is haunted by the sense of the mysterious, the closer it is to its divine origin:

¹⁰¹ It is significant that this early poem is epigraphed with two lines by Chapman, referring to a ‘mystick city’.

¹⁰² *Poems* I, pp. 243-47, 252-53, 190-99.

¹⁰³ Horne chose lines 10-24 of ‘The Mystic’ as an epigraph to his essay on Carlyle in *A New Spirit of the Age*.

¹⁰⁴ ‘Review of New Books’, rev. of *A New Spirit of the Age*, by R. H. Horne, *Graham’s Illustrated Magazine of Literature, Romance, Art, and Fashion*, XXVI (1844), 47-8 (p. 47).

The poetic fire is one simple and intense element in human nature; it has its source in the divine mysteries of our existence; it develops with the first abstract delight of childhood, the first youthful aspiration towards something beyond our mortal reach; and eventually becomes the master passion of those who are possessed with it in the highest degree, and the most ennobling and refining influence that can be exercised upon the passions of others. [... One condition of its presence] must be that of a certain consciousness of dreamy glories in the soul, with vague emotions, aimless impulses, and prophetic sensations, which may be said to tremble on the extreme verge of the fermenting source of that poetic fire, by which the life of humanity is purified and adorned.

From this spiritualized and idealist view of poetry, Tennyson emerges with ‘the title of a true poet of the highest class of genius’ and a ‘favoured son of Apollo’,¹⁰⁵ an estimation that was shared by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, who had collaborated with Horne on his *New Spirit*. As such, Browning’s appreciation of the poet – as well as of Wordsworth and Keats – was also interestingly predicated on a conceptual reliance on the mystical to define ‘poetry in its highest order’, as indicated in a letter that predates the publication of *New Spirit* by a year. ‘Certainly’, she had written to Horne in 1843, ‘there is a mystical effluence of poetry (a highest height over the highest height) in Wordsworth, Tennyson and Keats’.¹⁰⁶

That these examples point to the development of a more sympathetic attitude towards mysticism in Victorian literary criticism is supportable from another review of Horne’s work that appeared in *The Literary Gazette* of 16 March 1844; speaking of Horne’s style, the reviewer mentions how it has actually become fashionable to affect a ‘critical jargon’ that is itself coloured with ‘the clouded, mystical and metaphysical’ language of the literature it is evaluating.¹⁰⁷ At any rate, it may be fairly said that the kind of genial rapprochement between mysticism and poetry in the examples above continued well into the century, signifying a growing tendency towards the aesthetic construction of mysticism in Victorian discourse on poetry. We see this, for instance, in the ‘sweeping romantic vision’ of Robert Vaughan’s *Hours with the Mystics* (1856),¹⁰⁸ which makes a point in noting that the aesthetic appreciation of beauty –

¹⁰⁵ Richard H. Horne, *A New Spirit of the Age* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1844), pp. 201, 193-4.

¹⁰⁶ *Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning Addressed to Richard Hengist Horne*, ed. by S. R. Townshend Mayer, 2 vols (London: Richard Bently and Son, 1877), I, pp. 87-8.

¹⁰⁷ ‘Reviews of New Books’, rev. of *A New Spirit of the Age*, by Richard H. Horne, *The Literary Gazette and Journal of the Belles Lettres, Arts, Sciences, &c.* (1844) (p. 169).

¹⁰⁸ Leigh Schmidt, *Restless Souls*, p. 51. Schmidt’s view that Vaughan’s work displays a romantic approach to the subject, despite the latter’s occasional moral condemnatory note, owes to how Vaughan

including that experienced in poetry – can ‘aid us in our ascent toward the super-sensuous’ and ‘ideal world’:

We are often indebted to a sunset or a landscape, to a strain of music or a suddenly-remembered verse, for a voyage into a world of vision of our own, where we cease altogether to be aware of the external cause which first transported us thither.

The chapter on the ‘Mysticism of the Neo-Platonists’, where these lines occur, also refers to Plato’s ‘divine madness’ of poetic inspiration in the *Ion* to range poetry among the manifestations of the mystical temperament,¹⁰⁹ a classification that is all the more sympathetic to mysticism, given the special place Vaughan accorded to poets, and how he personally identified with them.¹¹⁰ Indeed, in a comment that further demonstrates the mid-century’s increasing acceptance of an essential affinity between poetry and mysticism, his friend J. B. Paton declared that everyone who knew Vaughan recognized that his belonged to ‘the poetic’ class of mind,¹¹¹ curiously adding that ‘his sympathy with mysticism, which attracted him to that subject, sufficiently proves this to be the bent of his mind’.¹¹² In other words, it takes a poet to understand a mystic, either because there is an aesthetic dimension to mysticism, or a mystical dimension to poetry. It is the same assumption made in George Eliot’s following lines about Goethe, from a letter of Nov. 11, 1874:

I must say, for my part, that I think he had a strain of mysticism in his soul,—of so much mysticism as I think inevitably belongs to a full poetic nature—I mean the delighted bathing of the soul in emotions which overpass the outlines of definite thought.¹¹³

frequently indulges in a sentimental and poetic account of the mystics, eliciting the following comment from his friend, H. R. Reynolds: ‘There is poetry enough in his *Hours with the Mystics* to stock half-a-dozen such poets as we hear of in these days. In the big dreams of Willoughby, in the saucy frolic, the bursting wit, and marvellous eloquence of what he, in his editorial capacity, called “the distressing outbreaks of Gower,” one feels disposed to say, “This man was meant for a poet, not a philosopher.”’: Vaughan (Snr.), *Memoir of Robert Alfred Vaughan*, p. 60.

¹⁰⁹ Robert Alfred Vaughan, *Hours with the Mystics: A Contribution to the History of Religious Opinion*, 2 vols (London: John W. Parker, 1856), I, pp. 74-5, 42-3.

¹¹⁰ Not only had Vaughan’s heart been set on the poetic vocation early in his career, but he also never ceased to think of himself as a poet, in some sense, even after he turned to philosophy and religious history. For this, see, for example, pp. 12-6, 21, 24, 31, 34, 40, 54, 76-8, 113 of the *Memoir*. As for Vaughan’s views on the nature and function of poetry, which are both idealistic and romantic, see the *Memoir*, pp. 80-89.

¹¹¹ See, for example, pp. 31, 34 and 113 of the *Memoir*. For, see also pp.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 278-9.

¹¹³ *George Eliot’s Life, as Related in Her Letters and Journals*, ed. by J. W. Cross, 3 vols (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1885), III, p. 175.

Other examples of this aesthetic tolerance for the mystical in the Victorian literary critical discourse of the second half of the century are found, for instance, in Swinburne's 1868 essay on Blake, or in the paper read by Hiram Corson at the eighth meeting of the London Browning Society in 1882. With regard to Swinburne, his essay describes Blake 'as a mystic of the higher' and 'nobler kind', and clearly shows how he had no patience for the kind of anti-mystical critics, who, as he sarcastically suggests, 'regard mysticism with distaste or contempt, as essentially in itself a vain or noxious thing a sealed bag or bladder that can only be full either of wind or of poison'. Although he did not necessarily believe that poetic inspiration was a form of mysticism, he does argue here that, when a mystic happens to be a poet, and one of great genius, as in the case of Blake, then his mysticism must be deemed aesthetically instructive. The mistake, then, of the critical literature that is overly suspicious of mystics, explains Swinburne, is its failure to realize that a literary critic is not called upon to be 'an apostle' of a poet's 'mystical creed', but rather to attempt an objective evaluation and appreciation of its aesthetic value in a work. To use his own words, what a 'reasonable commentator' ought to do, when approaching a mystical poem, is not to aim to 'preach' its 'gospel', but 'merely to do art a good turn in some small way, by explaining the "faith and works" of a great artist'. 'First get well hold of the mystic', he states, 'and you will then at once get a better view and comprehension of the painter and poet'.¹¹⁴

Hiram Corson's paper, on the other hand, holds that aesthetic experience, both that of poetic creation and appreciation, is intrinsically mystical in nature. His main proposition is that 'the life and efficacy of Art depends on the personality of the artist', where the idea of 'personality' corresponds not with the artist's 'conscious intellect', but with 'his spiritual constitution'. In the following excerpt, worth quoting in full, Corson particularly argues that, in true art such as Shakespeare's, the artist's personality succeeds to infuse the work with the deepest spiritual mysteries of the 'Soul' (or of 'Being'), eliciting an experience of cognitive-aesthetic communion between the artist and his/her audience, which he describes in mystical terms:

Personality is the ultimate source of spiritual quickening and adjustment. Literature and all forms of Art are but the intermediate agencies of personalities. [...] The inmost, secretest life of

¹¹⁴ A. C. Swinburne, *William Blake: A Critical Essay*, 2nd edn (London: John Camden Hotten, 1868), pp. 95, 101-5, 149, 156, 127.

Shakspeare's [*sic*] Plays came from the personality, the inmost, secretest life, of the man Shakspeare. We might, with the most alert sagacity, note and tabulate and aggregate his myriad phenomenal merits as a dramatic writer, but we might still be very far from that something back of them all, or rather that immanent something, that mystery of personality, that microcosmos, that "inmost centre, where truth abides in fullness," as Browning makes Paracelsus characterize it, "constituting man's self, is what Is," as he makes the dying John characterize it, in *A Death in the Desert*, that "innermost of the inmost, most interior of the interne," as Mrs. Browning characterizes it, "the hidden Soul," as Dallas characterizes it, which is projected into, and constitutes the soul of, the Plays, and which is reached through an unconscious and mystic sympathy on the part of him who habitually communes with and does fealty to them. That personality, that living force, cooperated spontaneously and unconsciously with the conscious powers, in the creative process; and when we enter into a sympathetic communion with the concrete result of that creative process, our own mysterious personalities, being essentially identical with, though less quickened than, Shakspeare's, respond, though it may be but feebly, to his.¹¹⁵

Much like Horne's usage of the notion, therefore, the mystical in this excerpt is evidently derived from an anti-secular conception of the word 'mystery', being more or less defined as the unknowable, inscrutable inner workings of the spiritual life. This is the same meaning that A. S. Arnold finds in Carlyle's understanding of mysticism, arguing in 1888 that 'the word mystery', for Carlyle, who acknowledged himself to be a mystic, was 'but an apology for ignorance' in spiritual matters, as in the ignorance in 'the ways of God', the 'Unseen Hand', or the infinite 'Power' that governs the universe.¹¹⁶

At this point, it should be noted that the few examples here brought together owe much to the earlier efforts of Carlyle, whose considerable and controversial attention at confronting the negative halo surrounding mysticism is what best marked the beginning of a new Victorian discourse on mysticism. I have previously observed that Carlyle was a pioneering figure in the popularization of mysticism, which is not far from what John R. Davis had in mind in pointing out that, as part of his project to promote German literature, Carlyle 'began to interpret positively the term "mystic"', as early as 1825, where it had been 'hitherto used as a term of abuse levelled at

¹¹⁵ 'The Idea of Personality: As Embodied in Robert Browning's Poetry', in *Browning Studies: Being Select Papers by Members of the Browning Society*, ed. by Edward Berdoe, M. R.C.S., &c. (London: George Allen, 1895), pp. 47-75 (pp. 63-4).

¹¹⁶ A. S. Arnold, *The Story of Thomas Carlyle* (London: Ward and Downey, 1888), p. 148.

German authors in Britain'.¹¹⁷ In 'The State of German Literature' (1827), for example, Carlyle criticises the many who are too quick to use this term disparagingly, without even pausing to consider what they mean by it: 'Mysticism is a word in the mouths of all: yet, of the hundred, perhaps not one has ever asked himself what this opprobrious epithet properly signified in his mind'. 'Examined strictly', he adds, 'mystical, in most cases, will turn out to be merely synonymous with *not understood*'.¹¹⁸ His answer to this rather accusatory conception of the mystical will be addressed in the next chapter (as part of my analysis of Carlyle's contribution to the Victorian construction of an ineffable mysticism), but it is sufficient, for now, to simply note how Carlyle was actively working to create a more favourable image for mystics in the face of English prejudices, especially during the early part of his career. 'Mystics', he insisted, according to Davis, 'were dealing in human truths, poetry, beauty and ideals at a time when most people's existence was narrow and mundane'.¹¹⁹ This finds expression in his essay on 'Novalis' (1829), for instance, as he claims for mysticism a universal legacy that honourably manifested itself through the poets of Italy, among others:

Novalis [...] was openly enough, in good part a Mystic himself. Not indeed what we English, in common speech, call a Mystic; which means only a man whom we do not understand, and, in self-defence, reckon or would fain reckon a Dunce. Novalis was a Mystic, or had an affinity with Mysticism, in the primary and true meaning of that word, exemplified in some shape among our own Puritan Divines, and which at this day carries no opprobrium with it in Germany, or, except among certain more unimportant classes, in any other country. Nay, in this sense, great honours are recorded of Mysticism: Tasso, as may be seen in several of his prose writings, was professedly a Mystic; Dante is regarded as a chief man of that class.

What Carlyle intended here as 'the primary and true meaning' of the word mysticism proves to be a positive (idealistic) one from the fact that he incidentally defines it in the same essay as 'that spiritual condition, which by its own account is like pure Light, colorless, formless, infinite'.¹²⁰

¹¹⁷ *The Victorians and Germany*, p. 70.

¹¹⁸ Thomas Carlyle, 'The State of German Literature', *The Edinburgh Review: Or Critical Journal* 46 (June-Oct. 1827), 304-51 (p. 339).

¹¹⁹ *The Victorians and Germany*, p. 70.

¹²⁰ Thomas Carlyle, 'Novalis', *The Foreign Review*, 4 (1829), 97-141 (p. 113).

We probably get an idea of Carlyle's enthusiasm for mysticism during this period from his notebook entry of 4 August 1831, in which we learn that it was not merely a subject with which he was preoccupied in writing, but one that obviously followed him in many of his conversations. The entry, written while travelling on his way to London, suggests his eagerness to discuss the subject even during a long and tiresome waiting interval. It reads thus: 'saw Esbie in the steerage; talked mysticism with him during six weary hours we had to stay at Whitehaven'.¹²¹ Moreover, as suggested by Edward Alexander, Carlyle's early dealings with John Stuart Mill also indicate that he was eagerly endeavouring to win 'disciples' to his 'own special brand of mysticism', a point that has been similarly mentioned by Emery Neff.¹²² Neff namely argues that, in the 1830s, 'Carlyle turned to the search of kindred spirits who might aid him in preaching the gospel of mysticism', adding that, when gratified to having found a number of 'young men already converted by his Review articles, he decided that his best work during the winter would be to investigate the "quality, numbers, and aims" of his London disciples'. Mill, Neff believes, was, in this regard, the most significant of these young associates.¹²³

During this period, Carlyle's correspondence with, or about, Mill is revealing in terms of his interest in mysticism. The following extract from his letter to Mill of May 1st, 1833 reveals, for instance, how he was constantly on the lookout for English fellow mystics:

Yesterday in some Newspaper I saw a sentence quoted from the Monthly Repository about Books and Men, which was curiously emblematic of my own late thoughts. If it was not you that wrote it (which I fear), then there must be another Mystic in England, whose acquaintance I should gladly make.¹²⁴

Carlyle had previously 'hunted out the author' of the five *Examiner* articles, entitled 'The Spirit of the Age' (1831), which had led him, upon reading them, to

¹²¹ James Froude, *Thomas Carlyle: A History of the First Forty Years of His Life, 1795-1835*, new edn, 2 vols (London: Longmans, Green, 1891), II, p. 166.

¹²² Edward Alexander, *Lionel Trilling and Irving Howe: And Other Stories of Literary Friendship* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 2011), p. 74; and Dwight N. Lindley, 'The Saint-Simonians, Carlyle, and Mill: A Study in the History of Ideas' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Columbia University, 1958), p. 24.

¹²³ *Carlyle and Mill: An Introduction to Victorian Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1926), p. 6.

¹²⁴ *The Collected Letters of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle*, ed. by Kenneth J. Fielding, Ian Campbell and others, 42 vols (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1970-present), VI, pp. 376-83, in *The Carlyle Letters Online*, ed. by Brent E. Kinser <<http://carlyleletters.dukejournals.org/>> [accessed 14 August 2013]; hereafter abbreviated as *CL*.

enthusiastically exclaim to himself: ‘Here is a new Mystic!’.¹²⁵ After seeking his acquaintance in London, Carlyle’s favourable description of his first meeting with Mill indicates his hope that he had succeeded to recruit a new member to his ‘Mystic School’:

We had almost four hours of the best talk I have mingled in for long. The youth walked home with me almost to the door; seemed to profess almost as plainly as modesty would allow that he had been converted by the Head of the Mystic School, to whom personally he testified very hearty-looking regard. [...] These rudiments of a Mystic School, better than I anticipated here, are by far the most cheering phenomenon I see in London. Good will come of it. Let us wait, and see in what way.¹²⁶

And even when Mill, for the sake of his conscience, ‘wrote to him a distinct profession’ of all the opinions he held, which he knew were incompatible with Carlyle’s mysticism, Carlyle simply brushed this aside and insistently replied that ‘the chief difference between’ them was that Mill ‘was as yet consciously nothing of a mystic’.¹²⁷ ‘Your very Mysticism’ (for there is enough of it in you), Carlyle explained, ‘you have to translate into Logic before you give it place’.¹²⁸ It is not clear when exactly Carlyle lost hope in converting Mill, but Dwight Lindley believes that it is this that ‘finally led to the rupture in their friendship’.¹²⁹

As for his conceptual association between poetry and mysticism, and how he, in turn, sought to re-interpret the latter category aesthetically, Carlyle has left us ample evidence of this in his essays and private writings. The closing paragraph of his notebook entry of 8 January 1828, for example, not only shows us ‘most clearly’ – if any of Carlyle’s writings could – what he meant by mysticism,¹³⁰ but also states his belief that poetry, in its truest and highest sense, properly belongs to its domain:

Tasso was a mystic, as we should call him: Must not every true poet be so? That is to say, must he not have a sense of the Invisible Existences of Nature, and be enabled as it were to read the symbols of these in the visible? Can any man delineate with life the figure even of a Trinculo or Caliban otherwise? For is not the poorest

¹²⁵ Edward Alexander, *Lionel Trilling and Irving Howe*, p. 75; and John S. Mill, *Autobiography* (London: Longmans, 1873), p. 174.

¹²⁶ *CL*, V, pp. 394-402.

¹²⁷ John Mill, *Autobiography*, p. 175-6.

¹²⁸ *CL*, VII, pp. 69-74.

¹²⁹ ‘The Saint-Simonians’, p. 24.

¹³⁰ F. L. van Holthoon, *The Road to Utopia: A Study of John Stuart Mill’s Social Thought* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1971), p. 64.

nature a mystery; the most grovelling street-porter, the most arid
Kanzlervervandte a type in some obscurer sense and an emanation
from the Land of wonders?¹³¹

These lines are an early, though non-figurative, expression of Carlyle's clothes philosophy that would be more fully developed in *Sartor Resartus* (1833-34), providing its controlling metaphor. Consciously turning back to 'a very old tradition' that 'has flowed through all ages of thought like a subterranean stream', the philosophy conceives material reality to be a mere appearance, as if a garment, concealing behind it a noumenally Absolute reality that is essentially divine in nature, and one that remains hidden and mysterious to all but a special few. Observing the lines above, it is useful to note what has been previously mentioned, that Carlyle's conceptualization of mysticism goes hand in hand with a particular notion of 'mystery'. In his excellently comprehensive study of Carlyle's relationship to German thought from 1819 to 1834, Charles F. Harrold relates this notion to the medieval theological conception of 'mystery' as 'that which is everywhere revealed but is not understood of those who have not right judgment'. Maintaining that this is also what underlies Carlyle's appropriation of Goethe's 'Open Secret', Harrold argues that Carlyle's 'sacred mystery' is such 'in a double sense: as beyond fathoming by human reason, and as lying undiscerned to the mass of mankind'. Mystics, in this sense, are those who are able to pierce through the shows and the outward trappings of the physical world, and seize at this 'divine mystery', an ability that Carlyle counted as 'but one of the two great gifts of the Hero' – the other being the gift of 'action'.¹³² And sure enough, given his suggestion above that 'every true poet' must be a mystic, it is no wonder that Carlyle included the class of poets as foremost among his catalogue of heroes in 1840, declaring its similarity to the class of prophets in that 'they have penetrated both of them into the sacred mystery of the Universe', 'open to all, seen by almost none! That divine mystery, which lies everywhere in all Beings'. The poet's penetration of this mystery, he explains, occurs on the aesthetic level, and yields a kind of organic unity between the outward musicality of the poetic utterance and the internal spiritual melody of the 'thing' sung:

¹³¹ *Two Note Books of Thomas Carlyle: From 23d March 1822 to 16th May 1832*, ed. by Charles E. Norton (New York: Grolier Club, 1898), p. 125.

¹³² Charles F. Harrold, *Carlyle and German Thought: 1819-1834* (London: Archon Books, 1963), pp. 78, 117, 139.

A *musical* thought is one spoken by a mind that has penetrated into the inmost heart of the thing; detected the inmost mystery of it, namely the *melody* that lies hidden in it; the inward harmony of coherence which is its soul, whereby it exists, and has a right to be, here in this world.

This, Carlyle believes, is behind Ludwig Tieck's description of Dante's *Divine Comedy* as 'a mystic unfathomable Song'.¹³³

An important point for discussion in relation to Carlyle's lecture on 'The Hero as Poet' (1840) is that mentioned by Emerson R. Marks, that such adulatory accounts of the poet, similar also to Emerson's description of the poet as a 'representative man', indicate how the focus of nineteenth century poetic theory was undergoing a 'shift of attention from what poets created to the intellectual and psychological equipment which enables creation in the first place'.¹³⁴ This brings me to Carlyle's appropriation of the Kantian distinction between 'Reason' and 'Understanding', and how it was part of a larger attempt by Victorian poets and critics to define mysticism in a way that asserts the authority of poetic intuitions over the empiricism and material philosophy of the period. To be sure, in such pieces as 'The State of German Literature' and 'Novalis', for example, Carlyle's defence of mysticism is, in effect, a defence of the cultural authority of poetry, because it involves postulating that ultimate knowledge is obtained, not through the much venerated logic of the rationalists, but by an intuitive faculty in man that is believed to be, among other things, the seat of the poetic imagination. This Carlyle accomplishes by giving a more Romantic and religious interpretation to the functions of Reason in Kant's Idealist philosophy.

Charles Harrold explains that Carlyle's Reason is, in fact, 'far less rational than Kant's pure practical reason', taking on for him 'a mystical significance' that shows the greater influence of Coleridge and Jacobi, with some traces of the seventeenth century English divines as well as the English Platonic tradition.¹³⁵ Defining both Reason and Understanding as 'organs', or 'modes of operation, by which the mind discovers truth', Carlyle perceives the relation between the two as an opposition between absolute and relative truth: 'Reason discerns Truth itself, the

¹³³ *On Heroes*, pp. 75-7, 84.

¹³⁴ *Taming the Chaos: English Poetic Diction Theory since the Renaissance* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998), p. 173.

¹³⁵ *Carlyle and German Thought*, pp. 145-6. For a good and detailed analysis of the unKantian elements of Carlyle's Reason, see pp. 135-46.

absolutely and primitively *True*; while understanding discerns only *relations*'. As to what is meant by 'Primitive Truth', Carlyle suggests that it is anything that deals with the transcendently 'infinite' and 'eternal' questions, such as 'the existence of God' and the 'immaterial Soul', or 'the end and meaning of man'. The answer to these, he argues, are attained only subjectively 'by intuitions, in the deepest and purest nature of Man', what he describes as 'the inward eye', which involves denying that 'Sense is the only inlet of Knowledge, that Experience is the primary ground of Belief'. Stated differently, these truths cannot be inferred from the external 'world of sense', as they are 'written' in 'obscure but ineffaceable characters within our inmost being'. For Carlyle, therefore, 'the proper province of Understanding is all, strictly speaking, *real* practical and material knowledge, Mathematics, Physics, Political Economy', *etc.*, which he deems to be far inferior to Reason's more spiritual domain: 'Let it not step beyond this province, however; not usurp the province of Reason, which it is appointed to obey, and cannot rule over without ruin to the whole spiritual man'.¹³⁶ That Carlyle indeed considered the intuitive, or visceral, 'mode' of discovering truth as definitive of mysticism is evident in his statement that '*to know*; to get into the truth of anything, is ever a mystic act, of which the best logics can only babble on the surface'.¹³⁷ It is even more clearly seen in how he equates the essential doctrine behind 'the *Teologia Mistica*, so much venerated by Tasso in his philosophical writings', as well as 'the "Mysticism" alluded to by Novalis' to his own peculiar version of Kant's Reason, prompting Charles Harrold to describe this Romanticized version of it as being 'little else than a mystical penetration to spiritual truth'.¹³⁸

Now according to the constructivist approach applied in this thesis, it is fair to say that Carlyle's characterization of the mystical along these Romantic and loosely Kantian lines effectively exemplifies Richard King's view that mysticism is a category that 'represents the conceptual site of a historical struggle' over 'meaning and authority'. It is perhaps useful to recall that this approach maintains not only that any established definition of mysticism is a product of 'a particular community, with a particular agenda, at a particular time, in a particular cultural space', but also that any investigation of the social or cultural construction of a given conception of mysticism is principally 'an investigation of power relations'. I have previously cited the opinion

¹³⁶ *State of German Literature* (pp. 347-9).

¹³⁷ *On Heroes*, p. 53.

¹³⁸ 'Novalis' (p. 117-8); and *Carlyle and German Thought*, p. 135-6.

that there is an agenda of power with a clear cultural and historical particularity underlying, for example, the medieval ecclesiastical definition of the mystical as being related to the hidden meaning of the Scripture: it demonstrates the patriarchal exclusion of medieval women from religious life, given that the majority of them lacked scholastic training in interpreting the Bible.¹³⁹ And so, too, in a different way, it is legitimate to argue that, in the case of Carlyle and other Victorians, the definition of mysticism as an intuitive path to ultimate knowledge defies the Jamesian essentialist notion of a mysticism that is universal, ahistorical and acultural, showing, instead, that it was very much a product of its ideological and historical situation. In defining it as an intuitive knowledge of transcendent reality, mysticism more specifically represented a conceptual site of a power contest between the competing ideals of the religious and secular camps in the nineteenth century.

In discussing the modern making of mysticism, Leigh Schmidt explains that there were many ‘battles to be both fought and mediated’ in the intellectual and religious worlds that brought about William James’s theory, a major one of which was the ongoing contention between religion and science. He moreover argues that the invention of an ‘intuitive’ mysticism that is superior to all rational discursive practices was partly meant as a ‘defensive’ strategy to secure ‘religious feelings’ in an isolated and untouchable sphere, above the onslaught of scientific or materialist analysis: ‘As an antipositivist, antimaterialist tool, the new mysticism offered an intellectual shield against untrammelled naturalism, “the fierce onward current of purely scientific thought”’.¹⁴⁰ With this in mind, nothing in Carlyle’s writings shows us more clearly how mysticism – so defined – was deeply entangled in contemporary cultural debates against positivism than the conclusion of ‘Novalis’. The following passage, extracted from it, is long, but besides interestingly employing Schmidt’s same metaphor of intellectual warfare, it will not bear abridgment without detracting from its relevance to how Carlyle’s defence of mysticism was implicated in issues of ideological power:

Mysticism, whatever it may be, should, like other actually existing things, be understood in well-informed minds. We have observed, indeed, that the old-established laugh on this subject has been getting rather hollow of late; and seems as if, ere long, it would in a great measure die away. It appears to us that, in England, there is a distinct spirit of tolerant and sober investigation abroad, in regard to

¹³⁹ King, *Orientalism and Religion*, p. 9, 14, 69; and Jantzen, *PGCM*, p. 86-7. See pp. 21, 23 above.

¹⁴⁰ ‘MMM’ (pp. 288, 274).

this and other kindred matters; a persuasion, fast spreading wider and wider, that the plummet of French or Scotch Logic, excellent, nay indispensable as it is for surveying all coasts and harbours, will absolutely not sound the deep-seas of human Inquiry. [...] ‘The day will come,’ said Lichtenberg, in bitter irony, ‘when the belief in God will be like that in nursery Spectres’; or, as Jean Paul has it, ‘Of the World will be made a World-Machine, of the Æther a Gas, of God a Force, and of the Second World – a Coffin.’ We rather think, such a day will *not* come. At all events, while the battle is still waging, and that Coffin-and-Gas Philosophy has not yet secured itself with Tithes and penal Statutes, let there be free scope for Mysticism, or whatever else honestly opposes it. A fair field, and no favour, and the right *will* prosper!

So much for essentialism’s insistence on the ahistorical and apolitical nature of mysticism. It clearly fails to place any importance on the ideological agenda underlying such a culturally-loaded discourse as this one. Evidently, Carlyle is not too particular about the exact definition of mysticism here, so long as it represented a category that offered an effective combatant against the purely secular movements that were steadily gaining ground at the time. Ideologically speaking, it appears that there is much at stake in insisting that mysticism is an ‘actually existing thing’, instead of something that warrants ridicule. The extract above may help indicate how, in the nineteenth century, the term’s definition was no longer primarily inclined toward the social exclusion of women from religious authority, as in medieval times, nor chiefly socially situated within debates about the acceptable ‘comportment of religious people’, as in mid-eighteenth-century critiques of enthusiasm. On the contrary, the term’s usage, in ‘Novalis’, reveals that what was fundamentally at stake at the time was, in fact, the primal religious impulse of the theists, and that mysticism was being proposed as a possible candidate to help win the ‘battle’ of belief between a God-centred, or theistic, philosophy and the ‘Coffin-and Gas’ philosophy of the materialists. To be sure, it is clear in the rest of the essay that the attraction of Kant’s Idealism for Carlyle’s conception of the mystical largely lies in its denial of ‘the existence of Matter’, or the radical reinterpretation of it, and the possible metaphysical and religious implications of that: ‘the old hostility of Matter is at an end, for Matter is itself annihilated; and the black Spectre, Atheism, “with all its sickly dews,” melts into nothingness forever’.¹⁴¹ Schmidt is correct in observing that this kind of metaphysical and philosophical speculation was an integral part of the intellectual

¹⁴¹ ‘Novalis’ (pp. 140-1, 115-7).

process that went into the modern making of mysticism:

The modern construction of mysticism as a category was very much grounded in a particular set of cultural negotiations over the reality and unreality of the spiritual world. It was intended to engage, not bracket, those metaphysical questions.¹⁴²

That being said, what is especially significant to highlight here is how Victorian poetic theory, and the poetic enterprise as a whole, constituted a major arena where this cultural and ideological struggle for domination took place in the process of inventing this modern construct. This is because taking part in any intellectual process – defining mysticism, in this case – that sought to establish the supremacy of religious theism over a secular, naturalistic philosophy was in the best interest of the Victorian poets and critics who were struggling to assert the cultural relevance of poetry by claiming its recourse to primal religious feelings. More specifically, we may argue that, if Richard King is correct in observing that there were important considerations (ideological, critical, ethical, etc.) involved in the decision to include, or exclude, certain phenomena from this category, then Victorian poets and critics undoubtedly took part in these decisions.¹⁴³ And these decisions served them well, too. The choice to include poetic inspiration as a type of the mystical phenomenon, for example, served to extend any claims that were being made for mysticism and religion to the sphere of poetry. In the same way, the decision to exclude rational modes of perception from the realm of the mystical was important, because it ensured that poetry stood separately, and independently, from the realm of Logic, either on an equal or superior footing; this naturally meant that the validity of poetic truths could not be critiqued, dissected or judged according to positivist epistemic values. For Victorian poets and critics, therefore, joining other intellectuals in defining mysticism as an inner subjective and anti-rationalist experience of the Absolute was a means of establishing the cultural authority, not only of religion, but also of poetry, given that poetry was already being promoted as a source of truth of high religious and mystical claims.

Examples of how Victorian discourse on poetry displayed this kind of cultural and ideological struggle for domination in its conception of mysticism is found in the critical tendency to identify poetry, sometimes along with religion, as being

¹⁴² ‘Making of Modern “Mysticism”’ (p. 289).

¹⁴³ *Orientalism and Religion*, p. 9.

constitutive of (or equivalent to) the mystical while simultaneously pitting it against logic and scientific scepticism. Carlyle's characterization of Kant's Reason stands as a representative example. Having established above how Carlyle's Romantic appropriation of the philosopher's Idealism transformed Reason into a mystical faculty, so to speak, it is curious to note now that 'Poetry' always seems to be at the foreground of the spiritual landscape Carlyle tends to create when referring to this Kantian notion. In 'Characteristics' (1831), for example, Carlyle refers to the intuitive faculty as the 'mystic region' of the mind, from where 'Posies' emerge, forming one of the leading cultural manifestations of man's spiritual principle. This principle, according to him, is awaiting to be revived from the sickening effects of the scepticism of modern life, the kind of scepticism that is born 'of Logic, and its limits, and uses and abuses':

The fever of Scepticism must needs burn itself out, and burn out thereby the Impurities that caused it; then again will there be clearness, health. The principle of life, which now struggles painfully, in the outer, thin and barren domain of the Conscious of Mechanical, may then withdraw into its inner sanctuaries, its abysses of mystery and miracle; withdraw deeper than ever into that domain of the Unconscious, by nature infinite and inexhaustible; and creatively work there. From that mystic region, and from that alone, all wonders, all Poesies, and Religions, and Social Systems have proceeded.¹⁴⁴

The internal conflict suggested in these lines between the spirits of rationalism and mysticism, in addition to the latter's definitive connection to poetry is also present in the following depictions of Reason offered in 'The State of German Literature' and 'Novalis'. The former states:

Its [Reason's] domain lies in that higher region whither logic and argument cannot reach; in that holier region, where Poetry, and Virtue and Divinity abide, in whose presence Understanding wavers and recoils, dazzled into utter darkness by that 'sea of light,' at once the fountain and the termination of all true knowledge.

Similarly, in 'Novalis', Reason is said to be 'the pure, ultimate light of our nature; wherein [...] lies the foundation of all Poetry, Virtue, Religion; things which are properly beyond the province of Understanding'.¹⁴⁵ The fact that 'Poetry' relies here

¹⁴⁴ 'Characteristics', *Edinburgh Review* (August-Dec. 1831), 351-83 (pp. 355, 381).

¹⁴⁵ 'State of German Literature' (pp. 349); 'Novalis' (p. 117).

on the mystical for the legitimacy of its cultural authority is unmistakable when one keeps in mind that in both essays Reason is consistently defined in mystical terms.

In addition to Carlyle, another significant Victorian thinker who entertained similar views about the authority of the mystical and poetic mindset over the rational one was none other than John Mill, the son of the distinguished philosopher of the empirical and utilitarian school, James Stuart Mill. But this was Mill of the early thirties who still ‘had a good deal in common’ with Carlyle, and who was particularly going through an ‘excess[ive]’ stage in his reaction against the Benthamite utilitarianism of his early education.¹⁴⁶ By then, Mill had emotionally recovered from his melancholic crisis of 1827-1828, itself owing much to his rigid rationalist upbringing that had threatened to turn him into ‘a mere reasoning machine’.¹⁴⁷ His recovery famously came through the works of Wordsworth and Coleridge, which led to his adoption of certain Romantic views on mysticism and poetry, views that would not last, but that clearly represent a significant moment in the history of mysticism in Victorian poetic theory.¹⁴⁸ These views, especially the ones on mysticism, were mostly expressed in his private correspondence with Carlyle, and his longest statement of them appeared in his letters of July 5, 1833, and March 2, 1834.

In these letters, Mill puts forth his idea about the proper role of the Logician, or philosopher, in relation to mysticism, poetry and art, the last two of which he uses interchangeably. His thoughts betray how, even at this stage, Mill could not completely liberate himself from his father’s doctrinaire rationalism, and his fundamental appeal to the principle of utility. Mill argues that ‘Mysticism’ is to be accepted, and deemed most serviceable, only if it proves ‘its translatability into

¹⁴⁶ Alfred William Benn, *The History of English Rationalism in the Nineteenth Century*, 2 vols (London: Longmans, Green, 1906), I, p. 424; and Mill, *Autobiography*, p. 230.

¹⁴⁷ Wendy Donner, *The Liberal Self: John Stuart Mill’s Moral and Political Philosophy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 98-9. For a good review of other scholarly opinions about the cause of Mill’s personal crisis, see ‘Sympathy and Self-Interest: The Crisis in Mill’s Mental History’, *Utilitas*, 1.2 (1989), 259-277 (pp. 259-62), by Michele Green, whose argument, similar to Donner’s, maintains that a deficiency in Mill’s capacity for sympathy was at the heart of his crisis, and that this was the result of an education that was markedly designed to cultivate logic and intellectual analysis to the detriment of the sentimental or ‘internal culture’.

¹⁴⁸ Later, in 1843, Mill would state that ‘mysticism, a word so much oftener written and spoken than understood’, is ‘neither more nor less than ascribing objective existence to the subjective creations of the mind’s own faculties, to mere ideas of the intellect; and believing that by watching and contemplating these ideas of its own making, it can read in them what takes place in the world without’, a definition that W. S. Lilly describes as ‘the Positivist philosopher’s account of mysticism’: see John Stuart Mill, *A System of Logic, Ratiocinative and Inductive: Being a Connected View of the Principles of Evidence, and the Methods of Scientific Investigation*, 2 vols (London: J. W. Parker, 1843), II, p. 364; and Lilly, ‘Modern Mysticism’ (p. 293).

logic'.¹⁴⁹ In true Romantic fashion, nonetheless, he declares that 'the highest truths' are those that belong to 'the poet or artist', which are intuitively attained: 'that is, they need neither explanation nor proof, but if not known before, are assented to as soon as stated'. All of this comes as part of his attempt to argue that his own 'humbler part', as a Logician, is much more needed than the role taken up by Carlyle, whom he considers 'a Poet and Artist', even though Carlyle's 'walk of usefulness' is judged 'to be the higher' of the two. Mill explains that, whereas 'the artist's is the highest part, for by him alone is real *knowledge* of such truths conveyed', only a few readers, hearers, and spectators, 'to whom those truths *are* intuitive', would be able to understand them. The majority, on the other hand, will 'consider them as nothing but dreaming or madness', due to the prosaic nature of his contemporary intellectual and social scene. This is where the role of the Logician comes in, as he is among those few who are endowed with the ability to intuitively perceive such truths, and is equally able to allow others to see them more comprehensibly through the lens of Logic. On him, then, falls the task of translating the mystical and 'impressive' language of the poets, so as to ultimately 'make those who are not poets, understand that poetry is higher than Logic'.¹⁵⁰

In other words, the authority of Mill's intuitive man of Logic is derived from his role as an auxiliary to mystics, poets and artists, who are elevated to the Carlylean pedestal of cultural prophets. It may be true that, for him, Logic is an indispensable tool for the evaluation of mysticism, but this is not in the sense of insisting that mysticism ought to be proven according to rationalist criteria of judgment. Rather, it is in the sense that it should be able to be 'manipulat[ed]' into clear logical statements. The letter of 1834, in which 'mysticism' features as a key term, indicates as much:

Is not the distinction between Mysticism, the mysticism which is of Truth, & mere dreaming, or the substitution of imaginations for realities, exactly this, that mysticism may be "translated into logic?" I mean in the only sense in which I ever endeavour so to translate it. You will understand what I mean. Logic proves nothing, yet points out clearly whether and how all things are proved. This being my creed, of course none of my mysticism, if mysticism it be, rests on logic as its basis; yet I require to see how it looks in the logical

¹⁴⁹ Emery Neff, *Carlyle and Mill*, p. 21.

¹⁵⁰ *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill: The Earlier Letters of John Stuart Mill 1812-1848 (Part I)* ed. by Francis E. Mineka, 33 vols (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963), XII, p. 79. For a discussion of how Mill was to later abandon this exalted view of poetry, see Donner, *The Liberal Self*, p. 100.

dialect before I feel sure of it. And if I have any vocation I think it is exactly this, to translate the mysticism of others into the language of Argument. Have not all things two aspects, an Artistic and a Scientific; to the former of which the language of mysticism is the most appropriate, to the latter that of Logic? The mechanical people, whether theorists or men of the world, find the former unintelligible, & despise it. Through the latter one has a chance of forcing them to respect even what they cannot understand – and that once done, they may be made to believe what to many of them must always be in the utmost extent of the term “things unseen.”¹⁵¹

This vocation of being a translator of intuitive truths is similarly described in his letter of the previous year, but in relation to poetry:

I am not in the least a poet, in any sense; but I can do homage to poetry. I can to a very considerable extent feel it and understand it, and can make others who are *my inferiors* understand it in proportion to the measure of their capacity. [my italics]

As Bruce Mazlish suggests, ‘neither the poetry nor the mysticism would be very recognizable’ after they have been subjected to Mill’s translation,¹⁵² but what is certainly recognizable from the quotes above is that mysticism, as a concept, was inexorably linked to poetry and art, and that even Victorian men of logic, such as Mill, found in it a meaningful term by which to lay their own claims to cultural authority. This sense of authority, however, was notably predicated on an understanding that the cognitive domain of science, logic and intellectual analysis is subordinate to the realm of intuitions.

Aside from the writings of Carlyle, Mill, and other Victorian intellectuals who ideologically regarded themselves as ‘outside Christianity’, a similar aestheticized notion of mysticism materialized even in Victorian vindications of poetry by the ‘consciously orthodox Christian’ critics, who, according to David J. DeLuara, placed various levels of importance ‘on credal and doctrinal correctness’. The two examples cited by DeLuara, from the writings of Frederick Robertson and John H. Newman, perfectly suit the present purpose, both of which express the then ‘increasingly widespread view’ that although poetry is ‘subordinate to revelation’, it is ‘the restorer of a disappearing religious consciousness’, ‘the guardian of a “vague” numinousness

¹⁵¹ *The Collected Works of Mill: The Earlier Letters*, p. 79, 102.

¹⁵² *James and John Stuart Mill: Father and Son in the Nineteenth Century* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1988), p. 246.

under threat from science'.¹⁵³ Namely, in 1852, Robertson stated that 'Poetry' originates from mysticism, and, in turn, serves to preserve it from the destructive forces of modern science, clearly conceiving the mystical as a visceral experience or knowledge that rises above the practical materialism of science:

Science destroys Poetry: until the heart bursts into mysticism, and out of science brings Poetry again; asserting a wonder and a vague mystery of life and feeling beneath and beyond all science, and proclaiming the wonderfulness and mystery of that which we seem most familiarly to understand.

Based on this, he also justifies the mystical style of poetry that belongs to Tennyson, Browning and Wordsworth, as a necessary response to the limitations and dry concreteness of scientific facts:

The reaction from the age of Science is, and I suppose ever will be, the Poetry of Mysticism. For men who have [...] become conscious that the clear formulas and accurate technicalities of science have not expressed, nor ever can, the truths of the Soul, find a refuge in that vagueness and undefined sense of mystery which broods over the shapeless borders of the illimitable. [...] This] is a necessary phase in the history of Poetry, and is but a protest and witness for the infinite in the soul of man.¹⁵⁴

Robertson seems to be saying that nineteenth-century mysticism is a testimony to the inadequacy of materialist and rationalist philosophies to meet man's metaphysical needs, and 'Poetry' is taken to be the definitive medium for its expression. As for John Newman, he had argued about a decade earlier that modern poetry had gradually come to 'counterbalance' the more dominant practical and materialistic tendencies of mid-century culture, and by this, substituting the spiritual role of the Church: 'The taste for poetry of a religious kind has in modern times in a certain sense taken place of the deep contemplative spirit of the early Church'. This is where he suggests that it would not be 'far-fetched' to draw a 'comparison between the mysticism of the ancients, and the poetry or romance of the moderns, as to the religious tendencies of each':

Poetry then is our mysticism; and so far as any two characters of mind tend to penetrate below the surface of things, and to draw men

¹⁵³ DeLaura, 'Future of Poetry', pp. 162, 165-6.

¹⁵⁴ *Lectures on the Influence of Poetry and Wordsworth* (London: H. R. Allenson, Ltd., 1906), pp. 27, 11-2.

away from the material to the invisible world, so far they may certainly be said to answer the same end; and that too a religious one.¹⁵⁵

Conclusion

To conclude, ‘mysticism’ obviously became a recurrent term in Victorian discourse on poetry, and the act of defining it offered poets and critics alike an important means for asserting and making sense of the place of poetry in the increasingly secularized milieu of nineteenth-century culture. Particularly, its definition as a transcendent state of consciousness, whether explicitly stated, or implicitly accepted, was intended to lend support to the Romantic critical claims that sought to elevate poetry to the status of a divinely inspired prophecy; this is because poetic inspiration itself was effectively being identified as a form of mystical experience. As has been widely discussed in the scholarship on Victorian poetry and criticism, such Romantic claims are best interpreted as a response to that generally perceived ideological crisis that came in the wake of the higher biblical criticism, and the early discoveries of geology and biology, all of which elicited the need to salvage the moral and spiritual functions of the discredited dogmas by transferring them to the poetic enterprise. We may rightly say, therefore, that the Victorian aestheticization of mysticism was driven by a clear cultural and ideological agenda: it was done as much to further the cause of religion, and its cultural sphere of influence, as to assert the spiritual and moral function of poetry in a modern secular setting. The same cultural and ideological politics also underlay the emergence of this modern category as an anti-positivist and anti-materialist construct, and Victorian poetic theory equally had much to do with this. When William James, for instance, wrote, in the context of discussing the mystical, that ‘intuitions’ are ‘truer than any logic-chopping rationalistic talk, however clever’, and Underhill followed suit in declaring the ability of passions to open ‘doors’ of truth ‘which logic has battered on in vain’,¹⁵⁶ they were both responding to the writings of Victorian poets and critics, who made a positive case for mysticism in the effort to establish the supremacy of poetry over science.

¹⁵⁵ ‘State of Religious Parties’, *The British Critic and Quarterly Theological Review*, 25 (1839), 396-426 (pp. 289-90).

¹⁵⁶ *Varieties*, p. 62; and *Mysticism*, p. 57.

CHAPTER III

‘I am bound to find you in reasons, Sir, but not in brains’:

Carlyle and the Nineteenth-Century Reinterpretation of the Obscurity of ‘Mysticism’

According to John Nichol’s biography of Thomas Carlyle for *The English Men of Letters* (1892), Carlyle’s days as a student saw the words ‘No Mysticism’ inscribed over Edinburgh University’s entrances, as part of its academic mission,¹ something that seems to have had an opposite effect on Carlyle.² For if anything, Carlyle’s early intellectual career would be marked by a diligent preoccupation with the mystical, whether in his readings, writings, or social interactions with friends and acquaintances. His early letters certainly reveal that he was eager to ‘preach’ mysticism to any literary company he mixed with;³ and, as in his first dealings with John Stuart Mill,⁴ he often tended to believe that he was close to winning a new ‘convert’ to ‘the Mystic School’. His letter to his brother John of 11 August 1829 is a case in point. In it, Carlyle gives the following account about his visit to Dumfries, where he met with Francis Jeffrey of the *Edinburgh Review*:

Saw the Jeffreys: they arrived about seven at night; and the new Dean and I sat talking of high and low matters till near two in the morning. The Dean of Faculty seems slowly coming over to “Mysticism,” were he not long ago a *vollendete Stümper* [completely unreasonable man]!⁵

Two years later, William Empson, Jeffrey’s son in law, would also be subjected to Carlyle’s efforts of conversion, and Carlyle would deliver a similar verdict on him:

¹ John Nichol, *Carlyle*, ed. by John Morely, English Men of Letters Series (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1892), p. 20.

² *The Carlyle Encyclopedia* (p. 420) argues that ‘Carlyle resented the intellectual limitations of Edinburgh University, which he satirized in *Sartor Resartus* as a “Rational University; in the highest degree, hostile to Mysticism”’. For other sources on how Carlyle was influenced by his university education, see Ian Campbell, ‘Carlyle and the University of Edinburgh’, in *Four Centuries: Edinburgh University Life 1583–1983*, ed. by Gordon Donaldson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1983), pp. 53-70; and his more recent ‘Carlyle and Education’, in *Thomas Carlyle Resartus: Reappraising Carlyle’s Contribution to the Philosophy of History, Political Theory, and Cultural Criticism*, ed. by Paul E. Kerry and Marylu Hill (Madison and Teaneck, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2010), pp. 49-61; as well as Ralph Jessop, *Carlyle and Scottish Thought* (London: Macmillan, 1997).

³ *CL*, V, pp. 316-20.

⁴ See pp. 88-89 above.

⁵ *CL*, V, pp. 19-22.

‘He is, as I thought, in the *threshold* of mysticism; but I think will go deeper’.⁶ This is not to mention the ‘Mr. Esbie’ cited in Chapter II, whom Carlyle ‘preached mysticism to for six hours’ while travelling to Liverpool, and this despite being both ‘sleepless’ and ‘victualless’.⁷ Even Carlyle’s intimate letters to his wife are not without his attempts to proselytize, revealing that it was his hope, too, that Jane Welsh Carlyle would become ‘a Mystic’. Such is the case of his letter of August 15th, 1831:

I will ‘take up with no other women’; for I believe in my heart I have the best woman of them all to myself – That is, if she were a mystic, as she will one day be: nay already is.– And so here good night my own Jane and Wife!

And again a week later:

Understand however once more that I have yet taken up with no other women. [...] I perceive that of all women my own Jeannie is the wife for me: that in her true bosom (once she were a Mystic) a Man's head is worthy to lie. Be a Mystic, Dearest; that is, stand with me on this everlasting basis, and keep thy arms around me: thro’ life I fear nothing.⁸

In this last letter, Carlyle also informed Jane about meeting Charles Wentworth Dilke, then the editor of the *Athenaeum*, whom he reported to have introduced to mysticism: ‘We had immensities of talk; and Dylk [*sic...*] heard mysticism for the first time with astonishment enough’. It should be pointed out that Carlyle’s visit to London in 1831 was for the purpose of arranging for the publication of *Sartor Resartus*, which explains why he was debating mysticism with several London publishers. Of his earlier meeting with John Bowring of the *Westminster Review*, he wrote: ‘I went to Bowring’s. [...] We talked copiously, he utterly utilitarian and radical, I utterly mystical and radical; and parted about noon; with a standing invitation on his part to come again’.⁹ From his letters, it is clear that Carlyle’s ultimate hope at the time was to be able to gather a circle of like-minded mystics around him, who could, as Emery Neff put it, ‘aid him in preaching the gospel of mysticism’.¹⁰ And he preferred this to be in London, where they can exert more

⁶ Ibid., pp. 372-81.

⁷ See footnote 3 above.

⁸ Ibid., pp. 327-33, 348-59.

⁹ *CL*, V, pp. 335-42, 348-59.

¹⁰ *Carlyle and Mill*, p. 6.

influence, and even start a publication of their own. Informing his brother John of his news on 20 December 1831, Carlyle writes:

Last and greatest, Tait of Edinr [...] says that he is just starting, or thinking to do it, a radical or mystico-radical Magazine, and earnestly desires &c &c I myself have been studying as you partly know, whether a mystico-radical school could not be brought together here [London], and a Publication begun as their organ: I write to Tait in some measure to that effect; and think probably for the present he will – *do nothing. Die Zeit bringt Rosen* [Time brings roses].

A few months earlier, Carlyle had also written to his wife that ‘in London, I should strive to ascertain if I could not be my own Editor. Two or three sufficient Mystics (such will ere long be in Britain) might do wonders’.¹¹

Of course, Carlyle was never to succeed in establishing the kind of mystic coterie he had in mind, one with its own publishing organ, but the same cannot be said about his aspirations for popularizing mysticism in Britain’s mainstream intellectual culture. The latter was no easy feat, and while other writers would contribute to bringing it about, there could be little doubt that Carlyle’s early writings played the role of catalyst. Indeed, an investigation of this would give credence to George Eliot’s laudatory remark of 1855 – written even amidst the public furor over *Latter-Day Pamphlets* (1850) – that ‘the extent of [Carlyle’s] influence may be best seen in the fact that ideas which were startling novelties when he first wrote them are now become common-places’.¹² ‘Carlyle’s discourse’, as a recent critic has similarly argued, ‘was so undeniably and powerfully constitutive’,¹³ a statement meant to suggest that the impact of Carlyle’s writings on nineteenth-century thought owed to their ability to construct new modes of thought, or reshape already-existing ones. This echoes a truth that was felt not only by Eliot, but by many other eminent contemporaries of Carlyle’s, such as biographer, editor, and literary critic David Masson,¹⁴ one of his lifelong friends. Albeit extravagant in tone, there is sufficient

¹¹ *CL*, VI, pp. 67-73; and V, pp. 281-86.

¹² George Eliot, ‘An Unsigned Review’, in *Thomas Carlyle: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Jules Paul Siegel (London: Routledge, 1971), pp. 409-11 (p. 410).

¹³ Vanessa D. Dickerson, *Dark Victorians* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008), p. 741.

¹⁴ In 1852, David Masson would be appointed Professor at University College, London, later becoming Regius Professor at Edinburgh University. He is the founder of *Macmillan’s Magazine*, and was a regular contributor to the century’s leading periodicals. Masson was also well acquainted with major literary figures of the time, including Dickens, Thackeray, the Rossettis, the ‘Leweses’, Herbert Spencer, and Emerson: See, G. G. Smith, ‘Masson, David Mather’, in *Oxford Dictionary of National*

justice in Masson's 1850 critical estimation of Carlyle's literary and intellectual influence:

It is nearly half a generation since Mr. Carlyle became an intellectual power in this country; and certainly rarely, if ever, in the history of literature, has such a phenomenon been witnessed as that of his influence. Throughout the whole atmosphere of this island his spirit has diffused itself, so that there is probably not an educated man under forty years of age, from Caithness to Cornwall, that can honestly say he has not been more or less affected by it. [...] One can hardly take up a book or a periodical without finding in every page some expression or some mode of thinking that bears the mint-mark of his genius.¹⁵

Carlyle on 'mysticism', the subject of this chapter, is an attempt to outline Carlyle's influence on the development of the modern category of 'mysticism', by viewing his early writings as one of the chief sources of the conceptual shift in the nineteenth-century understanding of this category. It was 1827 when Carlyle undertook 'to reveal the inadequacy of the reigning British empiricism, and its menace to whatever was creative and dynamic in literature, society, and ethics',¹⁶ a task he set out to do by 'Germanizing the public', to borrow his own phrasing.¹⁷ Charles Harrold explains that the reason Carlyle looked to Germany for inspiration was that he recognized that, in order to highlight 'the fallacies of the prevailing British philosophy', he had 'to advance beyond mere opposition, and to present in a new and illuminating form the essence of what he thought was at once the wisdom of the ages and the answer to his opponents'; in other words, it was a task that Carlyle felt 'needed new terms and fresh concepts', something he was able to find in the metaphysical language of the German Romanticists.¹⁸ 'Mysticism' was certainly one concept that was consistently invoked in his early writings, from the earliest essays on Jean Paul Richter (1827), Werner (1828), Novalis (1829), and Schiller (1831), through the various ones on Goethe (1828-32), culminating in his first major work, *Sartor Resartus* (1833-4). Eliciting passionate reactions (both reverential and hostile), these works were widely read at their time of publication, and again later, when Carlyle's

Biography (hereafter *ODNB*), ed. by David Cannadine, (Oxford University Press, 2004) <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/public/index.html>> [accessed 29 Aug 2015]

¹⁵ Vanessa Dickerson, p. 74-5.

¹⁶ Charles Harrold, *Carlyle and German Thought*, p. 2.

¹⁷ *CL*, IV, pp. 227-32.

¹⁸ *Carlyle and German Thought*, p. 3.

achieved fame through *The French Revolution* (1837) revived interest in his earlier writings.¹⁹ Their influence on contemporary notions of the mystical would be slow but definite, so that by the time of the publication of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*'s ninth edition (1875-89), the entry on 'mysticism' would bear the distinctive stamp of Carlyle's definition: it would place primary emphasis on characterizing mystical experiences as defying linguistic expression, an argument in the advancement of which Carlyle had played a leading role, more than any other writer of the period, and this as part of his defence against the century's abusive association of mysticism with the vague and obscure.

In this sense, this chapter is an investigation of Carlyle's contribution to the construction of one the essential features of mysticism in its modernist (Jamesian) sense: namely, its ineffability. Referring to some examples from twentieth-century scholarship in the fields of philosophy and psychology, where 'mysticism' emerged as a central term of debate, I will begin my analysis with a brief discussion of how the Modernist discourse on mysticism did in fact significantly define this category in terms of its ineffability. The discussion will then turn to one of the pejorative conceptions of the term in Victorian times, particularly how nineteenth-century writers very often used it in the sense of 'vagueness' or 'obscurity', as it is my contention that the then-emerging discourse on the ineffability of 'mysticism' – in which Carlyle participated – developed as a response to this kind of usage. The second section of my analysis will first focus on Carlyle, and how he sought to defend mystical literature against such a conception. It will be shown that he adopted an approach along the Johnsonian retort figuring in the title of this chapter,²⁰ one in which Carlyle blames any incomprehensibility that is attributed to the mystical text, not on the writer's style, but on the deficiency of the reader's intuitive powers of comprehension. A main objective of this discussion will be to show how Carlyle's definition of 'mysticism' as ineffable was a way of arguing for the authority of

¹⁹ Angus Hawkins, *Victorian Political Culture: 'Habits of Heart and Mind'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 222-23; and Gisela Argyle, *Germany as Model and Monster: Allusions in English Fiction, 1830s-1930s* (Toronto: McQuill-Queen's University Press, 2002), pp. 28-9. For a good account of Carlyle's reputation from his early career to the mid-twentieth century, including various estimations of the nature of his influence, see Jules Paul Siegel, ed., 'Introduction', in *Thomas Carlyle: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1971), pp. 1-25.

²⁰ 'I have found you an argument; but I am not obliged to find you an understanding', which was Samuel Johnson's reply to 'a pertinacious gentleman' he had debated with on a certain matter when this 'opponent' happened to say 'I don't understand you, Sir': James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, 2 vols (London: Henry Baldwin, 1791), II, p. 514. This appears in Carlyle's 'State of German of Literature' (p. 339).

intuitions in the face of the destructive forces of scepticism and scientific materialism. The chapter will finally provide an analysis of various examples from other Victorian writers, including Swinburne, Tennyson, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Arthur Symonds, all of whom believed in the inexpressibility of a mystic's meaning. Placing Carlyle's writing in the context of contemporary literary debates that negotiated this aspect of the term's meaning will lead to one of the main points I intend to highlight in this chapter: that is, the crucial role that Victorian poetic theory had in the modern construction of an ineffable mysticism, in many ways making this construct an artefact of Victorian poetics.

1. 'Mysticism' as an Ineffable Construct in Twentieth-Century Modernist Discourse

That ineffability is indeed a defining characteristic of the modern category of mysticism is something that can be confirmed with reference to the household names in the religious philosophy and psychology of the twentieth century. As Grace Jantzen notes, when modern and contemporary philosophers 'discuss mysticism they regularly take ineffability – the impossibility of verbal articulation – as a primary characteristic of the mystical'.²¹ William James, for instance, famously described it as 'the handiest of the marks by which [to] classify a state of mind as mystical', arguing that 'the subject of it immediately says that it defies expression, that no adequate reports of its contents can be given in words'. In this sense, James believed that mystical states 'are more like states of feeling than states of intellect':

No one can make clear to another who has never had a certain feeling, in what the quality or worth of it consists. One must have musical ears to know the value of a symphony; one must have been in love one's self to understand a lover's state of mind. Lacking the heart or ear, we cannot interpret the musician or the lover justly [...]. The mystic finds that most of us accord to his experiences an equally incompetent treatment.²²

Agreeing with William James that ineffability is one of 'the constant characteristics of the contemplative experience' of the mystic, Evelyn Underhill similarly refers to mysticism as 'the dim and ineffable contemplation of Unnameable Transcendence'.

²¹ *PGCM*, pp. 278-9.

²² *Varieties*, pp. 295.

‘Those who have seen’, she declares, ‘are quite convinced: those who have not seen, can never be told’. In an attempt to expound on this, she likens the mystics’ accounts of their experiences to the nautical charts and maps which can only be understood by experienced sailors:

These [mystical] maps have an uncouth, even an impious appearance in the eyes of those unacquainted with the facts which they attempt to translate: as the charts of the deep-sea sailor seem ugly and unintelligible things to those who have never been out of sight of land.²³

Other prominent twentieth-century theorists of mysticism who have emphasised its ineffability – taking their cues from both James and Underhill – include James Pratt, Rudolf Otto, W. T. Stace, and Ninian Smart.²⁴ In *The Religious Consciousness: A Psychological Study* (1926), for example, Pratt states that ‘the mystic is justified in his constantly reiterated assertion that his deepest religious experiences are indescribable’, and that ‘in fact the ineffability of the experience is one of its most prominent characteristics’.²⁵ Rudolf Otto’s *Das Heilige* of 1917 (translated into English in 1923) likewise argues that ‘mysticism is the stressing to a very high degree, indeed the overstressing, of the non-rational or supra-rational elements in religion’, so that the mystic’s experience of the ‘numinous’ remains ‘inexpressible – an *ἀρρητον* or *ineffabile* – in the sense that it completely eludes apprehension in terms of concepts’.²⁶ W. T. Stace makes the same point in *Mysticism and Philosophy* (1960), but additionally maintains that ineffability is a consequence of the indivisible unity inherent in the mystical experience:

Mystical experience, during the experience, is wholly unconceptualizable and therefore wholly unspeakable. This must be so. You cannot have a concept of anything within the undifferentiated unity because there are no separate items to be conceptualized. Concepts are only possible where there is a multiplicity or at least a duality.

²³ *Mysticism*, pp. 396, 413, 149-50.

²⁴ See also Aldous Huxley, *Perennial Philosophy*, p. 29; R. C. Zaehner, *Mysticism Sacred and Profane: An Inquiry into Some Varieties of Praeternatural Experience*, pp. 7, 16, 30; and Robert K. C. Forman, ed., ‘Introduction: Mysticism, Constructivism, and Forgetting’, in *The Problem of Pure Consciousness* (p. 41).

²⁵ *The Religious Consciousness: A Psychological Study* (New York: Macmillan, 1926), p. 346.

²⁶ Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, pp. 23, 5.

Stace, therefore, asserts that ‘mystical experiences being unconceptualizable are also unverbalizable’,²⁷ which finds an echo in Ninian Smart’s description of the mystical experience as ‘indescribable’, ‘beyond speech: higher than our words can soar’.²⁸ It is, indeed, with reason that Steven Katz states, in *Mysticism and Language* (1992), that the adoption by modern religious philosophers of ‘some form of the ineffability thesis’ has become ‘so common’ that ‘it is often presented as an unassailable truth, an unquestionable premise, of any and all study of mystical sources’.²⁹ This, however, has not always been the case, as will be shown in the following section.

2. ‘Mysticism’ as ‘incomprehensible gibberish’ in the Victorian Poetics of 1830-1870

Any review of the Victorian usage of the word ‘mysticism’ would reveal that, as far as its implications about language are concerned, it was most often deployed as a term of disparagement to denote ‘mistiness’, ‘vagueness’, ‘unintelligibility’, and ‘obscurity’, particularly within the period between 1830 and 1870. The familiar quip that ‘mysticism begins in mist and ends in schism’, for example, is a Victorian one, reportedly being the words of John Henry Newman, when discussing the Catholic Church’s position on the subject.³⁰ It was not, however, in the theological discourse of the nineteenth century that this derogatory usage of the term became prevalent,³¹ but rather in the period’s literary reviews of the writings of German authors and poets – or, for that matter, of any English poet who displayed a philosophical and stylistic inclination toward Germany.³² Of course, one is compelled to ask why such a term, which is ‘not literary in the sense that we would recognise today’, should become prominent in the critical assessment of literature? In *Victorian Scrutinies: Reviews of Poetry 1830-1870*, Isobel Armstrong contends that, ‘almost without exception’,

²⁷ W. T. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, p. 297.

²⁸ Ninian Smart, *Dimensions of the Sacred: An Anatomy of the World's Beliefs* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), pp. 43, 173.

²⁹ Steven Katz, ed., ‘Editor’s Introduction’, in *Mysticism and Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. v-vi (p. v).

³⁰ Nicholas Watson, ‘Introduction’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Mysticism*, ed. by Samuel Fanous and Vincent Gillespie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 1-28 (p. 6).

³¹ For a good summary of the mid-century’s negative theological significations of the term, see John Keble’s discussion on the ‘Meaning of the Charge of Mysticism’ in ‘On the Mysticism Attributed to the Early Fathers of the Church’, in *Tracts for the Times*, No. 89 (Oxford: James Parker and Company, 1840; repr. 1868), (pp. 3-4, 6-7).

³² Rosemary Ashton, *The German Idea*, pp. 96, 40-41, 70-71; and John R. Davis, *The Victorians and Germany*, p. 70.

periodical critics and reviewers (of the decades under study) embraced an ‘impure’ theory of art, refusing to regard the poem as being disconnected from a social and moral function. Theirs was a primarily ‘pragmatic’ criticism: its ‘emphasis was almost invariably on the human or social reference of the work of art, on its *effect on the reader*, and hence on the needs of the reader’. One of the consequences of this was ‘an almost complete absence of a specialised or technical critical vocabulary in Victorian reviewing, a vocabulary capable of describing the formal or aesthetic qualities of a poem’. Instead, most of the critical terminology that became common currency during the period ‘carry a psychological, human/social or moral reference’, and this, according to Armstrong, is partly why the term ‘mystical’ featured as one of ‘the commonest evaluative words in criticism at this time’. It is tied, she believes, with what Victorians conceived to be one of the essential moral functions of poetry, and that is to help in the growth and development – on both the individual and collective level – of the ‘faculty of sympathy’, upon which ‘the morality of a society’ depends. This was considered feasible only by adopting a ‘plain’ and ‘simple’ language that deals with the ‘common’ and ‘familiar’ aspects of everyday experience. A ‘mystical’, or ‘obscure’ language was, therefore, believed to be ‘symptomatic of a deep moral and emotional failure, a failure of sympathy’:

The poet’s job is not to explore strange and unknown areas of experiences [...], but to confirm and revitalize through an appeal to the emotions those central fundamental experiences with which we are already familiar. This is where his moral responsibilities lie.³³

As Armstrong suggests, Victorian reviews of poetry, ‘throughout the period’, abound with examples of the use of ‘mysticism’ as a ‘condemnatory’ critical term, which can be demonstrated through a list of short excerpts from various periodicals of the kind cited in her discussion.³⁴ My intention here, however, is to demonstrate this aspect of the term’s meaning, by referring to three nineteenth-century critics who have written more than a few passing comments on mystical literature, and whose commentaries are representative of this pervasive critical tendency. The first of these is the poet-critic J. B. Selkirk (the pseudonym of James Bucham Brown),³⁵ who

³³ Armstrong, pp. 4-6, 21, 26-27, 9-11, 21, 26, 27.

³⁴ *Victorian Scrutinies*, p. 6-9.

³⁵ Greatly admired by Tennyson, James Bucham Brown (1832-1904) was a Scottish poet and essayist, who started his career at his father’s manufacturing firm, later resigning that for a literary career. He was a frequent contributor to various papers and periodicals, including the *Scotsman*, *Blackwood’s*

dedicates a chapter on ‘Mysticism and Modern Poetry’ in his book *Ethics and Aesthetics of Modern Poetry* (1878). Selkirk argues that there is a ‘modern renaissance of the mystical element’ in both the poetry and criticism of the nineteenth century, pointing to the development of a ‘mystical school’ that ‘seems to encourage the belief in its disciples that mysticism is a necessity of true poetry’. For Selkirk, mystical poetry is chiefly identifiable by its ‘circuitous speech and doubtful intelligibility’, by its use of ‘an intricate and perplexed phraseology’, as well as ‘an amount of ingenious excogitation’; in short, by its ‘incomprehensible gibberish’:

It would be no exaggeration to say that pages of it might be quoted that, for ordinary readers, contain, on average, a gleam of intelligence in about every tenth line, and in some cases passages so utterly incoherent that to all rational appearances they might have been concocted in Bedlam by one of the inmates for the entertainment of his fellow-sufferers in bondage.

Of its contemporary popularity, Selkirk states that ‘the mischief of obscurity has been so dexterously shaded into our modern poetry’ that ‘we doubt much if there ever was a time in which the charge could be more justly made than our own’. To his fellow poets, he prescribes the recommendation given by William Thackeray’s Mr. Yellowplush, which, albeit humours, contains much truth, Selkirk believes: that it is ‘generally best in poetry to understand puffickly what you mean yourself, and to igspress your meaning clearly afterwards, in the simpler words the better p’r’aps’.³⁶

In principle, Selkirk has no strong objection against mysticism or ‘the mysterious’. ‘Mystery is inevitable’, he argues, especially in relation to ‘that class of subjects belonging to the spiritual or moral world, and in which poetry so largely deals’. What is problematic, in his opinion, is that many of the century’s poetic geniuses – he names Coleridge, Browning, Tennyson, and Carlyle ‘in prose’ – have ‘gone further into the region of mystery, and even mystification, than can be easily justified’, and therein lies their ‘weakness’. Nevertheless, Selkirk insists that this, in itself, does not amount to ‘a real mischief’, but that one has ‘to keep in mind that the over-applauded use of one generation is apt to become the abuse of the next’, and that

Magazine, *Cornhill Magazine*, and *Chambers’s Journal*, and his first published volume of poetry went through five editions, from 1869 to 1911. ‘Selkirk’ was the name of his childhood hometown, to which he dedicated one of his most popular poems, ‘Auld Selkirk Toon’: W. Sorley Brown, ed., ‘Foreward’, in *The Complete Poems of J. B. Selkirk*, centenary edn (Selkirk: R. M. Linklater, 1932), pp. xi-xxix.

³⁶ J. B. Selkirk, *Ethics and Aesthetics of Modern Poetry* (London: Smith, Elder, 1878), pp. 71, 99-100, 66, 77, 82.

these writers have indeed ‘had more influence on the poetry of the present generation than is good for it’. ‘The weakness of an undoubted master’, he adds, ‘becomes a very insufferable vice in his imitator’, a vice that, in this case, has grown into ‘a literary fashion’:

What we complain of is, that this step is being continually attempted, and a school of poets has arisen with whom mysticism appears to be an intentional specialty: an affected, imitation mysticism, for, being a fashion in most cases, it goes no deeper than a manner [...]. When mysticism falls from being the crisis of the man, and becomes the mere fashion or trick of the school, the chances are that it is no longer the veil over what is itself beautiful and profound, but rather the mist that magnifies feebleness.

And Selkirk lays the blame for this ‘fashionable freak of obscurity’ as much on ‘the incomprehensible poets’ as on their readers/critics, who refuse to challenge them for fear of being called ‘stupid’ or ‘common-place’:

Beyond doubt a great deal of obscurity is permitted to exist merely because it is unchallenged. A great many shrink from questioning what to them is unintelligible, or only half intelligible, for no better reason than that by so doing they fear to draw upon themselves a doubt of their own intellectual sufficiency. [...] Away with such moral cowardice! Let us rather be ten times stupid, in the eyes of fashion, than once false to our own judgment.³⁷

One critic whom Selkirk would not have deemed guilty of this type of ‘moral cowardice’ is Charles Knight,³⁸ the writer of the condemnatory piece entitled ‘The Mystic School’, published in *The London Magazine*, as early as 1828 – fifty years prior to Selkirk’s book.³⁹ Knight is well aware that the cost of criticizing ‘the disciples of this school’ is that it ‘will merely prove us in their minds to be “dullheads” –

³⁷ Selkirk, pp. 68-70, 72, 75-6, 98-9, 101, 86-7.

³⁸ An esteemed figure among the ‘London literati’, Charles Knight (1791–1873) was a publisher, author, social reformer, and Shakespeare scholar. His early position as Windsor’s overseer of the poor (1818) left its mark on his future publishing career, which was committed to the cheap production of popular ‘healthful literature’ for a working-class readership, seeking to educate on various subjects, including art, literature, history, geology, and physics – to the exclusion of politics and religion. At the time of writing this piece on ‘The Mystic School’, he had already turned from his early ‘tory radicalism’ to ‘whiggish utilitarianism’, and was at the height of his publishing career, both as reader and superintendent for the publications of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge. His most significant publications include the *Penny Magazine*, the *Penny Cyclopaedia*, and *The British Almanac*: Rosemary Mitchell, ‘Knight, Charles’, in *ODNB*, ed. by David Cannadine, (Oxford University Press, 2004) <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/public/index.html>> [accessed 17 June 2015]

³⁹ The piece was published anonymously, but has been attributed to Charles Knight by C. W. Proescholdt-Obermann in *Goethe and His British Critics: The Reception of Goethe's Works in British Periodicals, 1779-1855* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1992), p. 183.

“worldlings” – in short, dunces and ninnies of every shape and denomination’. Addressing other critics, however, he stresses that it is their obligation ‘to lift up our humble voice in favour of Truth, Nature, and Simplicity, as opposed to affectation, euphuism, mysteries, and *mysticism*’. As for his definition of the essay’s key term, Knight holds that ‘mysticism is of two sorts’, both of which are linked with a ‘paradoxical’ and ‘gratuitous obscurity’ that is often ‘gross, glaring, and most invitingly open to ridicule’. The first of these is conceptual in kind:

In the ideas, it is when the thinker himself has no very clear conception of what he is aiming at – when thoughts and images crowd upon each other, like the fumes of a drunken dream, – brilliant, perhaps, and striking in themselves, but connected by no logical links, and directed to no definite end.

The second type of mysticism, on the other hand, is stylistic in nature:

In the expression, it is when the writer, having a positive meaning, so involves it in obscurities of illustration (this is no Bull) and other disguises of language, as to prevent the reader arriving at any clear conclusion of what he really does mean.⁴⁰

Knight’s essay was, in fact, written in response to Carlyle’s critical articles of the late 1820s that were published in the *Edinburgh* and *Foreign Reviews*, including ‘Jean Paul Friedrich Richter’ (1827), ‘State of German Literature’ (1827), and ‘Goethe’s Helena’ (1828). The main objective of Knight’s essay, therefore, is to offer a cautionary note against ‘a certain species of criticism and tone of writing, which have latterly been creeping into our critical literature’, in which one finds ‘straightforward nature cast contemptuously aside, and all the vague, hair-splitting, endlessly-involved jargon of German mysticism supplying its place’. To demonstrate his point, Knight quotes several excerpts from Carlyle’s writings, to which he responds in a continual note of puzzlement. ‘We confess’, he states at one instance, ‘that we cannot trace the glimmering of a meaning here’. And at another: ‘Now, we dare say this writer *believed* that he understood himself; – but did he? – did he understand what he meant by the words contained in the last sentence [...]?’ It should be noted that Knight’s censure is not only levelled at Carlyle’s criticism, but also equally at German mystical poetry, because he believes, like Selkirk, that ‘the style of

⁴⁰ Charles Knight, ‘The Mystic School’, *The London Magazine*, I (1828), 170-76 (pp. 176, 174, 172, 170).

criticism has grown up with, and partly grown out of, the style of poetry'. On Goethe's poetic style, for example, he poses the following rhetorical questions:

Why not tell openly and clearly – as eloquently or poetically as you please, but still clearly – what you have to say? Did the best, the greatest, the most poetical writers, use any such trickery – for it is trickery – as this?

While this, and the other previous examples, tellingly support Armstrong's argument that clarity was a valued aesthetic quality for Victorian poets and critics, they also serve to reveal how 'mysticism' featured as a significant term of reproach in nineteenth-century debates about poetry, namely those addressing its responsibilities toward its readers, as well as the conceptual and stylistic demands that should be made upon it. The same is true for Knight's following objection to what he perceives as the enigmatical indulgences of 'the mystic school' of poetry in general:

Poetry is not an enigma. We are not to be called upon, in the first instance, to "give it up," before the poet will deign to tell us the solution. The great masters of Art have thought it best to tell their meaning in clear terms; and in this, as in nearly all things else, the great masters of Art have adhered to the principles of Nature.⁴¹

More than the sense of puzzlement expressed by Knight at the meaning of Carlyle's articles is his bewilderment by the fact that the articles were published in the *Edinburgh Review*, 'precisely the very last place where we should have expected to find them', given that the review was previously antithetical to anything mystical.⁴² Indeed, John Davis argues that it is to the 'credit' of Francis Jeffery – the editor of the review, whose literary sympathies were expressly anti-mystical and anti-German – that he agreed to publish Carlyle's work.⁴³ This brings me to the third critic who had

⁴¹ 'The Mystic School' (pp. 170-5); and Selkirk, p. 67.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 170-1.

⁴³ Davis, *Victorians and Germany*, p. 71. In 1828, speaking of his 'paramount duty', as an editor, 'to promote the popularity, circulation and effect of the review', Jeffery wrote to Carlyle that 'to you I can only say that I have trenched more upon it already for your sake than I ever did for that of anyone besides', by which he was referring to how the review attracted much censure due to Carlyle's mysticism. Later the same year, he would write: 'you shall write mysticism for me too – if it will not be otherwise – and I shall print it too, at all hazard': See Francis Jeffery, *The Letters of Francis Jeffery to Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle*, ed. by William Christie (London: Pickering and Chatto Ltd., 2008), pp. 28, 30. Henceforth, this edition will be abbreviated as *Jeffery Letters*. For Jeffery's intolerance for what he called the 'German taste', see, for example, his 1825 review of Carlyle's translation of *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, where he states that, despite being considered, 'by the general consent of all Germany, to be the very greatest work of their very greatest writer', Goethe's work is 'conversant only with incomprehensible mystics and vulgar men of whim, with whom, if it were at all possible to understand them, it would be a baseness to be acquainted'. In 1833, he also wrote to Carlyle: 'I am

substantially written against mysticism, and who had often done so by employing the term in the depreciatory sense of ‘vagueness’ and ‘obscurity’, that is, Francis Jeffrey himself. Jeffrey’s criticism is suggestive not the least because the bulk of it was written in his private letters to Carlyle,⁴⁴ with whom he was corresponding as an intimate friend, rather than an editor,⁴⁵ thus revealing that discussions of mysticism were not confined to the public sphere of nineteenth-century writing; they also infiltrated the private lives of Victorian intellectuals. Only published in their entirety in 2008, Jeffrey’s letters to Carlyle represents a rich source on mid-nineteenth-century conceptions of mysticism that has not yet received its due attention, and of which a full analysis demands much more space than my present study would allow. It is still possible, however, as well as profitable, to refer here to a number of typical examples from the text, with the purpose of demonstrating how the correspondence between the two was one of the significant conceptual battlegrounds on which the Victorian debate about mysticism was fought.⁴⁶ With Carlyle being an advocate of the mystical, and Jeffrey a trenchant opponent, one could say that the letters demonstrate, on a smaller and heightened scale, the ideological and cultural tensions and oppositions of the nineteenth-century that went into the modern construction of mysticism, a process that involved a continual attempt at advancing/repelling certain definitions of the term from both sides of the conflict.

Indeed, in his introduction to Jeffrey’s letters to both Thomas and Jane Carlyle, William Christie highlights the special attention that is given to the subject of

determined to learn German – and give battle to that race of canting muddy-headed pretenders – I want Macaulay to clapperclaw Niebuhr in the meantime – and Palgrave to demolish Goethé’: See *Jeffrey Letters*, p. 138, and ‘*Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship, a Novel*’, in *Contributions to the Edinburgh Review by Francis Jeffrey*, 2nd edn, 3 vols (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1846), I, pp. 257-301 (pp. 263-4).

⁴⁴ Jeffrey had also publically denounced mystical writing. See, for example, his review of Goethe mentioned in the previous note, as well as his biting remarks against Wordsworth’s ‘dull mysticism’, in his famous 1814 review of the poet: ‘Wordsworth’s *Excursion*’, in *Contributions to the Edinburgh Review* (1846), II, pp. 504-39 (pp. 517-20).

⁴⁵ For a good account on the ‘puzzling’ nature of their relationship, see William Christie, ed., ‘Introduction’, in *Jeffrey Letters*, pp. ix-xxxiii.

⁴⁶ None of Carlyle’s letters to Jeffrey has survived, but, ‘fortunately’, Jeffrey’s own letters, as well as Carlyle’s and Jane’s ‘copious correspondence’ with others, allow ‘us to recover their responses to Jeffrey’s letters and to the issues they raise’. On 13 January 1829, for example, Carlyle dejectedly wrote to his brother John that Jeffrey ‘chatters unprofitably about *Mysticism* and so forth. I am very much alone in this world’. Still, with the almost ‘obsessive’ manner in which Jeffrey objected to Carlyle’s mysticism in his letters, one cannot help but regret the loss of Carlyle’s letters of response, which would have been of much scholarly value for the present study. The circumstances of their loss are equally regrettable, having been destroyed by Jeffrey’s daughter Charlotte ‘in a fit of pique’, following the publication of Carlyle’s *Reminiscences*, ‘which had publicized her mother’s nervous twitching and her own physical unattractiveness and social awkwardness’: Christie (pp. xxxi (n13), 36 (n2), xv, xxix).

mysticism throughout their correspondence. This is discussed in the context of ‘the *unlikeliness* of the friendship’ between the two men, which went beyond ‘the obvious imbalance in background, status, wealth and age’, prompting even Carlyle to consider their relationship ‘a Mystery’.⁴⁷ According to Christie, the seeming incompatibility of this friendship stems from what can only be ineffectually termed an ‘intellectual’, ‘philosophical’, ‘political’, or even ‘ideological’, ‘impasse between the two men that would never be overcome throughout their long, vicissitudinous relationship and would require at times all the mutual toleration they could muster’. He notably points out that ‘the most intransigent characterization of this impasse’ is found in Carlyle’s *Reminiscences*, where Carlyle declares that Jeffrey ‘seemed bent on, first of all, converting me from what he called my “German Mysticism,” – back merely, as I could conceive, into dead Edinburgh Whiggism, Scepticism, and Materialism’. It is Christie’s contention, moreover, that ‘the two of them would recur to this impasse obsessively in their dealings with each other over the years, with a good deal of acrimony and even contempt at different times’.⁴⁸

As far as Jeffrey’s side of the correspondence is concerned, Carlyle could not have phrased it better when he noted that their conversations were characterized by ‘an unembarrassment and frankness of hitting and repelling’, which perhaps too often became, as William Christie puts it, both ‘uncompromising and insensitive’ on Jeffrey’s part. From his letters, it certainly seems that Jeffrey was never one to pass up an opportunity to ‘preach’ against, or at least ridicule, what he believed to be his friend’s most ‘cherished opinions’, and this resulted in – to borrow again Christie’s words – a great deal of ‘mocking and nagging’. Many times, though, his ‘nagging’ was of the kind of teasing banter that was meant to be affectionately playful, rather than confrontational or corrective, and was not necessarily about the obscurity of mysticism. To this belongs, for example, the mock-honorific appellations that he used with Carlyle, such as ‘the master mystic’, or ‘my most magnificent of mystics’. It is also evident in the letter Carlyle received from him when visiting Cheltenham, well-known for its medical waters: Jeffrey light-heartedly comments there that ‘it would be a fine thing’ if it should turn out that Carlyle’s mystical philosophy ‘was merely the

⁴⁷ When the two had first met, Carlyle was thirty-two years old, ‘comparatively unknown’ and without a salaried position, whereas Jeffrey, at fifty-three, was not only the editor of ‘the leading periodical of the day’, but was also a well-off Edinburgh advocate and one of ‘its star literary attraction[s]’, gaining £2,800 a year through his editorship, to say nothing of his income as an advocate: Christie (pp. ix-x, xii).

⁴⁸ Christie (pp. xii, ix, xv).

result of a bad secretion of Bile, – and was all washed away by the copious potations of the Cheltenham spring’. A further example is found in Jeffrey’s attempt at moderating some ‘magnificent compliments’ that Carlyle had paid him in a previous letter:

You mystics will not be contented with kindness of heart and reasonable notions in anybody – but you must have gifts and tasks and duties – and relations with the universe, and strugglings to utter forth the truth – God help you and your vainglorious jargon, which makes angels smile I take it – and sensible men laugh outright.⁴⁹

Of course, more important for the present discussion is the fact that Jeffrey’s teasing remarks were most often about the unintelligibility of this ‘vainglorious jargon’, as is observable, for example, in his letter of December 9, 1829. In the following excerpt from it, Jeffrey makes a dig at Carlyle’s literary taste, particularly how he expects him to delight in the unreadability of a certain article by William Hamilton, of which Jeffrey greatly disapproved:

One article⁵⁰ I think must have given you particular pleasure – being genuine German and mystical. – and altogether unintelligible to ordinary mortals. – I venture to pronounce it without any exception the most unreadable thing that ever was printed in Great Britain and moreover downright sheer gibberish and nonsense.

A similar example is found in the letter of January 3, 1828. There, in the same context of his suggestion – made in jest – to recommend Carlyle as ‘Professor of Mysticism’, Jeffrey sarcastically comments on his friend’s penchant for the vague and unintelligible, how it would hinder his appreciation of the unambiguous, yet dignified, philosophy of a Dugald Stewart, for example: ‘he was a man of a lofty and pure mind – and could for the most part be understood – for which you of course will despise him’. In the same instance, and to further drive his point home, Jeffrey mocks the obscure style of a German mystical pamphlet that was sent to Carlyle by an admirer of his ‘State of German Literature’: ‘Some horrid German blockhead has sent me an incomprehensible little pamphlett [*sic*] for you – about Kants philosophy – a childish – primer sort of thing’. It should be kept in mind, of course, that Jeffrey’s derisive exasperation with the German’s incomprehensibility here is also a derision against the

⁴⁹ Christie (pp. x-xi, xiv, xv); and Jeffrey, *Jeffrey Letters*, pp. 39, 16, 25, 19, 46, 140, 28.

⁵⁰ Hamilton’s review of Victor Cousin, published in *ER*, 50 (Oct. 1829), under Macvey Napier’s editorship.

incomprehensibility of mystics in general, because, for him, ‘German’ and ‘mystical’ were nearly interchangeable. As William Christie has pointed out, ‘in the vocabulary of Jeffrey’s letters, “German” and “Germanic” remain part of a family of pejoratives – one that includes “mysticism” and “mystical”’.⁵¹

That Jeffrey also found Carlyle’s own mystical writings pure ‘gibberish’, in an amusing sort of way, is evident when he casually mentions how he, Thomas Macaulay and several others had ‘laughed at your Mechanical age – and some of your ravings ab[ou]t the ravings of your German novelists’, the latter of which is a reference to Carlyle’s *German Romance* (1827), which includes authors Jeffrey had previously censured for their mysticism.⁵² Of Carlyle’s review of Burns, moreover, he expressed his ‘wish [that] there had been less mysticism about it – at least less mystical jargon’, and, when asked to describe such jargon, he defined it as the peculiar use of language that renders the writer humorously incomprehensible:

I hold the frequent use of words at once vague and unusual to come fairly within that description – or any use of words by the mere mention of which everybody at once recognises the writer – and smiles at the recollection.

It should also be noted that many of Jeffrey’s gibes at his friend’s mystical obscurity were embedded in his insults of Carlyle’s ‘German idols’, because he believed that the complexity of Carlyle’s writings owes much to the stylistic ‘perversions and absurdities’ he had acquired from German literature. It is telling that, in the letter where Jeffrey explains his meaning of ‘mystical jargon’, he does so in the context of noting the Germans’ influence on Carlyle’s style. ‘I am really anxious to save you from this foeda superstitio’,⁵³ he writes, ‘the only harm it has yet done you is to make you a little verbose and prone to exaggeration’. The letter specifically makes an association between ‘mysticism and Dousterswivels’, as Jeffrey argues that Carlyle should not begrudge being labelled by such terms, so long as he ‘profess[es] to think lightly of all that can be readily understood – and to measure the depths of anything

⁵¹ *Jeffrey Letters*, pp. 41, 14; and Christie (p. xv).

⁵² *Jeffrey Letters*, p. 96. In citing from Christie’s edition, I follow his choice of typographical marks that attempt to reproduce, as closely as possible, the manuscript form of Jeffrey’s letters. One example of Carlyle’s ‘German novelists’ who had been previously censured by Jeffrey is Goethe, whose work features in the third volume of Carlyle’s *German Romance*, a collection of translated German novellas; see note 101 above, referring to Jeffrey’s review of Carlyle’s 1824 translation of Goethe.

⁵³ Latin: repulsive fanaticism.

by its darkness'. With 'Dousterswivel' generally standing for a German swindler,⁵⁴ it is safe to deduce from this that 'German' and 'mysticism' were both synonymous in Jeffrey's mind with 'incompressibility'. In this sense, an indictment of the enigmatical language of mystics almost always underlies Jeffrey's censure of German writers, such as when he asks Carlyle '[to] spare us, if you possibly can for once - the laud and exaltation of your Germans - which doth somewhat nauseate our insular taste - even in moderate doses'.⁵⁵

To these, and other such comments, Carlyle did not seem to have taken any offence, but Jeffrey did not always voice his objections against his friend's mysticism with the intention of making a casual joke of it. Many times his censures became serious rebukes that were conveyed in the vein of expressing his concerns about what was obstructing Carlyle's 'career both of usefulness and distinction'.⁵⁶ In such cases, it is indeed a testimony to Jeffrey's critical integrity that his commentaries to his friend were not less severe or unsparing than his criticism of Wordsworth's and Goethe's mysticism;⁵⁷ and, although it was not as easy for Carlyle to take these in the good-natured spirit he displayed toward Jeffrey's congenial mockery, he always made it a point to reply with the most 'kind' and 'friendliest Letters'.⁵⁸ His harsh evaluations of Carlyle's writings should not, however, indicate that he believed them to be 'less than original and highly intelligent'. As William Christie states, 'Jeffrey never doubted Carlyle's genius, [...] he just did not like anything Carlyle thought and wrote!'.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ 'Dousterswivel' is from the character Herman Dousterswivel, a German swindler in Walter Scott's novel *The Antiquary*. As William Christie explains, the word 'became a common term of abuse which Jeffrey and his circle applied to charlatans, especially those inhabiting the grey area between science and magic and between philosophy and mysticism': *Jeffrey Letters*, p. 22 (n2).

⁵⁵ *Jeffrey Letter*, 21-3, 2, 146, 23-4, 45.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁵⁷ It is worth mentioning here Michael Fry's view, in the *ODNB*, on Jeffrey's criticism of Romantic poets in general: that, 'influential' though he was, 'Jeffrey failed to appreciate some of the best and most enduring literature of his time. He could see no virtue, for example, in the English lake poets'. According to Fry, his attacks on Wordsworth's "The Excursion", and Byron's first collection, as well as the way 'he overstated the case for Scott's "Marmion"' reveal 'Jeffrey's lack of sympathy with, indeed incomprehension of, romantic sensibility. He remained in aesthetic matters a man of the eighteenth century, holding to standards of correctness in literature which he identified with artificial diction and deliberate design': Michael Fry, 'Jeffrey, Francis, Lord Jeffrey', in *ODNB*, ed. by David Cannadine, (Oxford University Press, 2004) <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/public/index.html>> [accessed 17 June 2015]

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 75 (n3). See, for example, Carlyle's letter to his brother John of 12 November 1830, for a full account of his true reaction to one of Jeffrey's rebukes. Carlyle describes it as 'a long, unasked, abusive and almost ill-bred Criticism', confessing that, upon reading it, his 'first thought was naturally to wash him away': *Jeffrey Letters*, p. 75 (n3).

⁵⁹ Christie (p. xvi).

‘It always provokes me to see him throwing away great talents’, wrote Jeffrey to Jane Carlyle, describing his regret at how her husband’s ‘poetical abstractions’ were an impediment to his popularity; and this seems to be the consistent sentiment in all his rebukes against Carlyle’s mysticism, which never fail to touch upon the unintelligibility of said ‘abstractions’. I cite below two excerpts from Jeffrey’s letters to demonstrate this. The excerpts are long, but only long enough to give a good sense of how the mainstream intellectual culture of the early and mid-nineteenth century – as represented by Francis Jeffrey – had a strong aversion to mysticism and the mystical, and how these terms were commonly applied with the pejorative meaning of ‘vagueness’ and ‘obscurity’. In the following passage from his letter of 4 January 1829, for example, Jeffrey questions the basic tenants of Carlyle’s mystical philosophy, referring to them as ‘paradoxes’, and warning against the detrimental effects they would have on the future of his career:

I persist in kind thoughts – and good purposes – and firm opinions ag[ains]t all dogmatism and clear views of the desperate darkness of wilful and audacious mystics – [...] Do cure yourself of this tendency to exaggeration – which is a propensity too youthful even for you – [...] You may talk as long as you like about [...] the necessity of having a right creed as to your relations with the universe – but you will never persuade anybody that the regulation of life is such a mighty laborious business as you would make it, or that it is not better to go lightly thro’ it, with the first creed that comes to hand, than to spend the better part of it in an anxious verification of its articles – If you were only amusing yourself with these paradoxes, I should have no objection – but you take them so dreadfully in earnest that it vexes me – for it will neutralise half the fame, and all the use of your talents – and keep aloof from you most of the men who are fittest for your society – and so much for my renewed testimony ag[ains]t mysticism.

Besides labelling Carlyle’s philosophy as paradoxical, notice here Jeffrey’s description of the mystics’ views as a desperate ‘darkness’, a term that could stand to signify their ignorance, but one that he had used elsewhere in reference to what he believed to be the complex and perplexing language of mysticism.⁶⁰

In addition to this, another instance where Jeffrey delivers a stern lecture on Carlyle’s mysticism is his letter of response to Carlyle’s request for his assistance in procuring the Chair of Astronomy at the University of Edinburgh. This was in 14

⁶⁰ *Jeffrey Letters*, pp. 118, 33-4.

January of 1834, and it was not the first (nor last) time Carlyle sought Jeffrey's support for a teaching position, only to be informed that there was little that could be done for him while he continued to uphold his mystical doctrines.⁶¹ On this occasion, Jeffrey particularly urged Carlyle to step down from his 'barren and misty eminence', which is a reference to Craigenputtoch, Carlyle's principal residence at the time, and a place that stood for Jeffrey as a perfect symbol of his friend's mysticism.⁶² Never a mincer of words, Jeffrey speaks here again of the unpopularity of Carlyle's 'paradoxes' and 'obscure' doctrines, and blames them for being the cause of his 'not having the occupation and consequent independence of some regular profession':

That of a Teacher is no doubt a most useful and noble one – But you cannot actually exercise it, unless you offer to teach what is thought worth learning – and in a way that is thought agreeable – and I am afraid you have not fulfilled either of those conditions – You know I do not myself set much value on the paradoxes and exaggerations in which you delight – [... They are] arrogant, vituperative – obscure – anti-national and inconclusive – [...] It sounds harsh to say this – but I say it as a witness – and as you begin to experience the effects, you may perhaps give more credit to my testimony than you used to do – you will never find (or make) the world friendly to your doctrines, while you insist upon dragooning it into them in so hyperbolic a manner. [...] And if we once had you fairly down from that barren and misty eminence where you reside bodily, I trust we should soon reconcile you to an intellectual subsidence.⁶³

Jeffrey's purpose here was clearly to impress upon Carlyle how their contemporary intellectual 'world' did not consider his mystical doctrines 'worth learning', especially

⁶¹ See, for example, Jeffrey's letter of 6 September 1827, as well as that of 4 February 1834, in which he replies to similar requests by Carlyle.

⁶² Albeit playfully, Jeffrey typically spoke of Craigenputtoch in highly religious terms, and too often in association with Carlyle's mysticism, which is partly due to the place's elevated and secluded location that (in a way) resembled a monastery. In 1831, he described it, for example, as 'the mist veiled shrine in the desert', and, in his letter of 8 December 1828, he wrote: 'Pray tell us what you have been doing – or suffering rather in that supramundane retreat – I sometimes fear you are ill – and sometimes that you are so happy with your mysticism [...] that you forget there is anybody to care for you in this lower world': *Jeffrey Letters*, pp. 84, 31. For other similar examples, see pp. 26, 65, 38-9, 105, 129. In fact, Carlyle himself often ascribed his Dumfriesshire home with religious and mystical significance. As Chris Vanden Bossche has pointed out, 'he became fond of comparing Craigenputtoch to Patmos, the island in the Aegean where Saint John wrote the book of Revelations', and spoke of it in his letters as 'a place to write "mystical Reviews" and to begin "prophesying"'. Even Jane W. Carlyle draws on this connection in one of her letters, when she jokingly informs Henry Inglis that one of their farm animals, 'being of another school than the mystic', 'found his station at Craigenputtoch quite too solitary; and so, without hinting his resolve to anyone, rushed forth one day into the wide world': see Chris R. Vanden Bossche, *Carlyle and the Search for Authority* (Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1991), p. 52; and *CL*, IV, pp. 429-35.

⁶³ *Jeffrey Letters*, p. 144.

given that he had not conveyed them ‘in a way thought agreeable’, by which he was referring to Carlyle’s manner of writing. His description of Carlyle’s writing as ‘hyperbolic’, ‘exaggerat[ed]’, and ‘anti-national’ is related to what he perceived as an intentional abandonment, on Carlyle’s part, of the lucid and straightforward style that Jeffrey often associated with English writers, as opposed to the ‘paradox[es] and outlandish absurdity’ he attributed to German writing.⁶⁴ What the excerpt above succeeds to convey, in other words, is the general unfavourable attitude of the nineteenth-century British public toward mysticism, and the many negative significations it was ascribing to the term, an important one of which was that of ‘mistiness’ and ‘obscurity’.

3. ‘Toleration is all I ask’:⁶⁵ Carlyle and the Redefinition of ‘Mysticism’ as Ineffable

Although Jeffrey was correct in perceiving how the intellectual climate of their time was seriously opposed to what he believed to be Carlyle’s ‘verbal and metaphysical’ peculiarities, his avowal that Carlyle would never succeed in making ‘the world friendly’ to his ‘doctrines and manner of writing’ would be contradicted by the successful reception of the turn-of-the-century studies on mysticism by William James, who not only was a personal acquaintance of Carlyle, but was also intellectually influenced by him.⁶⁶ It is, of course, well-known by Jamesian scholars

⁶⁴ For an example of this, see *Jeffrey Letters*, pp. 21-2.

⁶⁵ See *CL*, I, pp. 343-46. Carlyle wrote this as early as 1821, in a letter to a college friend who apparently criticized his interest in mystical literature, and the impact it was having on his writing style. In reply, Carlyle stated, ‘Let me be doing with Lake poets, Mystics, or any trash I can fall with’, justifying his style in terms of the unutterability of the meanings he often wished to communicate:

I have been a solitary dreamer all my days, wrapt up in dim imaginings, strange fantasies, and gleams of all things; so that when I give utterance to the sensations produced on me by the actual vulgar narrow stupid world of realities, you very justly think me on the verge if not past the verge of—*coma*. But Toleration, man! toleration is all I ask.

⁶⁶ In 1901, writing on the success of his University of Edinburgh Gifford lectures on mysticism, from which the text of his *Varieties* (1902) would be taken, William James states: ‘I have given nine of my lectures and am to give the tenth tomorrow. They have been a success, to judge by the numbers of the audience (300-odd) and their non-diminution towards the end. No previous “Giffords” have drawn near so many’: James, *The Letters of William James*, p. 149. The following year, James would continue to explore his notions on mysticism in his Harvard Summer School of Theology Lectures on ‘Intellect and Feeling in Religion’, where he would develop a significant point of discussion around what Carlyle had called ‘natural supernaturalism’. As mentioned in the previous chapter, a large part of Carlyle’s influence on James came through his friendship with James’s father, Henry James Sr., who – despite the many reservations he expressed about Carlyle in his personal account of him – was a great admirer of Carlyle’s ‘Past and Present’ (1843) and *Sartor Resartus*; he wrote that ‘Carlyle is the very best interpreter of spiritual philosophy which could be devised for this age, the age of transition and conflict’: See William James, *Manuscript Lectures*, ed. by Frederick H. Burkhardt, *The Works of*

that James had read *Sartor Resartus* by the early 1870s,⁶⁷ and the point they most often note, in terms of Carlyle's influence on his work, is James's appropriation of Diogenes Teufelsdröckh's spiritual conversion as a valid model of mystical illumination.⁶⁸ I argue here, however, that James's indebtedness to Carlyle is equally evident in another significant way that has not received its due recognition; by this, I mean how James addresses 'the reproach of vagueness', to use his own words, that was frequently attached to 'the words "mysticism" and "mystical"' by recourse to the ineffability thesis that also appears in the conversion episode of *Sartor Resartus*. My contention from this is that it provides a clue to how the Jamesian 'mark of ineffability' is a distinctly Victorian inheritance, one that found its earliest and most extensive articulation in Carlyle's writings. I shall shortly discuss the examples from Carlyle's work, but the main point of interest here is the fact that, contrary to Jeffrey's concerns, the popular reception of what he regarded as the mystics' stylistic and doctrinal 'obscurities' was growing more cordial with the advance of the century.

This last point is substantiated by Carol T. Christ in *Victorian and Modern Poetics*, which argues that the period between the 1830s and 1870s witnessed a gradual shift in the reading public's attitude toward the kind of poetry that was deemed 'mystical', 'extravagant' and 'obscure', a fact that finds support in how Victorian criticism was becoming 'increasingly tolerant of difficulty in poetry'. 'Browning's critical reputation during the Victorian period', Christ states, 'provides a good index to Victorian attitudes toward the obscurity and interpretability of literary texts'. She maintains that while his early published work, up to *Men and Women* (1855), was criticized for the 'mysticism' and 'obscurity' of its style, by 1864, with the publication of *Dramatis Personae*, his poetry was increasingly being 'praised for

William James, 17 vols, XVI (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988 [1875-1908]), p. 90; and Henry James, *Henry James, Senior: A Selection of His Writings* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1974), p. 273, as well as pp. 251-67, for his 'Personal Recollections of Carlyle'. For further notes on Carlyle's connection with and influence on James, see p. 70 (n. 51) of Chapter II of this thesis, and Robert J. O'Connell, S. J., *William James on the Courage to Believe* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), pp. 28, 103.

⁶⁷ For James's reading lists that were recorded in his notebook of 1856, and his diaries of 1870-71 (where Carlyle's name appears), see Robert D. Richardson, *William James in the Maelstrom of American Modernism* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2007), pp. 15, 125.

⁶⁸ James extensively quotes from that episode in *The Will to Believe* (1896), and again recurs to it in *The Varieties* (1902): See *The Will to Believe and Other Essay in Popular Philosophy* (London: Harvard University Press, 1979), pp. 42-45; and *The Varieties*, pp. 167-68. As for the Jamesian scholarship that notes this, see, for example, Arthur Oncken Lovejoy, 'William James as Philosopher', in *William James Remembered*, ed. by Linda Simon, 153-64 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999) (p. 162); Robert D. Richardson, *James in the Maelstrom*, p. 355; and Jeremy Carrette, *William James's Hidden Religious Imagination: A Universe of Relations* (Abingdon, Oxon: Taylor & Francis, 2013), p. 179.

its complexity, its subtlety, its truth and authenticity'. The reverse is also true in the case of Tennyson's reputation, Christ adds: 'in the forties and fifties he was praised for the very universality and clarity of moral statement which, it was felt, Browning lacked', but, 'by the 1870s, when Browning's reputation was at its height', Tennyson's poetry was condemned 'for being too simple in conception'. In an argument that finds support in Gregory Tate's recent and insightful study on the 'psychology of Victorian poetry', Christ explains that one of the reasons for the Victorian's developing appreciation of the difficulty of Browning's works is the period's rising interest in Psychology, a discipline that helped cultivate the belief that the complex 'workings of the mind were a legitimate subject for poetry'.⁶⁹ But what Christ does not mention is that such an acceptance of the enigmatic and complex style of writing was as much tied to the century's metaphysical negotiations as to its psychological theories,⁷⁰ and that this positive shift in attitude was not confined to popular opinions toward the mystical style; it extended to the concept of mysticism itself. Drawing on the same critical literature, a good example of the latter point can be found in the 1864 critical estimation of Browning by Walter Bagehot, one of Browning's admirers. In the vein of listing the poet's 'accomplishments', Bagehot mentions Browning's mysticism in a romantic and idealised light: 'He is at once a student of mysticism, and a citizen of the world. He brings to the club sofa distinct visions of old creeds, [and] intense images of strange thoughts'.⁷¹

When compared with *The Saturday Review's* outcry against Browning's 'madness and mysticism' of nine years earlier (24 Nov. 1855),⁷² Bagehot's review is a good indication of how the Victorian discourse on mysticism was becoming more congenial in its conceptualization of the term. Central to my present argument is the idea that one of the characteristic ways in which this change occurred was through the deliberate attempts by poets and critics alike to invert the term's traditional derogatory

⁶⁹ Carol T. Christ, *Victorian and Modern Poetics* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 145-6; and Gregory Tate, *The Poet's Mind: Psychology of Victorian Poetry 1830-1870*, pp.154-6. See also Tate's discussion of how 'the more positive reception of [Browning's] work from the 1860s onward was closely' bound up with 'the critical fortunes' of the 'psychological school', pp. 154-6.

⁷⁰ See, for example, Gregory Tate's discussion of 'the pervasive obscurity and linguistic intricacy' of Browning's *Sordello* (1834-1840), and how it uses 'a syntax and style so difficult as to verge on impenetrability' in an attempt to reflect the complexities of a human 'Mind' that is conceived both as a psychological and a metaphysical entity: *The Poet's Mind*, pp. 56-7.

⁷¹ Walter Bagehot, 'Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Browning; or, Pure, Ornate, and Grotesque Art in English Poetry', *The National Review*, 19 (1864), 27-67 (p. 56).

⁷² *Robert Browning: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Boyd Litzinger and Donald Smalley (London: Routledge, 1968), p. 176.

connotations of ‘vagueness’ and ‘obscurity’ into positive ones, so that the mystical came more and more to signify ‘the ineffable’, ‘the incommunicable’ or ‘the infinite’. As far as Victorian attempts of promoting mysticism are concerned, Carlyle was something of a pioneer, as noted by John R. Davis and Jerry A. Dibble,⁷³ particularly through his defence of German mysticism. The posthumous estimation of Carlyle by his friend David Masson also hints to his leading role in the positive redefinition of the term; Masson refers to how Carlyle ‘dallied with the term’ in his early career, and how he ‘seemed to be the apostle of an unknown something called “German Mysticism”’. According to Masson, this had even earned Carlyle the epithet ‘Mystic’ in the intellectual circles of the day: ‘The first name affixed to Carlyle to signify a perception of the difference of his ways of thinking from those of other people was *Mystic*’.⁷⁴

Unsurprisingly, the first work of Carlyle’s to secure him such a title is his essay ‘State of German Literature’ (1827), being the first to receive sufficient critical acclaim, as well as to ‘set many tongues wagging’.⁷⁵ In it, Carlyle significantly highlights how the word ‘mystical’, in England, has become heavily-loaded with a negative meaning that is ‘synonymous with *not understood*’, and goes on to argue that the meaning does not necessarily indicate that the fault lies with the mystical writer: that is, it could very well be indicative of a problem in the readers’ powers of comprehension:

It is well known, that to the understanding of anything, *two* conditions are equally required; *intelligibility* in the thing itself being no whit more indispensable than *intelligence* in the examiner of it. “I am bound to find you in reasons, Sir,” said Johnson, “but not in brains;” a speech of the most shocking unpoliteness, yet truly enough expressing the state of the case.

What the lines here show is an attempt to subvert the semantic implications of ‘the charge of mysticism’ in favour of the German mystic writers,⁷⁶ and to question the

⁷³ John R. Davis, *The Victorians and Germany*, p. 70; and Jerry A. Dibble, *The Pythia’s Drunken Song: Thomas Carlyle’s Sartor Resartus and the Style Problem in German Idealist Philosophy* (London: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978), pp. 3-5.

⁷⁴ David Masson, *Carlyle, Personally and in His Writings: Two Edinburgh Lectures* (London: Macmillan, 1885), p. 70.

⁷⁵ Thomas Carlyle, *Reminiscences*, ed. by James A. Froude (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1881), p. 178. On the reception of the essay, see *The Carlyle Encyclopedia*, (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2004), pp. 442-3.

⁷⁶ ‘State of German of Literature’ (p. 339).

position of authority from which English critics so often scorn their writings, an attempt that runs through Carlyle's treatment of mysticism in the rest of the essay.

In fact, in his attempt to overturn the pejorative signification of 'mysticism' as 'obscurity', Carlyle shifts the whole locus of authority from the critic to the mystic, subordinating the former to the latter. This is done by conceiving the mystic poet (or writer) as a source of prophetic truth, who is endowed with transcendental legitimacy. In this case, any stylistic complexity found in the prophet's writing is explained in terms of the religious profundity of his/her message, and of the spiritual experience it endeavours to capture, things that are said to surpass the rational constraints of human language. The following two excerpts are Carlyle's sketch of a mystic caught in an ecstatic, visionary moment so intense that it eludes not only external symbolic representation (through language), but even the internal mental processes that facilitate cognition and memory:

A simple, tender, and devout nature, seized by some touch of divine Truth, and of this perhaps under some rude enough symbol, is wrapt with it into a whirlwind of unutterable thoughts; wild gleams of splendour dart to and fro in the eye of the seer, but the vision will not abide with him, and yet he feels that its light is light from heaven.

Carlyle expounds on this, arguing that critics and 'scoffers' who frown upon the 'obscure' nature of the mystic's speech are ungenerous in their judgments, because they fail to appreciate it for what it is: that is, a serious and honest attempt by one who has been granted a divine revelation to translate this into a vernacular that belongs to the corporeal realm of ordinary experience. The difficult and idiosyncratic style that often arises from this should not, therefore, be attributed to a want of eloquence or intelligence on the mystic's part, but rather to the inadequacy of the linguistic medium itself to accommodate his/her experiential knowledge of metaphysical reality. Such knowledge, Carlyle insists, is essentially unspeakable:

How shall he speak; how shall he pour forth into other souls that of which his own soul is full even to bursting? He cannot speak to us; he knows not our state, and cannot make known to us his own. His words are an inexplicable rhapsody, a speech in an unknown tongue. Whether there is meaning in it to the speaker himself, and how much or how true, we shall never ascertain; for it is not in the language of men, but of one man who had not learned the language of men; and, with himself, the key to its full interpretation was lost

from amongst us. These are mystics; men who either know not clearly their own meaning, or at least cannot put it forth in formulas of thought, whereby others, with whatever difficulty, may apprehend it. Was their meaning clear to themselves, gleams of it will yet shine through, how ignorantly and unconsciously soever it may have been delivered; was it still wavering and obscure, no science could have delivered it wisely.⁷⁷

As it is obvious, instead of reinforcing its usual depreciatory senses of ‘vagueness’, ‘darkness’ and ‘ambiguity’, Carlyle seeks here to make ‘mysticism’ definitive of what is ‘unutterable’ and ‘ineffable’, a transcendent spiritual state far beyond the reach of words.

One might naturally ask, why do Carlyle’s mystics resort to language in the first place when fully knowing that their experience cannot be given linguistic form, and is not that a contradiction? Carlyle explains that this is because mystics are ‘labouring with a poetic, a religious idea, which, like all such ideas, must express itself by word and act, or consume the heart it dwells in’. Thus, although convinced of the inadequate resources of language as a means of communicating their meaning, mystics, Carlyle suggests, cannot help but try to express the inexpressible, in the hope that they may convey at least the barest rudiments of it to their fellowmen. He believes that, in doing so, there will be much stuttering and faltering – or even a complete breakdown – in the mystic’s speech, but that ‘gleams’ of the intended meaning ‘will yet shine through’ to the perceptive reader. This is why Carlyle lays the blame on critics and readers for any complaints about the incomprehensibility of mystical texts. In his opinion, readers are expected to appreciate the difference between reading a text that conceptually deals with a ‘material and physical object’⁷⁸ and one in which ‘the object to be treated belongs to the invisible and immaterial class’. In the former, ‘the few obstacles to communication are easily overcome’,⁷⁹ because the physical and conceptual properties of the object being considered are naturally susceptible to external representation – through the various tools and methods of scientific discourse. But it is entirely another matter in the case of ‘invisible and immaterial’ objects, where ‘the difficulties of comprehension are

⁷⁷ ‘State of German Literature’ (pp. 340-41).

⁷⁸ Carlyle includes within this category objects that do not purely belong to the ‘physical’ realm, but rather qualify as quasi-abstract objects, such as the phenomena of social and political science. See pp. 339-40.

⁷⁹ Jerry A. Dibble, *Pythia’s Drunken Song*, pp. 4-5.

increased an hundred-fold', and the reader is expected to be as patient and as cooperative as the writer, before condescendingly dismissing the latter as a 'mystic':

In this case, [...] it will require long, patient and skilful effort, both from the writer and the reader, before the two can so much as speak together; before the former can make known to the latter, not how the matter stands, but even what the matter is, which they have to investigate in concert. He must devise new means of explanation, [...and] strive, by a thousand well-devised methods, to guide his reader up to the perception of it; in all which, moreover, the reader must faithfully and toilsomely cooperate with him, if any fruit is to come of their mutual endeavour. Should the latter take up his ground too early, and affirm to himself that now he has seized what he still has not seized; that this and nothing else is the thing aimed at by his teacher, the consequences are plain enough: disunion, darkness and contradiction between the two; the writer has written for another man, and this reader, after long provocation, quarrels with him finally, and quits him as a *mystic*.⁸⁰

As Jerry A. Dibble notes, the passage reflects Carlyle's belief that the habit of negatively labelling a writer as a 'mystic' is 'less an attempt at classification than a way of rejecting out of hand philosophical ideas uncongenial to one's own way of thinking'.⁸¹ Stated differently, Carlyle is suggesting that accusations of mysticism, when used in the sense of 'unintelligibility', largely reflect the intellectual laziness or conservatism of readers and critics who are unwilling to be drawn into a contemplation of things 'invisible and immaterial'.

Carlyle takes this a step further in his later essay on 'Novalis' (1829), where he more boldly contests the disparaging meanings attached to mysticism, particularly those pertaining to matters of intelligibility. The essay clearly indicates that its main objective is a corrective one, and that is 'to communicate some views not of what is vulgarly called, but of what *is* a German Mystic'. As in 'State of German Literature', Carlyle points out that the 'vulgar' connotation that English speakers most often associate with the word 'mystic' merely turns out to be the quality of not being understood: 'What we English, in common speech, call a Mystic [...] means only a man whom we do not understand, and, in self-defence, reckon or would fain reckon a Duncie'. However, in his attempt to deconstruct this negative association in 'Novalis', Carlyle is not only considerably harsher on fellow English critics who employ the

⁸⁰ Carlyle, 'State of German Literature', pp. 339-41.

⁸¹ *Pythia's Drunken Song*, p. 4.

term in this derisive sense, but is also less confident in the reading public's ability to comprehend mystical texts. Whereas his previous essay contends that it is possible for readers to understand a poet's mystical language if only they were more patient and cooperative with the writer, Carlyle suggests now that the difficulty that readers often encounter with this kind of language does not necessarily stem from their impatience, or unwillingness to collaborate with the writer: too often it is because the meaning being communicated is beyond their sphere of comprehension. In other words, what Carlyle seems to be arguing in this essay is that an understanding of a poet's mysticism depends less on the full engagement of one's mental faculties, and more on the possession of an intuitive faculty that is akin to the mystical poet's, and with which the majority of the reading public is not equipped. And herein comes the proper role of literary critics, Carlyle believes. By his definition, true critics possess the necessary intuitions to decipher the mystic's message, and are thus elevated to the pedestal of cultural prophets who come second only to mystics and poets in their ability to meet the spiritual demands of their time. He particularly argues that on the critic falls the responsibility of explaining the interpretable parts of the mystic's message, while encouraging readers to hold with respect and veneration – rather than ridicule – those parts that are beyond their understanding:

He [is] the priest of literature and Philosophy, to interpret their [the mystics'] mysteries to the common man; as a faithful preacher, teaching him to understand what is adapted for his understanding, to reverence what is adapted for higher understandings than his.⁸²

As far as the question of authority is concerned, the mystics here are clearly being presented as intellectual and spiritual superiors to 'the common man', with the critic serving as a faithful mediator between the two, who humbly submits to the mystics' authority. According to Carlyle, such is the role that literary criticism ought to have, but he believed that this is far from the case of the contemporary literary scene.

In pointing out his reservations about the then dominant discourse of literary criticism, Carlyle underlines how modern reviewers and critics essentially belong to the school of 'Common-sense Philosophers, men who brag chiefly of their irrefragable logic, and keep watch and ward, as if this were their special trade, against "Mysticism" and "Visionary Theories"'. Their purpose in doing so, as Carlyle

⁸² Carlyle, 'Novalis' (p. 229, 201, 188).

explains, is to cater to the prevalent taste for pragmatic and materialist principles (over idealist ones), so as to offer the consuming public what it wants, rather than what it needs, while steering clear of any philosophy that might contradict its comfortable worldview. ‘In this way’, Carlyle adds, the reviewer may ‘recommend himself to certain readers, but it is the recommendation of a parasite’, one who ‘glozes his master with sweet speeches, that he may filch applause, and certain “guineas per shet,” from him’. Such a reviewer, he also declares, is nothing but ‘a pander of laziness, self-conceit and all manner of contemptuous stupidity on the part of his reader; carefully ministering to these propensities; carefully fencing-off whatever might invade that fool’s-paradise with news of disturbance’. He explains that the ‘most convenient’ method in which this is carried out is to adopt ‘the style of derision’ in critical reviews. Namely, when dealing with mystical poets, whom Carlyle refers to as ‘great Authors’, this critic’s approach is said to involve the ‘habit of sneering at all greatness, of forcibly bringing down all greatness to his own height’, leading to the pejorative characterization of the mystic as being ‘little better than a living mass of darkness’.⁸³

In response to this, and as in ‘State of German Literature’, Carlyle attempts to redefine ‘the mystical’ by inverting its negative connotations of ‘darkness’ and ‘obscurity’ into the favourable one of ‘ineffability’, and it is interesting how well his attempt here demonstrates Grace Jantzen’s Foucaultian premise which I have used as a guiding argument for my thesis: that ‘the way one defines “the mystical” relates to ways of establishing and defining authority’. Indeed, Carlyle’s awareness of the issues of authority at stake in contemporary negotiations of mysticism is apparent in the distinction he draws between the kind of relationship that reviewers often adopt toward the mystical poets being reviewed and the kind that he embraces in his own reviews. Both are portrayed in a language that masks the ‘conflictual power relations’ at the heart of Victorian responses to the mystical.⁸⁴ For Carlyle, the former involves the easier and more ‘convenient’ approach that places critics at the centre of authority, allowing them to treat any difficulty encountered in the mystical text as an occasion for mockery:

The first and most convenient [method] is, for the Reviewer to perch himself resolutely, as it were, on the shoulder of his Author, and

⁸³ ‘Novalis’ (p. 203, 186-8, 229).

⁸⁴ Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion*, pp. 9-10, 171.

therefrom to show as if he commanded him and looked down on him by natural superiority of stature. Whatsoever the great man says or does, the little man shall treat with an air of knowingness and light condescending mockery; professing, with much covert sarcasm, that this and that other is beyond *his* comprehension, and cunningly asking his readers if they comprehend it! [...] In this way does the small Reviewer triumph over great Authors; but it is the triumph of a fool.

Grace Jantzen states that, at any moment in time, ‘what counts as mysticism will reflect (and also help to constitute) the institutions of power in which it occurs’, and these lines from Carlyle certainly show a consciousness of the power dynamic involved in defining this category.⁸⁵ The dynamic is symbolized by the ‘Reviewer’ towering over ‘his Author’ in ridicule of what he perceives to be the latter’s deficient phraseology and unintelligible style, two things that are so often associated with mysticism as to amount to a definition of it. But Carlyle realizes that such a conception of the term is a ‘self-defen[sive]’ strategy at its core, one that is meant to reinforce the mainstream ideological culture of the time. I have noted in the previous chapter how Carlyle’s ‘Novalis’ described the cultural thought of the early nineteenth century as being widely grounded in secular and naturalist principles, making it very sceptical of the philosophical idealism of Germany, and the transcendental values it propounds. In the context of the essay, therefore, the quote above reflects Carlyle’s belief that, in an intellectual climate that privileges the utilitarian, positivist and materialist values of industrial England, defining ‘mysticism’ as ‘that which cannot be comprehended’ is a way of undermining the authority of mystics, and their transcendental worldview. This is indeed why Carlyle closes his essay with a plea to ‘let there be free scope for Mysticism’ in the ideological ‘battle’ that was ‘still waging’ between ‘Religion’ and the ‘Coffin-and-Gas Philosophy’ of ‘French or Scotch Logic’.⁸⁶

By the same token, it is not surprising that Carlyle’s alternative definition of mysticism in this essay is also driven by an agenda of power. This may be discerned, partly at least, in the attitude he attempts to foster in his readers toward the mystics’ challenging language, encouraging them to adopt one not of mere ‘tolerance’, but of ‘reverence’. Carlyle specifically argues in ‘Novalis’ that mystics, as writers, are admittedly ‘very singular’ and ‘difficult beyond most others to examine wisely and

⁸⁵ Jantzen, *PGCM*, p. 14.

⁸⁶ ‘Novalis’ (pp. 186-7, 229).

with profit', but that their complexity is more a thing 'to wonder at than laugh at'. His invocation here of the sense of 'wonder' is a suggestion that readers should develop a religious interest in the mystic's words, only possible if they are to abandon the usual conception of mysticism as being nothing more than a stylistic idiosyncrasy, moving from this to a conception that aims for an understanding – imperfect as it may be – of the experiential reality that lies behind the mystic's words. In this case, the problems relating to the readability of mystical texts are no longer blamed on the mystic's linguistic capacity; instead, and as mentioned earlier, they are attributed to the limitations of the perceptual and conceptual categories of earthly language, how they are insufficient to capture the religious state of consciousness that is said to be the primary subject of the mystic's message. What Carlyle ultimately intends is to call into question the rationalists' commitment to a materialist epistemology, and its adequacy as an authoritative mode for understanding and representing the world. It is safe to say that this ideological agenda is the underlying motivation of the following lines, for example, where Carlyle addresses the ineffability of mystical experiences, by rhetorically asking this question: how may a spiritual state that is completely devoid of sensory content be possibly represented through the materialist constraints of a logical mindset, one that is made even less imaginative by England's industrial ethos?

How shall we understand it, and in any measure shadow it forth?
How may that spiritual condition, which by its own account is like
pure Light, colourless, formless, infinite, be represented by mere
Logic-Painters, mere Engravers we might say, who, except copper
and burin, producing the most finite black-on-white, have no means
of representing anything?

Thus, it is also safe to say that, by overturning mysticism's pejorative signification of 'unintelligibility' into the idealised meaning of 'inexpressibility', Carlyle seeks to reverse the whole network of power relations around which the previous definition has been constructed, placing the mystic at the highest level of authority. This is evident in the fact that his approach to Novalis involves identifying himself, as well as his readers, as being morally and intellectually inferior to the mystic author:

We wish less to insult over this highly-gifted man, than to gain some
insight into him; [...] we are bound in justice to say that, far from
looking down on Novalis, we cannot place either them [readers] or
ourselves on a level with him. To explain so strange an

individuality, to exhibit a mind of his depth and singularity before the minds of readers so foreign to him in every sense, would be a vain pretension in us.⁸⁷

Of course, no discussion about Carlyle's contribution to the Victorian construction of an ineffable mysticism would be complete without referring to *Sartor Resartus* (1833-34), which, to borrow the words of J. A. Dibble, 'has long been recognized as a seminal work for Carlyle and for the Victorian period as well'.⁸⁸ Carlyle's apology for the mystic's language in 'Novalis' – including the ideological power dynamics in which it was embedded – finds similar expression in *Sartor Resartus*, something that has been noted in Dibble's instructive study of the latter work. With regard to the central ideological/cultural tension that informs *Sartor Resartus*, Dibble identifies it – in line with the various readings of the work – as 'a conflict between English and German, empiricist and idealist, or Benthamite and Coleridgean points of view'. He also points out how these are respectively represented through the work's two fictional personas, the English 'Editor' and the German author of the Clothes Philosophy, Diogenes Teufelsdröckh. Dibble, however, rejects the familiar and persistent interpretation of the work that considers its editorial framework 'a reflection of Carlyle's own divided loyalties, a basic uncertainty on his part how far it was advisable to follow German idealism down the road to pure Reason'.⁸⁹ He argues, on the contrary, that Carlyle employs this framework only as a way to modify the style of 'dogmatic idealism'⁹⁰ that he had adopted in previous writings, and more importantly, that this modification is 'part of a legitimate and distinct approach to the problem of philosophical style', an approach whose main objective does not at all differ from that of Carlyle's earlier work: namely, the popularization of both the mystical language of German idealism, and the philosophy it endeavours to express.⁹¹

⁸⁷ 'Novalis' (pp. 201, 187-9).

⁸⁸ *Pythia's Drunken Song*, p. 5.

⁸⁹ For examples of this view, see Janice Haney, 'Shadow-Hunting': Romantic Irony, *Sartor Resartus*, and Victorian Romanticism', *Studies in Romanticism*, 17 (1978), 307-33; and David Riede, 'Transgression, Authority, and the Church of Literature in Carlyle', in *Victorian Connections* (1989), pp. 88-120. Riede argues that, during the 1820s and 1830s, Carlyle was ideologically torn between the romanticism of German mysticism and the scepticism of Scotch/French logic, so his early writings are best 'understood in terms of romantic irony – romantic ideals are simultaneously held forth and ironically undermined; Teufelsdröckh is set forth as an inspired seer who might just be a madman' (pp. 88, 94).

⁹⁰ For Dibble's re-evaluation of the critical opinion that insists on the 'dogmatism' of Teufelsdröckh, how he considers the use of the word in this context 'both misleading and ambiguous', see *Pythia's Drunken Song*, pp. 40-44.

⁹¹ Jerry A. Dibble, *Pythia's Drunken Song*, pp. 5-7, 37.

But Dibble is also keen to note that Carlyle's incorporation of a stylistic approach that is 'radically different from that of dogmatic idealism' should not indicate that he 'shared the reservations of his English readers', or that he was no longer sympathetic 'to the rationale behind the style of dogmatic idealism'; after all, he 'would return to it under different circumstances and with different goals in mind' in his future writings. To explain *Sartor Resartus*'s stylistic departure from Carlyle's previous writings, therefore, Dibble maintains that, despite Carlyle's awareness of 'the advantages of a dogmatic style', he was likewise aware that it had 'serious limitations – limitations, which without amelioration, spell defeat for the very program to which the style as a whole was meant to give expression'. Not the least of these limitations is how it 'never failed to provoke the English realist to righteous indignation' against its 'needless obscurity', 'its avoidance of "plain words," its "hyper-metaphorical style," its addiction to paradox, and, above all, its lack of logical method and consequent mysticism'.⁹² Thus, when it came to writing a new work, as Dibble's argument runs, Carlyle was driven 'to embody the expected resistance of Anglo-Saxon audiences in the persona of an English editor', whose role was to serve 'as a buffer for ingrained English attitudes' toward the linguistic and stylistic devices of German mysticism. As the editor criticized, and attempted to make sense of it, the text gradually grew into a justification of the mystic's philosophy and style:

The Editor's "English" reservations about the style and method of Teufelsdröckh's Clothes Philosophy, like his reservations about idealism generally, are part of a strategy designed to lead the reader toward acceptance of the idiosyncrasies of Teufelsdröckh's style and, ultimately, the Clothes Philosophy itself. Almost certainly, the Benthamites' charges of mysticism, irrationality, and argument from

⁹² By referring to 'State of German Literature', Dibble argues that 'the Editor's descriptions of Teufelsdröckh and his Clothes Philosophy are drawn from Carlyle's earlier experiences with English prejudices': p. 7 (n4). I believe that a good argument can be made that Francis Jeffrey was largely present in Carlyle's mind when contriving his English 'Editor', which can be established through a textual comparison between the editorial voice in *Sartor Resartus* and Francis Jeffrey's critical feedback on Carlyle's work in *Jeffrey Letters*. It is perhaps useful to note in this connection that, during the process of handing over the editorship of the *ER* to Macvey Napier, Jeffrey had written to Carlyle 'for your sake I will be Editor always', and this was in the context of discussing Carlyle's 'mystical propensities' (p. 38):

Napier [...] is more alarmed at your mystical propensities even than I am – and would naturally feel more shy and awkward in remonstrating ag[ains]t them – What I have to suggest therefore is, that you should indulge in these propensities as little as possible, in the beginning at least of your intercourse with him – and then that you should apply to me, whenever you are in any perplexity, as freely as if I were still in the chair of the Editor – To you, and for your sake I will be Editor always.

private intuition are the specific kind of objection the Editor seeks to counter by his criticism of Teufelsdröckh's style.

In short, far from reflecting Carlyle's ambivalence about the transcendental philosophy of German mystics, the editorial framework of *Sartor Resartus*, and its approach to 'the problem of style', suggest that the work shares the same ideological agenda as 'Novlis' and other earlier work. It aims to promote the religious impulse of the mystics in the face of rationalist reductions of it by the century's ever-advancing secular and material forces. In the words of Dibble, *Sartor Resartus* belonged to the idealist enterprise, and was, thus, part of 'a crusade against a godless and dehumanized world', exemplifying 'what is often seen as the Victorians' disparagement of logic', which 'was not so much a denial of its powers as a recognition of its limits'.⁹³

One of the most prominent examples in *Sartor Resartus* that conveys the kind of philosophical and cultural negotiations that motivated the Victorian discourse on mysticism is found in the Editor's response to Teufelsdröckh's spiritually-charged ruminations about his conversion experience at the opening of the chapter on 'The Everlasting Yea'. The implicit philosophical question being negotiated, in this instance, is whether or not individual, private revelation holds any authority as a reliable source of knowledge. The Editor's commentary is meant to represent the realist perspective that is often reluctant to attach any epistemological value to intuitive religious experiences on the grounds that such experiences are far removed from tangible reality, as well as being inaccessible to discursive reasoning. In this case, 'mysticism' features as a label of abuse in the context of criticizing the mystic's writing for being 'perplex[ing]', full of 'innuendoes', and 'with needless obscurity'; and what begins as an attack on style becomes loaded with ontological implications. This is evident in how the stylistic criticism quickly turns into an evaluation, on the phenomenological level, of the mystic's experience, where it is finally judged to be delusive and 'whimsical' in nature. The reason given for such a verdict is that the experience's description offers 'no clear logical Picture', which indicates that the Editor prioritizes rationalist and empirical philosophy, over metaphysics, as a self-sufficient approach to reality.⁹⁴

⁹³ Ibid., pp. 35-7, 6, 31-33.

⁹⁴ Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus: The Life and Opinions of Herr Teufelsdröckh* (London: Saunders and Otley, 1838), p. 191.

But Carlyle only brings in this disparaging conception of the mystical to allow for an opportunity to challenge it, and so we find Teufelsdröckh rebutting the Editor's argument by echoing the same rhetorical question Carlyle had posed in 'Novalis'. The intent of the question is to indicate that what is deemed 'unintelligible' by 'the sensual eye' of the Editor is, in fact, 'unspeakable' from a metaphysical perspective. This is shown in the following passage that also includes the Editor's commentary:

Singular Teufelsdröckh, would thou hadst told thy singular story in plain words! But it is fruitless to look there, in those Paper-bags, for such. Nothing but innuendoes, figurative crotchets: a typical Shadow, fitfully wavering, prophetic-satiric; no clear logical Picture. 'How paint to the sensual eye,' asks he once, 'what passes in the Holy-of-Holies of Man's Soul; in what words, known to these profane times, speak even afar-off of the unspeakable?' We ask in turn: Why perplex these times, profane as they are, with needless obscurity, by omission and by commission? Not mystical only is our Professor, but whimsical; and involves himself, now more than ever, in eye-bewildering *chiaroscuro*.⁹⁵

The ideological clash here between the transcendentalism of the 'mystical' Professor and the secular-positivism of the Editor supports my argument that the nineteenth-century discourse on mysticism – whether it was on the offensive or the defensive side of the question – was deeply implicated in a cultural contest over meaning and authority. Indeed, as it has just now been pointed out, the Editor's negative association of the word 'mystical' with the sense of vagueness/ambiguity is an attempt to delegitimize any truth claim that does not abide by the objective and clear-cut distinctions of the scientific and empirical worldview. On the other hand, Teufelsdröckh's defensive conceptualization of 'mysticism' as something ineffable, a reiteration of Carlyle's own defence of mystical language in previous works, is clearly meant to contest the period's many claims about the absolute authority of scientific materialism, with its resolute attachment to verifiable, physical reality; this, in turn, is meant to champion the validity of intuitive experiences as a source of real knowledge, unverifiable as they may be. Through the principle of ineffability, therefore, Carlyle is particularly trying to differentiate between a 'sensual' realm of experience and a super-sensual one, arguing that while the first offers much true and useful knowledge, its material and conceptual distinctions are too 'profane' to accommodate an understanding of the other.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

This finds further support elsewhere in *Sartor Resartus*, most notably in Teufelsdröckh's diatribe against those who are hostile to 'Mystery and Mysticism'. According to Teufelsdröckh, these are rationalists who take up 'Logic' as the ultimate instrument of 'Truth', refusing to believe anything that cannot be explained through its lens, while failing to recognize its inability to answer the prime questions of existence – such as those relating to the problems of life and death. Theirs is a matter-bound value system, as Teufelsdröckh argues, and they would mockingly label as 'a delirious Mystic' anyone whose vocabulary does not conform to the well-defined structures of this system. To Carlyle's German professor, however, such mockery sounds like a 'foolish cackle', because it betrays how 'sand-blind' these Logicians are to the profound mysteries of an 'all-pervading' spiritual world, one that cannot be perceived through the limited physical and mental apparatus of the modern scientist:

Thou wilt have no Mystery and Mysticism; wilt walk through thy world by the sunshine of what thou callest Truth, or even by the hand-lamp of what I call Attorney-Logic; and 'explain' all, 'account' for all, or believe nothing of it? Nay, thou wilt attempt laughter; whoso recognizes the unfathomable, all-pervading domain of Mystery, which is everywhere under our feet and among our hands; to whom the Universe is an Oracle and Temple, as well as a Kitchen and Cattle-stall, – he shall be a delirious Mystic; to him thou, with sniffing charity, wilt protrusively proffer thy hand-lamp, and shriek, as one injured, when he kicks his foot through it? – Armer Teufel! Doth not thy cow calve, doth not thy bull gender? Thou thyself, wert thou not born, wilt thou not die? 'Explain' me all this, or do one of two things: Retire into private places with thy foolish cackle; or, what were better, give it up, and weep, not that the reign of wonder is done, and God's world all disembellished and prosaic, but that thou hitherto art a Dilettante and sand-blind Pedant.⁹⁶

One way in which this diatribe can be interpreted is in terms of an attempt to redefine and rehabilitate 'Mysticism' from a word that negatively signifies 'the unintelligible' to one that stands for 'the unfathomable'. The image of the mystic kicking through the Logician's 'hand-lamp' serves this purpose, in the sense that it symbolizes how the mystic's all-inclusive and unified spiritual perception leads to the deconstruction of the dualistic patterns of thought on which human language is based, and in which the logical mind-set is entrapped. In other words, the epistemological bonds of the

⁹⁶ *Sartor Resartus*, pp. 68-9.

Logician's materialist philosophy remain transparent to the mystic, whose experience of transcendence lies outside the conceptual entrapments of language, in the realm of the ineffable. 'Mysticism', in this sense, becomes indicative of 'the trans-conceptual' and 'the trans-linguistic', rather than 'the ambiguous' and 'the unintelligible'. And to return to my previous point about the power agenda implicit in such a redefinition, Carlyle's struggle for authority – ideological in this case – is evident here in the fact that his defence of mysticism is inseparable from the attack he levels at the epistemological sufficiency of autonomous reason. This is why the symbolic light of rational 'Truth' is drastically re-evaluated by Teufelsdröckh to suggest that, far from resembling the sweeping brilliance of the 'sun', it is equal to that of a mere 'hand-lamp', a re-evaluation that Carlyle must have deemed necessary for any attempt to cast the mystical in a sympathetic and laudatory light; it is based on the belief that only by questioning the dominant realism of the time will it be possible to make room for the alternative idealist ideology that Carlyle is seeking to promote. In short, the excerpt above provides a representative example of how mysticism, as an ineffable category, developed out of the tug and pull of nineteenth-century ideas that were competing for dominance, particularly those that were preoccupied with questions about the nature of reality.

Of course, all of this should not indicate that the competition for authority inherent in Victorian (idealist) claims of mystical ineffability were only fought for the sake of ideology, as it must be borne in mind that, more often than not, the defenders of the mystical were also motivated by a personal agenda of power: that is, to promote themselves as modern prophets with a moral and cultural significance. While the scope of this chapter does not permit a full exploration of this point, it would be worthwhile to consider how it applies to the case of Carlyle, at least, as a way of offering a suggestive example. I would only add that the same argument presented here can be made, with varying degrees of relevance, in relation to other Victorian writers who have contributed to the modern making of an ineffable mysticism, several of whom I shall be shortly discussing. That said, I believe that Carlyle's defence of the mystical style of German writers, and of their transcendental philosophy, cannot but be read also as a defence of his own writing, given that his articles were widely perceived by contemporaries to be 'couched in a style of the most blazing Germanism', as one critic wrote, or to have introduced 'a new Anglo-German style',

as another critic put it.⁹⁷ As mentioned in the previous chapter, Carlyle himself was, in fact, not averse to being regarded as a ‘Mystic’, nor to admit that he wrote in the mystics’ ‘lingo’,⁹⁸ a telling example of which is what he wrote to Johann Peter Eckermann on December 9, 1828:

I mean to write on *Novalis*, and not in the style of mockery, but in the true ‘mystic’ vein, which is thought to be peculiar to me. For you must know that I pass here generally enough for a ‘Mystic,’ or man half-drowned in the abysses of German speculation; which, considering everything, is all, in my opinion, exactly as it should be.⁹⁹

It is not unreasonable to assume, therefore, that any transcendent authority Carlyle sought to confer upon his German poets was also an assertion of his own authoritative position as a cultural man of letters, and a visionary prophet. Among present-day critics who have highlighted the ‘self-interested motive’ behind Carlyle’s espousal of German mysticism, and his adoption of a ‘romantic rhetoric of mystification’ is David Riede. Riede cites Kenneth Burke’s biting commentary on how the nineteenth-century’s literary appropriation of mysticism was partly driven by the need of poets and critics alike to establish the superiority of their intellectual and moral status as writers: ‘Perhaps reality would not look mysterious at all to our literary mystics if it did not also include the reverence due their professional careerism’. In a section entitled ‘Limited Ideologies and the Authority of Transgression’, Riede also invokes ‘Foucault’s analysis of transgressive language’ to argue that Carlyle’s endorsement of the ‘idiosyncratic’ style of German mystics was not only geared toward the endorsement of an ideology; it went beyond that to a personal investment in it as part of a strategy of self-fashioning (through language), to contrive an image of himself as an oracular prophet:

In order to be heard at all, he must gain the ear, and the respect, of an audience that will believe him to have a genuine wisdom from “beyond the veil.” And to do this, of course, the prophet must not write like other men — he must develop a style to express

⁹⁷ Catherine Heyrendt, “‘My Books Were Not, nor Ever Will Be Popular’: Reappraising Carlyle in and through France”, in *Thomas Carlyle Resartus: Reappraising Carlyle’s Contribution to the Philosophy of History, Political Theory, and Cultural Criticism*, ed. by Paul E. Kerry and Marylu Hill (Madison and Teaneck, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2010), pp. 170-86 (p. 176); and Charles Knight, ‘The Mystic School’, *The London Magazine*, 1 (1828), 170-76 (p.171).

⁹⁸ Jeffrey, *Jeffrey Letters*, p. 60.

⁹⁹ See *CL*, IV, pp. 425-29. Also see p. 79 (n. 89) above.

experience directly, and the style must be idiosyncratic in order to express the novelty of his point of view.¹⁰⁰

Having touched upon the personal interest that many times underlay Victorian proclamations of the ineffability of mysticism, it would now be useful to turn to nineteenth-century responses to these proclamations, namely, to how contemporary intellectuals who were inimical to the mystical sought to make sense of the notion of ineffability. In fact, my present argument that the Victorian construction of an ineffable mysticism was part of a quest for authority – whether at the individual, or the ideological level – or both – is perhaps best substantiated by the period’s anti-mystical critics who voiced their suspicions to this effect; that is to say, their defence against the notion of ineffability was to brand it as being nothing more than a ploy for authority. In ‘Coleridge’ (1840), John Stuart Mill perfectly summarizes these critics’ argument when the authority in question is on the ideological level. But first his description of the ideological warfare between the positivist and transcendentalist philosophical camps, in which mysticism was a key participant:

Between the partisans of these two opposite doctrines there reigns a *bellum internecinum*. Neither side is sparing in the imputation of intellectual and moral obliquity to the perceptions, and of pernicious consequences to the creed, of its antagonists. Sensualism is the common term of abuse for the one philosophy, mysticism for the other. The one doctrine is accused of making men beasts, the other lunatics. It is the unaffected belief of numbers on one side of the controversy, that their adversaries are actuated by a desire to break loose from moral and religious obligation; and of numbers on the other that their opponents are either men fit for Bedlam, or who cunningly pander to the interests of hierarchies and aristocracies, by manufacturing superfine new arguments in favour of old prejudices.

Keeping in mind that Mill associated the two philosophical traditions with Bentham and Coleridge, respectively, he then argues that a major Benthamite objection to the transcendentalists is how the authority of ‘their à priori truths’ solely depends on the ineffability thesis, irrespective of the lack of verifiable evidence:

[The followers of Bentham] allege that the transcendentalists make imagination, and not observation, the criterion of truth; that they lay down principles under which a man may enthrone his wildest dreams in the chair of philosophy, and impose them on mankind as

¹⁰⁰ David Riede, ‘Transgression, Authority, and the Church of Literature in Carlyle’, in *Victorian Connections* (1989), pp. 88-120 (pp. 93, 96-8).

intuitions of the pure reason: which has, in fact, been done in all ages, by all manner of mystical enthusiasts. And even if, with gross inconsistency, the private revelations of any individual Böhme or Swedenborg be disowned, [...] whoever form a strong enough party, may at any time set up the immediate perceptions of their reason, that is to say, any reigning prejudice, as a truth independent of experience; a truth not only requiring no proof, but to be believed in opposition to all that appears proof to the mere understanding; nay, the more to be believed, because it cannot be put into words and into the logical form of a proposition without a contradiction in terms: for no less authority than this is claimed by some transcendentalists for their à priori truths. And thus a ready mode is provided, by which whoever is on the strongest side may dogmatize at his ease, and instead of proving his propositions, may rail at all who deny them, as bereft of “the vision and the faculty divine,” or blinded to its plainest revelations by a corrupt heart.¹⁰¹

Mill’s sketch of the typical Benthamite reaction to claims about the unspeakable nature of mystical ‘revelations’ highlights how the intellectual community of the nineteenth century was not oblivious to the authority issues that are likely to inform a certain characterization of mysticism. More specifically, it indicates how anti-mystical critics were conscious of the fact that defining ‘mysticism’ as ineffable conveniently supports the ideological legitimacy of the idealist project, in the sense that such a definition can easily function as a defensive strategy to keep at bay any rationalist critiques of the idealist’s intuitive experience: at the heart of it is the premise that, if mysticism is above the conceptual and logical constraints of language, then it exists in a sphere of its own, untouchable by rationalist criteria of judgement.

4. Beyond Carlyle: Other Victorian Voices in Defence of an Ineffable ‘Mysticism’

Turning from Carlyle to other Victorian writers who have contributed to characterizing the mystical as ineffable, let me underline that my earlier contention regarding Carlyle’s influence on William James was merely to draw attention to the literary points of contact between two (if not the two) leading figures in the modern construction of mysticism in the Victorian and Modernist eras – each in his respective era, of course.¹⁰² The intention behind this was not to suggest that mysticism, as a

¹⁰¹ ‘Coleridge’, *The London and Westminster Review*, 33.2 (1840), 257-302 (pp. 265-66). J. A. Dibble, in *The Pythia’s Drunken Song*, pp. 27-36, called my attention to Mill’s discussion.

¹⁰² As noted in my introductory chapter (p. 4 n. 10), the use in this study of such traditional terms of periodization as ‘Victorian’ and ‘Modernist’ is a tentative one, one that is informed by the growing scholarship on ‘the problematics of periodization’: it is particularly conscious of the complex nature of

modern construct, came to acquire its defining characteristic of ineffability simply through a particular case of influence of one author on another. Within his contemporary intellectual and literary culture, Carlyle may have been the writer most explicit – and even most resolute – in confronting what was negatively perceived to be the vagueness and obscurity of ‘mysticism’, but this should not detract from the significance of many other Victorian writers who have also voiced their objections to this pejorative conception of the term. Indeed, a consideration of examples from a number of poets and critics of the period would reveal that Carlyle’s literary engagement with this category, pioneering and crucial as it was, was part of a larger process of redefinition, one that would require several decades and the weight of many concurring voices before it would effect a significant alteration in conceptions of mysticism.

If one is to accept Leigh Schmidt’s suggestion that the on-going editions of the *Encyclopædia Britannica* offer ‘a good and relevant [measure] when it comes to category formation’,¹⁰³ then it is safe to assume that the new definition of ‘mysticism’ as an ineffable phenomena had notably taken hold in mainstream intellectual thought sometime between the mid-1870s and early 1880s. It should be noted that, in its eighth edition (which appeared from 1852 to 1860), the encyclopaedia’s entry on *mysticism* took up a distinctly ambivalent tone, oscillating between idealization and

the cultural and aesthetic transition between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, how it is marked by many continuities that complicate the traditional view of ‘Modernism’ as being an essential break from ‘Victorianism’. With this in mind, having been born in 1842, it is often pointed out, and correctly so, that ‘part of the richness of James as a thinker is that he sits on the fulcrum between two historical worlds’: the late-Victorian culture of the nineteenth century and the modernist currents of the twentieth. As Martin Halliwell and Andy Mousley argue, therefore, ‘there is enough evidence to claim James as either Victorian or modernist’; and Jessica R. Feldman probably comes closest to the truth when she states that ‘as a psychologist and philosopher he captures the spirit of Victorian Modernism’, a term she critically employs as a way of ‘lead[ing] Modernism back into the Victorian age’. That said, however, this becomes a different matter when the question being asked relates not to William James’s intellectual affiliations/inheritance, but rather to his key role in the historical development of the category of ‘mysticism’. In this case, it is important to highlight that, although James ‘emerged as a thinker with his own point of view’ in 1878, his interest in ‘abnormal psychology’ (with its preoccupations with psychical and mystical states of consciousness) only developed in his later career, culminating in the publication of *The Varieties* in 1902. It is more accurate, then, to suggest that his influence, where notions of mysticism are concerned, only begins to be felt in twentieth-century Modernist writings: see Martin Halliwell and Joel D. S. Rasmussen (eds), ‘Introduction: William James and the Transatlantic Conversation’, in *William James and the Transatlantic Conversation: Pragmatism, Pluralism & Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 1-14 (p. 5); Martin Halliwell and Andy Mousley, *Critical Humanisms: Humanist/Anti-Humanist Dialogues* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), p. 143; Jessica R. Feldman, *Victorian Modernism*, pp. i, 172; and Ignas K. Skrupskelis, ‘William James’, in *American National Biography Online*, ed. by Susan Ware, (Oxford University Press, February 2000) <<http://www.anb.org/articles/20/20-01725.html>> [accessed 8 May 2016]

¹⁰³ Schmidt, ‘MMM’ (p. 282).

disapproval.¹⁰⁴ And what is worth mentioning here is that, within its disapproving sections, the mystical featured as a term of reproach to denote ‘murkiness’ and ‘unintelligibility’. Characterizing it as a ‘wild extravagance’, for example, the entry sets up ‘mysticism’ in clear opposition to ‘common-sense’, and the only sympathetic account it offers on the subject is in its discussion of the ‘mysticism of Emanuel Swedenborg’, and this because it holds that Swedenborg’s scientific learning made his a most unmystical mysticism; according to the entry, ‘it differs from that of all other mystics’ in its hostility to the vague and obscure, obviously suggesting that these are among the defining features of ‘all the mystical systems’, and that Swedenborg is the exception to the rule:

The theosophic mysticism of Emanuel Swedenborg stands alone among all the mystical systems which have yet been noticed. [... He does not] display any of the rambling theorizing and turbid vehemence peculiar to [them]. With the Swedish seer all is scientific precision and calm serenity; he utters himself always with clear collectedness, and [...] is peculiarly temperate and by no means mystical.¹⁰⁵

This entry would remain unchanged in subsequent publications of the encyclopaedia until 1884, when volume seventeen of the ninth edition came out, containing the updated entry.¹⁰⁶ In the new edition, one notices not only that the condemnatory tone of the previous editions is all but gone, but also that the unfavourable association between ‘mysticism’ and ‘unintelligibility’ is completely absent, whereas an idealist understanding of it as something defying linguistic articulation takes an unprecedented precedence; it is what the entry immediately opens with:

MYSTICISM is a phase of thought, or rather perhaps of feeling, which from its very nature is hardly susceptible of exact definition. It appears in connection with the endeavour of the human mind to grasp the divine essence or the ultimate reality of things, and to enjoy the blessedness of actual communion with the Highest. The

¹⁰⁴ See Leigh Schmidt, ‘MMM’ (pp. 283-84, 290-91), which refer to the edition’s reliance on the ambivalent perspective of Robert Albert Vaughan’s *Hours with the Mystics*.

¹⁰⁵ John Downes, ‘Mysticism’, in *The Encyclopædia Britannica, Or Dictionary of Arts, Sciences, and General Literature*, ed. by T. S. Traill, 8th edn, 21 vols and index (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1858), XV, 755-59 (p. 758).

¹⁰⁶ The twenty-four volumes of the ninth edition were published one by one from 1875 to 1889.

first is the philosophic side of mysticism; the second its religious side¹⁰⁷

Commenting on the opening sentence, John Quincy Adams states: ‘This comes very near to what James calls its ineffability’.¹⁰⁸

That Carlyle was central in bringing about this conceptual shift from the 1858 definition of the mystical¹⁰⁹ is unquestionable; but it is doubtful that this process of redefinition could have gained momentum had there not existed an idealist trend of literary thought in the nineteenth-century that was already predisposed to Carlyle’s notions, one that was increasingly keen to speak of spiritual verities that are impervious to scientific reasoning. Indeed, as mentioned in the previous chapter, even as early as 1852, Frederick Robertson could explain that it was the development of an idealist literary sensibility as a ‘reaction from the age of Science’ that had brought about the wave of literary mysticism then sweeping over England. More important and more to the point is what I have delayed pointing out when first referring to Robertson’s argument, and that is his belief that the development of this idealist strain of thought was tied in with an understanding of mysticism that is predicated on its ineffability. What Robertson particularly suggests is that the growing appeal of mysticism in the mid-century was partly due to the rising recognition that the realities of the eternal realm resist articulation through the finite limitations of human language, and that ‘the clear formulas and accurate technicalities of science have not expressed, nor ever can, the truths of the Soul’. According to Robertson, the poets and critics of the century came more and more to appreciate mystical language for how it represents both ‘the infinite in the soul of man’ and the ‘undefined sense of mystery which broods over the shapeless borders of the illimitable’, leading to the ascendancy of what he calls the ‘Poetry of Mysticism’. Mysticism, in other words, was being associated with spiritual and religious realms of experience that were believed to evade exact definition, and this was embraced as a virtue in a world that gave credence to experience only in so far as it was consistent with the scientific culture, and its emphasis on precise and definite criteria of judgment.

¹⁰⁷ Andrew Seth Pringle-Pattison, ‘Mysticism’, in *The Encyclopædia Britannica, Or Dictionary of Arts, Sciences, and General Literature*, ed. by Thomas Spencer Baynes, 9th edn, 24 vols and index (Boston: Little, Brown, 1884), XVII, 128-35 (pp. 128-9).

¹⁰⁸ ‘Christian Mysticism’, *Auburn Seminary Record*, 9 (1913), 447-476.

¹⁰⁹ Volume fifteen of the eighth edition, in which the entry appeared, was first published in 1858.

In my discussion in Chapter II of the Victorian identification of ‘mysticism’ as part of the poetic enterprise (or vice versa), I have argued that the Victorian writers’ poetic and critical defence of the category of mysticism was, in effect, a defence of the cultural authority of poetry, and the divine inspiration of the poet: this is obviously because asserting an essential affinity between mysticism and poetry served to extend any claims that were being made for mysticism to the sphere of poetry. I have explained that at the forefront of these claims was what constitutes the Romantic (idealist) definition of ‘the mystical’, and that is the belief that it is an intense, religious experience of an intuitive form of reality that has epistemological value. It was my contention that such a definition was underpinned by the desire to postulate the existence of an independent category of experience, entirely different and separate from the material/physical levels of experience that are subjectable to scientific scrutiny. A corollary of this belief, moreover, is the idea that the knowledge procured from this type of experience is equally reliable, if not more so, than that obtained through the sensory realm, and some writers even argued that the difference between the two is a difference between knowledge of Absolute and relative truth. In short, the chapter argued that implicit in Victorian attempts to aestheticize and poeticize ‘mysticism’ is the claim that knowledge of ultimate reality is obtained, not through the much venerated logic of material science, but by an intuitive faculty in man that is believed to be, among other things, the seat of the poetic imagination.

The intent of my discussion was, above all, to underscore how the Victorian discourse on poetry was rife with issues of authority, and how its engagement with defining ‘the mystical’ reflected the spiritual concerns of a post-Christian perspective: it was a way of asserting the poet’s cultural relevance as a divinely-inspired prophet in a world where it was felt that the threat of secular positivism to religious and moral feeling was constantly on the rise. I believe that it was a similar preoccupation with these anxieties about the possible future irreligiosity of Britain – and the poet’s place in it – that motivated Victorian poets and critics to defend the ineffability of mysticism. After all, it was really the experience of poetic inspiration that was being defended, given that it was considered one of the manifestations of the mystical temperament. To claim its ineffability, then, was to contend that poets had access to a higher state of being that is pre-linguistic, and beyond the reach of ordinary perceptions, which only served to validate their religious authority as possessors of a unique visionary power. It was also a convenient way to shield the integrity of the

poet's intuitions against the de-spiritualizing effects of scientific reductionism: if an experience is incommunicable through physical and conceptual modes of description, then it cannot be evaluated according to empirical epistemic principles, and this ensures that the poet's insights can stand unchallenged by the scientific community. In 'Mysticism and Philosophy', Richard Gale has suggested that the concept of ineffability, when used as a descriptor of experience, is 'an honorific title',¹¹⁰ which corresponds well enough with the case of its use in the Victorian discourse on poetry, as it is chiefly meant to raise the poet to an exalted moral and spiritual pedestal that befits a religious prophet.

Perhaps Walter Bagehot's 1855 critique of 'The First Edinburgh Reviewers' – appearing in the second number of his then newly founded *National Review* – is a good place to start with as an example of this kind of Victorian (Romantic) figuration of the poet in the mid-nineteenth century. The article addresses Francis Jeffrey's 1814 review of Wordsworth's *The Excursion* (1814), which accused the poem of 'dull mysticism', famously opening with the brutal verdict that 'This will never do!'. Bagehot argues that it was principally for its mysticism that Jeffery castigated Wordsworth's work, and that mysticism was anathema to Jeffrey because he 'had the natural infirmities of a Whig critic' with which Bagehot believed the entire first generation of Edinburgh reviewers were afflicted. As for his definition of what constitutes a 'Whig critic', he explains that, while a great deal had been written to theoretically express the Whigs' creed, for him, 'Whiggism is not a creed, it is a character'; and, interestingly enough, his description of this character incidentally resembles the definitions offered by Matthew Arnold and James Thomson of what they respectively termed 'the Philistines' and 'the Bumbles':¹¹¹

[Whig critics are] men of a cool, moderate, resolute firmness, not gifted with high imagination, little prone to enthusiastic sentiment, heedless of large theories and speculations, careless of dreamy scepticism; with a clear view of the next step, and a wise intention to take it; a strong conviction that the elements of knowledge are true, and a steady belief that the present world can, and should be,

¹¹⁰ See Wayne Proudfoot's reference to Gale's 1960 article in *Religious Experience*, pp. 126.

¹¹¹ Generally speaking, the similarities between Bagehot's 'Whigs', Arnold's 'Philistines' and Thomson's 'Bumbles' seem to be their 'equal want of imagination', their intolerance for 'new, arduous, overwhelming, original excellence', and how they are always inclined 'to the quiet footsteps of custom': Walter Bagehot, 'The First Edinburgh Reviewers', in *Literary Studies*, ed. by Richard Holt Hutton, 2 vols (London: Longmans, Green, 1879), I, pp. 1-40 (pp. 39, 26). More will be said about Arnold's 'Philistines' and Thomson's 'Bumbles' in the next chapter, pp. 190, 191.

quietly improved. [...] Nor are the intellectual powers of the characteristic element in this party exactly of the loftiest order; they have no call to make great discoveries, or pursue unbounded designs [...]. In taste, they are correct, that is, better appreciating the complete compliance with explicit and ascertained rules, than the unconscious exuberance of inexplicable and unforeseen beauties.

It is with this in mind that Bagehot states that ‘the deep sea of mysticism lies opposed to some natures; in some moods it is a sublime wonder; in others an “impious ocean,” – they will never put forth on it at any time’. According to him, the Whigs’ aversion to mysticism stems from ‘the limitation of their imagination’, which ‘restricts them to what is clear and intelligible, and at hand’. He also believes that theirs is a purely rationalist temperament, in the sense that they could never ‘be convinced without arguments’, refusing to entertain the notion that ‘the most convincing arguments [...] may be expressed imaginatively, and may work a far firmer persuasion than any neat and abstract statement’. This is where Bagehot’s defence of the ineffability of mysticism comes into focus, as he states that those arguments which are most persuasive to the imagination are characteristically of an intuitive and infinite nature, too lofty to be expressed within the rational confines of language:

They [the Whigs] are most averse to mysticism. A clear, precise, discriminating intellect shrinks at once from the symbolic, the unbounded, the indefinite. The misfortune is that mysticism is true. There certainly are kinds of truth, borne in as it were instinctively on the human intellect, most influential on the character and the heart, yet hardly capable of stringent statement, difficult to limit by an elaborate definition. Their course is shadowy; the mind seems rather to have seen than to see them, more to feel after than definitely apprehend them. They commonly involve an infinite element, which of course cannot be stated precisely, or else a first principle an original tendency of our intellectual constitution, which it is impossible not to feel, and yet which it is hard to extricate in terms and words.¹¹²

The fact that Bagehot’s conception of an ineffable mysticism occurs in the context of discussing the religious and prophetic authority of poetry is evidenced in the lines immediately following the excerpt just quoted, where he argues that the ‘kinds of truth’ mentioned in the lines above constitute ‘what has been called the religion of nature, or more exactly, perhaps, the religion of the imagination’. He

¹¹² Bagehot, ‘First Edinburgh Reviewers’ (pp. 29, 13-14, 39, 26-27).

explains that ‘this is an interpretation of the world’ that is achieved, not through the physical senses, but by a ‘mystical sense’ that perceives every aspect of material existence as infused with moral and religious significance:

In nature the mystical sense finds a motion in the mountain, and a power in the waves, and a meaning in the long white line of the shore, and a thought in the blue of heaven, and a gushing soul in the buoyant light, an unbounded being in the vast void air, and “Wakeful watchings in the pointed stars.”

Based on this, Bagehot argues that the work of a true poet or artist must be a supremely religious one, because he believes that it is the love of ‘beauty’ that best facilitates the discernment of the mystical and religious meanings of the universe. This is why he refers to Wordsworth and Coleridge as ‘sacred poets’, arguing that their aesthetic sensibilities prove that they ‘possessed the inner nature – “an intense and glowing mind,” “the vision and the faculty divine”’. The latter expressions are of course borrowed from Wordsworth’s *Excursion* (II:274, I:79),¹¹³ which reveals that Bagehot came from a background that was already absorbed in the early Romantics’ cultural narrative of the poet as a visionary prophet, and a figure of moral authority.

And it is with recourse to this narrative that he defends Wordsworth’s mysticism against charges of unintelligibility, whereby he maintains that ‘the sublimities of the preacher’ are not in themselves difficult to understand, but that their profundity renders them unfathomable to the mere formalist and rationalist mind-set of a Francis Jeffrey, or a Sydney Smith.¹¹⁴ Bagehot adds that, as ‘a scoffer at metaphysics’, Jeffrey’s contemporary popularity may linger for a while, but that ‘the religion of the imagination’ will surely have the last word, because the prophetic value of Wordsworth’s mystical poems will withstand the test of time:

It is certain that Mr. Wordsworth preached this kind of religion, and that Lord Jeffrey did not believe a word of it. His cool, sharp, collected mind revolted from its mysticism; his detective intelligence was absorbed in its apparent fallaciousness; his light humour made sport with the sublimities of the preacher. His love of perspicuity was vexed by its indefiniteness; the precise philosopher was amazed at its mystic unintelligibility. [...] The world has given judgment. Both Mr. Wordsworth and Lord Jeffrey have received

¹¹³ William Wordsworth, *The Excursion: A Poem*, a new edn (London: Edward Moxon, 1853), pp. 51, 6.

¹¹⁴ Bagehot names them as the most ‘pre-eminent’ among the Whig founders of the *Edinburgh Review*: See ‘First Edinburgh Reviewers’, p. 19.

their reward. The one had his own generation; the laughter of men, the applause of drawing-rooms, the concurrence of the crowd: the other a succeeding age, the fond enthusiasm of secret students, the lonely rapture of lonely minds. And each has received according to his kind.

In reversing the conception of ‘mysticism’ from that which is perplexing and incomprehensible to that which is ineffably ‘sublime’, Bagehot was also reversing the cultural status of the mystic in relation to the critic: the mystic-poet is no longer a proper object of ridicule, but one who is worthy of the divine reverence that is due a prophet, whereas the critic becomes nothing more than a contemptible ‘shrill artificial voice’:

Nature ingeniously prepared a shrill artificial voice, which spoke in season and out of season, enough and more than enough, what will ever be the idea of the cities of the plain concerning those who live alone among the mountains; of the frivolous concerning the grave; of the gregarious concerning the recluse; of those who laugh concerning those who laugh not; of the common concerning the uncommon; [...] the notion of the world of those whom it will not reckon among the righteous – it said, “This won’t do!” And so in all time will the lovers of polished Liberalism speak, concerning the intense and lonely prophet.¹¹⁵

In addition to Bagehot’s article, Swinburne’s previously discussed essay of 1868 on William Blake is another important critical piece that stakes a position in the ‘vagueness versus ineffability’ debate in nineteenth-century negotiations of mysticism. The essay particularly speaks in defence of Blake’s prophetic books, stating that however contradictory and anomalous its mystical language may outwardly seem, it is by no means nonsensical:

Here, as in all swift “inspired” writing, there are on the outside infinite and indefinable anomalies, contradictions, incompatibilities enough of all sorts; open for any Paine or Paley to impugn or to defend. But let no one dream that there is here either madness or mendacity: the heart or sense thus hidden away is sound enough for a mystic.¹¹⁶

Swinburne is convinced that these seeming ‘incompatibilities’ are not to be treated as a stylistic weakness, but rather as a distinctive feature of a dignified form of writing

¹¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 27-9.

¹¹⁶ Swinburne, *William Blake*, p. 152.

that places the poet in the league of ‘inspired’ writers, a belief that obviously accords religious or quasi-religious¹¹⁷ value to the mystical. This is confirmed elsewhere in the essay, where Swinburne maintains that the ‘sound’ sense hidden behind the mystic’s words belongs to the intuitive and spiritual class, and that any linguistic representation of it is only a fractional portrayal of what is essentially unsayable and ineffable. ‘The meaning of a mystic’, he writes, ‘is but partially expressible by words, as (to borrow Blake’s own symbol) the inseparable soul is yet but incompletely expressible through the body’.¹¹⁸ For this reason, Swinburne insists that to be able to grasp Blake’s meaning, one must follow the poet in his imaginative flight toward that rarefied realm of understanding in which the mystic’s consciousness is said to dwell, and where discursive reasoning can gain no footing. Such is his advice in the following lines that employ a ground/cloud dichotomy to symbolize two opposing epistemological standpoints: the rational versus the intuitive, the empirical versus the imaginative, or the realist versus the idealist:

To pluck out the heart of Blake’s mystery is a task which every man must be left to attempt for himself: for this prophet is certainly not “easier to be played on than a pipe.” Keeping fast in hand what clue we have, we may nevertheless succeed in making some further way among the clouds. One thing is too certain; if we insist on having hard ground under foot all the way we shall not get far. The land

¹¹⁷ The question of Swinburne’s religious views is a complex one and has been the subject of much critical debate from the poet’s own time to the present. The major critical positions on this question range from those arguing that his work portrays the poet’s religious descent into blank atheism, through critical positions associating Swinburne’s writings with various forms of theism, to ones that regard him as an agnostic – or a self-conscious agnostic, with an emotional inclination to belief. Perhaps any consideration of Swinburne’s religious and philosophical leanings when writing *William Blake* should take into account his 1874 letter to E. C. Stedman, in which he thoroughly denied being ‘a Theist’, where theism is understood to mean a belief in ‘a *personal* God’. On the other hand, he wrote of embracing a vague form of religious humanism in the fashion of Blake and Shelley:

We who worship no material incarnation of any qualities, no person, may worship the divine humanity, the ideal of human perfection and aspiration, without worshipping any God, any person, any fetish at all. Therefore I might call myself if I wished a kind of Christian (of the Church of Blake and Shelley), but assuredly in no sense a Theist.

It should also be kept in mind that Swinburne could speak, as late as 1884, of his ‘creedless faith’, which includes the same belief in immortality expressed in some of Emily Brontë’s poetry:

I do now – on the whole – strongly incline to believe in the survival of life – individual and conscious life – after the dissolution of the body. Otherwise, I would not on any account have affected a hope or conviction I did not feel. The glorious and desperately unorthodox verses written in sight of death by Emily Brontë express my creed – or rather my creedless faith – better than any words I know.

See Algernon Swinburne, *The Swinburne Letters*, ed. by Cecil Y. Lang, 6 vols (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1959), I, p. xxv; and *ibid.* (1960), III, p. 14.

¹¹⁸ Swinburne, *William Blake*, p. 221.

lying before us, bright with fiery blossom and fruit, musical with blowing branches and falling waters, is not to be seen or travelled in save by help of such light as lies upon dissolving dreams and dividing clouds. By moonrise, to the sound of wind at sunset, one may tread upon the limit of this land and gather as with muffled apprehension some soft remote sense of the singing of its birds and flowering of its fields.¹¹⁹

In summing up the merits of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, moreover, Swinburne suggests that Blake's readers are of two kinds: those who possess the visionary capacity – or a semblance of it – and are thus able to appreciate the poem's intellectual and spiritual depths; and those who do not. The second type, according to him, are the ones most impatient with the poet's mystical language, simply because they are powerless to comprehend it. The first, on the other hand, are those readers to whom Blake's mysticism requires no critic's interpretation/explanation, and to whom a critic can be instructive only insofar as to point out the aesthetic, and religious qualities of the poem, as Swinburne does in the following lines:

Remark what eloquence, what subtlety, what ardour of wisdom, what splendour of thought, is here; how far it outruns, not in daring alone but in sufficiency, all sayings of minor mystics who were not also poets; how much of lofty love and of noble faith underlies and animates these rapid and fervent words; what greatness of spirit and of speech there was in the man who, living as Blake lived, could write as Blake has written. Those who cannot see what is implied may remain unable to tolerate what is expressed; and those who can read aright need no index of ours.¹²⁰

As the lines here indicate, Swinburne obviously believed that being a poet makes for a superior mystic, but the important point being made is in the last two lines, and that is that the mystic's meaning is untranslatable, so any understanding of it on the part of readers really comes down to whether or not they 'can read aright' – and not on the critic's efforts to make it more readable. We are made to understand, moreover, that 'reading aright' is possible only when the individual possesses a visionary or prophetic temperament akin to that of the mystic-poet's – not necessarily in degree, but in kind. Notice, for example, how those who cannot read aright are described as being unable to 'see' the mystic's meaning, associating their lack of understanding with a deficiency of vision/visionary power.

¹¹⁹ Swinburne, *William Blake*, pp. 106-7.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 225.

This point becomes all the more clear when considered in light of Swinburne's discussion of Blake as a visionary, where the subject of vision is explicitly addressed. In terms of Swinburne's understanding of 'vision', Thomas E. Connolly explains in *Swinburne's Theory of Poetry* that the poet's essay on Blake employs the term in an idealist Blakean sense to mean 'the transcendence of human reason by imagination or intuition'.¹²¹ Connolly sees this best exemplified in the passage below, where Swinburne attributes to Blake higher levels of vision than the mere corporeal one, the latter of which he refers to as 'singleness of vision', associating it to the 'mechanical intellect' or the closed-eyed state of a sleepwalker:

Upon earth his [Blake's] vision was "twofold always"; singleness of vision he scorned and feared as the sign of mechanical intellect, of talent that walks while the soul sleeps, with the mere activity of blind somnambulism. It was fourfold in the intervals of keenest inspiration and subtlest rapture; threefold in the paradise of dreams lying between earth and heaven, lulled by lighter airs and lit by fainter stars; a land of night and moonlight, spectral and serene.¹²²

When it comes to an individual's perception of the world, then, Swinburne considered it a form of blindness to completely rely on the material and conceptual fields of one's sensory-experience, which he identified with the lowest form of human vision. Opposed to this are the various levels of imaginative or intuitive vision that, according to him, involve seeing through 'the soul', what he elsewhere refers to as the 'spirit within the sense of ear and eye'.¹²³ The fact that Swinburne believed that a reader's comprehension of a mystic's language requires using this intuitive or spiritual sense is perhaps nowhere more evident than in his 'Notes on the Text of Shelley' (1869), written the year following his publication of *William Blake*. There he comments thus on the mystical sections of Shelley's *Epipsychidion* (1821):

In all poetry as in all religions, mysteries must have place, but riddles should find none. The high, sweet, mystic doctrine of this poem is apprehensible enough to all who look into it with purged eyes and listen with purged ears.¹²⁴

¹²¹ Thomas E. Connolly, *Swinburne's Theory of Poetry* (Albany: State University of New York, 1964), p. 34.

¹²² Swinburne, *William Blake*, pp. 41-2.

¹²³ Algernon Swinburne, *Songs of the Springtides* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1880), p. 45. The words are from line 134 of Swinburne's 'On the Cliffs' (1880).

¹²⁴ Algernon Swinburne, *Essays and Studies* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1875), p. 236. The essay was first published in the *Fortnightly Review* of May 1, 1869, pp. 539-61.

Borrowed from the traditional language of spiritual purification, the word ‘purged’ connotes letting go of all the rational categories attached to one’s physical perceptions of reality, implying that these are an impediment to understanding the writings of mystics whose meanings rise above the normative linguistic forms of a materialist worldview.

Of course, arguing that mystical poetry requires a specific set of eyes and ears for its comprehension is another way of saying that its language is neither obscure nor vague, but that it surpasses the capacity of the ordinary or common understanding. In Swinburne’s essay on Blake, therefore, the notion of the ineffability of mysticism is meant to indicate that the mystic’s intended readers are, as Margot Louis puts it, ‘part of a peculiarly gifted élite’.¹²⁵ This is certainly one of the reasons Swinburne compares the experience of aesthetic appreciation – in the case of reading Blake – to the sacrament of the Eucharist, indicating that a reader’s ability to grasp the poet’s intuitive (and unutterable) meanings serves as a marker of distinction. To use Margot Louis’s argument, ‘Swinburne defends Blake’s apparent obscurity on the ground that great art can be appreciated, not by “the corporeal understanding,” but only by a rarer “innate and irrational perception”’. Referring to the following excerpt from his essay, Louis adds that ‘Swinburne’s main point is that Blake administers his eucharist to the small community of “exceptional temperaments” which share with him a kind of visionary power’.¹²⁶

It is in fact only by innate and irrational perception that we can apprehend and enjoy the supreme works of verse and colour; these, as Blake indicates with a noble accuracy, are not things of the understanding; otherwise, we may add, the whole human world would appreciate them alike or nearly alike, and the high and subtle luxuries of exceptional temperaments would be made the daily bread of the poor and hungry; the *vinum dæmonum* which now the few only can digest safely and relish ardently would be found medicinal instead of poisonous, palatable instead of loathsome, by the run of eaters and drinkers; all specialties of spiritual office would be abolished, and the whole congregation would communicate in both kinds. [...] The sacramental elements of art and poetry are in no wise given for the sustenance or the salvation of

¹²⁵ Margot K. Louis, *Swinburne and His Gods: The Roots and Growth of an Agnostic Poetry* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1990), p. 70.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

men in general, but reserved mainly for the sublime profit and intense pleasure of an elect body of church.¹²⁷

It should not escape notice that Swinburne's overall defence of Blake's language against charges of obscurity is one that clearly conflates the spheres of 'mysticism' and 'poetry': I had mentioned earlier how he suggests that, rather than leading us to question the poet's sanity, the 'anomalies' and 'incompatibilities' of Blake's mystical speech should be taken as one of the signature features of 'inspired writing'; and Swinburne takes this a step further in the quote above, arguing that the fact that Blake's mystical writing cannot be fully understood by the majority of readers does not detract from the value of his work, but serves, instead, as a testament to its place among 'the supreme works of verse'. It appears from this that, for him, 'mysticism' served as a defining characteristic of 'the most sublime poetry', which signifies a clear overlap in his conceptions of the two categories. Indeed, this is why he describes other readers who cannot aesthetically appreciate Blake's poetry in the same terms used to describe those unable to understand his mysticism, namely, as suffering from defective senses. To 'the heavy ear' and 'the torpid palate', he writes, the poetry would seem an 'impediment of speech, very perplexing to the mundane ear; a habit of huge breathless stuttering, as it were a Titanic stammer, intolerable to organs of flesh'. In both cases, however, Swinburne ultimately seeks to establish that the usual charges of 'vagueness' and 'obscurity' against mystical poetry very often reveal that the weakness lies, not in the poet, but in the mainstream contemporary culture that is too reliant on the 'organs of flesh' to the detriment of the 'spirit of sense'.¹²⁸ And, as in Bagehot's review, by asserting the supra-rational and supra-linguistic nature of the mystical, Swinburne's essay transforms 'mysticism' from a label of abuse to a term of privilege, one that culturally authorizes mystics and their intended readers over the abusive critics.

Much like Swinburne, and more than twenty years before him, Richard H. Horne was also critical of the English intolerance to mystical poetry, similarly attributing it in *A New Spirit of the Age* (1844) to a contemporarily perceived materialist preoccupation with the world of the 'flesh', what he refers to as the belief in 'the beef':

¹²⁷ Swinburne, *William Blake*, pp. 35-6.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

We are such a people for “beef.” We cry aloud for soul – we want more soul – we want to be inspired and the instant anything is floated before our ken which might serve as an aerial guide to the Elysian Valley, or the Temple of the Spirit, then we instantly begin to utter the war-cry of “dreamy folly!” “mystical mystery!” and urged by the faith (the beef) that is in us, continue our lowing for the calf, that surely cometh, but cannot satisfy our better cravings.¹²⁹

This is from Horne’s chapter on Tennyson, in which he speaks in defence of Tennyson’s mysticism with recourse to the ineffability thesis, as was the case in Bagehot’s vindication of Wordsworth’s mysticism, or Swinburne’s of a mystical Blake, or Carlyle’s of his German poets. It should be apparent by now that the ineffable mysticism of the nineteenth century was largely a defensive construct, something that was invoked by critics in defence of poets whose works were believed to supply the much-needed spiritual nourishment for withstanding the increasingly pervasive secularism of the time. As such, it was also an aesthetic (or poetic) construct, corroborating many a critic’s theoretical account about the true nature of poetry, and what it ought to do.

With regard to Horne, and as has been previously mentioned, he held the view that ‘the poetic fire [...] has its source in the divine mysteries of our existence’, and that there are three levels to the full appreciation of it: the sensual, the imaginative, and the mystical. ‘The first and second of these’, he writes, ‘must be clear to all; the last will not receive so general an admission, and, perhaps, may not be so intelligible to everybody as could be wished’. To explain these, he argues that, the ‘objects’ of poetry are ‘palpable to the external senses’ in so far as the reader has conditioned his/her perceptions ‘to contemplate them with interest and delight’; and they are ‘palpable to the imagination’ in so far as the reader ‘possesses this faculty’ and has conditioned it ‘to ideal subjects and profoundly sympathetic reflections’. As for the mystical element of poetry, Horne explains that it is the most supreme and subtlest of the three, and that any perception of it occurs on the spiritual level, and only by readers who have become attuned to their souls’ ‘prophetic sensations’, ‘vague emotions’ and ‘aimless impulses’:

We thus arrive at the conclusion that the poetic element, though simple and entire, has yet various forms and modifications of development according to individual nature and circumstance, and,

¹²⁹ Horne, *A New Spirit of the Age*, p. 201.

therefore, that its loftiest or subtlest manifestations are not equally apparent to the average mass of human intelligence.¹³⁰

Again, the conclusion that we are meant to draw here is that, if a poem's language appears to be puzzling or obscure, the error may not be in the poet's style, but in the ability of readers to hone their spiritual perceptions, so as to comprehend that which resides beyond the natural strictures of linguistic expressibility. This is why Horne believes that many English critics of Tennyson are baffled by what he refers to as his 'transcendentalisms of the senses', which 'do not belong to the flesh-and-blood class' and 'which no German critic would for a moment hesitate to take to his visionary arms'.¹³¹ He, therefore, takes complaints about Tennyson's mystical language as a sign of the critic's spiritual bankruptcy rather than a stylistic weakness in the poet.

Tennyson himself also made similar claims about the ineffability of mysticism when describing his own trance experiences, which indicates that mysticism, as an ineffable category in nineteenth-century literary writing, was not entirely restricted to the critical literature, nor was it always used in a defensive context. Aside from it generally being a critical construct (employed by critics in defence of poets), many Victorian poets were also involved in the construction of this category, and this often occurred in the assertive context of claiming transcendence for their own experiences as inspired poets. In Tennyson's case, this is best exemplified in the 'The Ancient Sage' (1885), especially when compared to the poet's descriptions of his trance experiences in his epistolary or conversational intercourse with intimate friends, part of which I have done in the previous chapter.¹³² 'The Ancient Sage', first published as 'The Ancient Mystic', contains perhaps Tennyson's clearest autobiographical avowal to his readers about these trances, in the sense that it is stated outside the literary world of the poem; as previously mentioned, footnoted to the section about the ancient mystic's visionary experiences is Tennyson's ascription of the same kind of experience to himself: 'This is also a personal experience which I have had more than once'. In terms of his belief in the ineffability of such an experience, John Tyndall reports that, when Tennyson described it to him, he insisted that 'it was impossible to give anything that could be called a description of the state, for language seemed incompetent to touch it'. The poet's letter to Benjamin Blood describing the same

¹³⁰ *A New Spirit of the Age*, pp. 193-4.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 200-1.

¹³² See pp. 79-81.

experience similarly attests to this: ‘This [is] not a confused state, but the clearest of the clearest, the surest of the surest, the weirdest of the weirdest, utterly beyond words [...]. I am ashamed of my feeble description. Have I not said the state is utterly beyond words?’.¹³³ A similar account is reported by William Allingham, who mentions a conversation he had with the poet on the evening of 22 July 1866 that further reveals Tennyson’s belief in the ineffability of mysticism. The conversation is quite interesting in that it conveys ‘how necessary’ the poet’s ‘role as Seer’ was for him,¹³⁴ and the kind of authority it granted him:

T.[ennyson] said, ‘In my boyhood I had *intuitions* of Immortality – inexpressible! I have never been able to express them. I shall try some day.’ I say that I too have felt something of that kind; whereat T.[ennyson] (being in one of his less amiable moods) growls, ‘I don’t believe you have. You say it out of rivalry.’¹³⁵

As Robert Preyer observes, ‘in this little exchange Tennyson is insisting that he has the sort of insights which make a poet and that the poetaster Allingham does not’. On the dynamics of authority that govern this distinction, Anne-Marie Millim comments that the poet’s trances sometimes occasioned a sense of ‘superiority’: ‘Questioning Allingham’s intellect, talent and truthfulness and insisting on his higher status, Tennyson re-establishes inequality between them, which the former’s bold claim had sought to eliminate’.¹³⁶

As for how Tennyson’s notion of ineffability is reflected in ‘The Ancient Sage’, it is partly evident in the fact that the word ‘Nameless’ is employed at least ten times in his reference to the ‘Power’ that ‘is more than man’ (or ‘more than mortal things’), and, by extension, to his boyhood experience of being spiritually united to it (256, 215):¹³⁷

More than once when I
Sat all alone, revolving in myself
The word that is the symbol of myself,
The mortal limit of the Self was loosed,

¹³³ Cuthbert Butler, *Western Mysticism*, p. 331; and *Memoir II*, p. 473.

¹³⁴ Robert Preyer, ‘Tennyson as an Oracular Poet’, *Modern Philology*, 55.4 (1958), 239-251 (p. 246).

¹³⁵ William Allingham, *William Allingham: A Diary*, ed. by H. Allingham and D. Radford (London: Macmillan, 1908), p. 1866.

¹³⁶ Preyer (p. 247); and Millim, ‘Personal Museums: The Fan Diaries of Charles Dodgson and William Allingham’, in *Victorian Celebrity Culture and Tennyson’s Circle* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 136-163 (p. 156).

¹³⁷ *Poems III*, pp. 144, 146.

instances where she either speaks of a personal inclination to ‘mysticism’, or describes herself as ‘a mystic’. ‘I will not deny my mysticism’, she once wrote to Mary Russell Mitford, for example, to whom she often spoke (and even joked) about her ‘own natural leaning towards mysticism’, suggesting on one occasion that she could imagine herself going ‘to Germany to smoke & take a master’s degree in mysticism’.¹⁴² To Anna Jameson, in 1853, she wrote that she and ‘Robert’ had ‘been meditating socialism and mysticism of very various kinds’, and in 1859, just two years before her death, her new year’s letter to Ruskin indicates that she had not undergone a change of heart on the matter, declaring that ‘I am what many people call a “mystic”’.¹⁴³ That Barrett Browning closely associated the mystical with the poetic, and thought of these in relation to ineffability, is evidenced in her letter to Mitford of April 1st, 1842, where she shares her oft-expressed opinion that Carlyle was fundamentally ‘a poet’.¹⁴⁴ In the letter, she discusses Carlyle’s mystical language, and how it is often deemed idiosyncratic, favourably justifying it as the inevitable consequence of a poet’s desire to verbally translate into ‘sound’ and ‘music’ certain contemplations of a purely spiritual nature. Such contemplations, she explains, are essentially inaudible, cultivated in the ‘silent’ sphere of ‘the mystic & true’, and rising above the reach of any human lexicon:

He does not write pure English .. no, nor quite pure German – nor pure Greek, by any means. But he *writes thoughts*. [...] There is something wonderful in this struggling forth into sound of a contemplation bred high above dictionaries & talkers – in some silent Heavenly place for the mystic & true. The sounds do come – strangely indeed & in unwrought masses, but still with a certain

¹⁴² Wellesley College, Margaret Clapp Library, Special Collections, Browning Collection, Checklist Number 41030-00, EBB to Mitford, 14 June 1841, p. 16; Checklist Number 43348-00, EBB to Mitford, 24 November 1843, p. 11; and Checklist Number 43366-00, EBB to Mitford, 16 December 1843, p. 3, in *Baylor University Libraries Digital Collections* (hencefore abbreviated as *BULDC*, and all references from this source were accessed on the same date as follows) <<http://digitalcollections.baylor.edu/cdm/>> [accessed 22 May 2015]

¹⁴³ WC, MC Library, Browning Collection, CN 53022-00, EBB to Jameson, 17 March 1853, p. 3, in *BULDC*; and *The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning: Edited with Biographical Additions*, ed. by Frederic G. Kenyon, 2 vols (London: Macmillan, 1898), II, p. 299.

¹⁴⁴ See, for example, *ibid.*, CN 45044-00, EBB to Robert Browning, 17 February 1845, p. 13, where she writes that Carlyle ‘is a poet unaware of himself’, or her suggestion that ‘he is a poet [...] by his insight into the activity of moral causes working through the intellectual agencies of the mind’, a statement made in one of the sections she contributed to Horne’s 1844 essay on Carlyle, as presented in ‘Carlyle: A Disentangled Essay by Elizabeth Barrett Browning’, in *Literary Anecdotes of the Nineteenth Century: Contributions Towards a Literary History of the Period*, ed. by W. Nicoll and Thomas Wise, 2 vols (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1896), II, pp. 105-119 (pp. 117).

confused music & violent eloquence, which prove the power of *thought over sound*. Carlyle seems to me a great prose poet.¹⁴⁵

In her 1844 contribution to the essay on Carlyle in Horne's *A New Spirit of the Age*, Barrett Browning also calls Carlyle a 'prose poet', explaining that he had 'the language of a gifted poet, the colour of whose soul eats itself into the words'. This is what she meant by her declaration that 'he is [...] a poet in the mode', but she equally argues in the essay that Carlyle qualifies as 'a poet' not only by virtue of his style, but also in the 'moral' sense of what he 'would do for Society collectively'.¹⁴⁶ 'He fills the office of a poet, does he not?' is a statement she would make the following year in a letter to Browning,¹⁴⁷ and, according to Joseph Bristow, Barrett Browning believed that 'the office of a poet' is that of 'a *Vates*', as indicated in her 'zealous passage' on the poets in *Aurora Leigh* (1856).¹⁴⁸ This is where she asserts that, 'invested with divine knowledge', the poets are 'teachers' of the 'sublime', and 'the only truth-tellers now left to God', their voice often revealing that 'This soul, / This life, this work is being said in heaven'. In other words, Barrett Browning believed that the true function of a poet is a highly spiritual one, but, more importantly for the present discussion, that the 'essential truth' of poetry is the stuff of 'heaven', and has its source in the human 'soul' (Book I. 387. 854-80).¹⁴⁹ An obvious consequence of this is her belief in the essential ineffability of a poet's meaning, namely, the idea that poetic truths can never be fully represented in the temporal medium of language, because they originate in the eternal realm. This is a recurrent theme in her poems, particularly those that depict the creative process from the poet's perspective, such as 'The House of Clouds' (1841), or 'Insufficiency' (1844), the latter of which is one where Barrett Browning herself assumes the role of the spiritually inspired poet-prophet. The poem portrays her 'soul' as being enchained within the body, seeking to 'utter forth in verse / [...] something farther, fuller, higher' than anything that can be found in the 'false' and 'weak' world of the flesh (336. 1-2, 4, 9-10). 'What we best conceive we fail to speak', the poet states, reassuring her soul that it shall attain its full singing capabilities, but only after death:

¹⁴⁵ WC, MC Library, BC, CN 42049-00, EBB to Mitford, 1 April 1842, p. 13-4.

¹⁴⁶ 'Carlyle: A Disentangled Essay' (pp. 115-18).

¹⁴⁷ WC, MC Library, BC, CN 45053-00, EBB to RB, 27 February 1845, p. 2, in *BULDC*

¹⁴⁸ Bristow, ed., 'Introduction', in *Victorian Poet: Poetics and Persona*, (pp. 12-14).

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.* (p. 13); and *The Poetical Works of Elizabeth Barrett (Browning): With Two Prose Essays*, ed. by Humphrey Milford (London: Oxford University Press, 1920). All references to EBB's poems are to page, as well as line numbers, and are from this edition.

Wait, soul, until thine ashen garments fall,
And then resume thy broken strains, and seek
Fit peroration without let or thrall. (12-4)

Returning to Barrett Browning's understanding of mysticism, 'The Soul's Expression' (1844) is another poem that revolves around the inexpressibility of a poet's 'thought and feeling' (328. 4), and her description here of her own struggles with language is strikingly similar to her commentary on Carlyle's idiosyncratic style quoted above. On the one hand, she suggests that her poetical contemplations are of a 'grand' and 'infinite' nature that, whenever translated into 'sound' through 'portals of the sense', the end result is a 'stammering' and 'insufficient' speech (7, 1, 10). On the other, her 'octaves' are said to possess 'a mystic depth and height' (6), indicating that her notions about the ineffability of poetic experiences are closely linked with the belief that they are characteristically mystical in nature, perhaps even that she deemed mysticism a necessary condition for the unutterability of poetic truths. She even takes this a step further than any poet so far discussed, arguing that any attempt to fully articulate this mystic 'song of soul' would be to the detriment of her physicality: 'my flesh would perish there' (9, 13).

Aside from this, it is worth calling attention to the fact that the terms 'mystic', 'mystical', and 'mystery' are recurrent ones in the vocabulary of Barrett Browning's poetry, and are many times employed in association with meanings of ineffability. 'A Rhapsody of Life's Progress' (1844) is a case in point, to look at but one example.¹⁵⁰ In it, the poet contends that only before birth and after death do 'we lie still on the knee of a mild Mystery' (I. 272. 2), but that this intimate proximity becomes disrupted by the 'sensual relations and social conventions' of our mortal state (VI. 274. 4). At best, as she explains, we 'are 'ware of a sight' and 'a sound / Beyond Hearing and Seeing', but 'we ask not their name', because we know they are too 'wonder[ous]' for words (VI. 274. 5-6, 19-20). According to her, even poets who are accorded a special place "'twixt the Heavens and earth' may never adequately speak of 'the sense of the mystical march': it is true that, through them, 'we send up the lark of our music that cuts / Untired through the cloud, / To beat with its wings at the lattice [of] Heaven', but these only prove to be 'little wings' that provoke the 'pity' of the angels, and to which Heaven's gate remains 'shut' (VI. 274. 30, 13, 24-6, 28-9).

¹⁵⁰ For another example, see 'Human Life's Mystery' (1850), in which Barrett Browning speaks of 'mystic Things', describing them as 'Things nameless', whose purpose is to 'draw above our common thoughts to Heaven's unknown' (37, 43-44, 50).

Besides Tennyson and Barrett Browning, Arthur Symons is yet another Victorian poet who was a champion of the concept of an ineffable mysticism, and who also personally identified with mystics and their experiences. The latter is something he admits to at the very beginning of his influential work *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1898), as part of his dedicatory note ‘To W. B. Yeats’:

I speak often in this book of Mysticism, and that I, of all people, should venture to speak, not quite as an outsider, of such things, will probably be a surprise to many. It will be no surprise to you, for you have seen me gradually finding my way, uncertainly but inevitably, in that direction which has always been to you your natural direction.¹⁵¹

It should be pointed out that, in this work, Symons employs the terms ‘mystic’ and ‘mysticism’ interchangeably with ‘symbolist’ and ‘symbolism’, even arguing at one point in his discussion that the ‘Symbolist’, ‘Decadent’, and ‘Mystic’ schools are different labels for one and the same principle. He refers to this principle as ‘the doctrine of Symbolism’, on one occasion, and ‘the doctrine of Mysticism’, on another, and would define it as a philosophy of art that seeks to underscore the centrality of ‘mystery’ in human experience:

The doctrine of Mysticism, with which all [...] symbolical literature has so much to do, of which it is all so much the expression, presents us, not with a guide for conduct, not with a plan for our happiness, not with an explanation of any mystery, but with a theory of life which makes us familiar with mystery, and which seems to harmonise those instincts which make for religion, passion, and art.¹⁵²

For him, therefore, a mystic-poet is one who ‘has realised, better than any one else, the significance, in life and art, of mystery’, whose work is ‘founded’ on ‘the sense of the mystery of the universe’. But ‘the mysterious’, Symons contends, is neither ‘vague’ nor ‘obscure’, pointing out that the difference between the one and the other is akin to that between what is transcendently ‘infinite’ and what is mundanely ‘indefinite’:

All art hates the vague; not the mysterious, but the vague; two opposites very commonly confused, as the secret with the obscure,

¹⁵¹ (London: W. Heinemann, 1899), p. vi.

¹⁵² pp. v, 134, 174.

the infinite with the indefinite. And the artist who is also a mystic hates the vague with a more profound hatred than any other artist.¹⁵³

Symons is obviously speaking here in defence of mystics against critics who are quick to label anything mystical as ‘obscure’, elsewhere indicating that their error stems from a superficial preoccupation with the mystic’s unusual style that fails to appreciate the visionary profundity lying at the heart of it; he believes that, otherwise, such critics would be able to recognize that the stylistic irregularities of a Gérard de Nerval, for example, represent the breakdown in the capacity for language by one who has been overcome with transcendent vision, comparing the condition of ineffability to a state of blindness:

Truth, and especially that soul of truth which is poetry, may be reached by many roads; and a road is not necessarily misleading because it is dangerous or forbidden. Here is one who has gazed at light till it has blinded him; and for us all that is important is that he has seen something, not that his eyesight has been too weak to endure the pressure of light overflowing the world from beyond the world.¹⁵⁴

Conclusion

Identifying ‘ineffability’ as a core feature of ‘mysticism’ in the modernist, essentialist discourse of William James, Evelyn Underhill, and other twentieth-century philosophers and psychologists of religion, this chapter has sought to establish the contribution of Victorian writers to the development of this aspect of the term’s meaning. At the beginning of the chapter, I have highlighted how, in the period between 1830-1870, ‘mysticism’ became a prevalent term in the critical vocabulary of Victorian reviews of poetry, most often employed in the condemnatory sense of ‘vagueness’, and ‘unintelligibility’, a usage that reflects the primarily pragmatic nature of the criticism of the period. In particular, and as has been noted, such a usage reflects the moral preoccupation of periodical critics and reviewers with the human/social reference of the work of art, as it is related to their belief that a simple and plain language that dealt with the common and familiar aspects of everyday experience is readily capable of engaging the readers’ sympathies; this, they believed, would make readers more impressionable to the poet’s moral purpose than if the

¹⁵³ pp. 153-57.

¹⁵⁴ p. 32.

language had been a strange vernacular, dealing with foreign and unusual realms of experience, as in the case of the mystical literature imported from Germany. It has been my contention throughout the chapter that it was from this context that an ineffable ‘mysticism’ emerged as an important critical term in nineteenth-century debates about the transcendental conditions of poetic creativity. I have argued that many Victorian poets and critics who were interested in and sympathetic to mysticism sought to challenge the charge of ‘unintelligibility’ by conceding that mystics are indeed ‘vague’ and ‘obscure’, but only to those whose intuitive faculties have been blunted by a purely materialist and logical worldview. In this case, any problems of incomprehensibility were blamed on the reader, whereas the mystic-poet was claimed to be the minister of a divine revelation, whose complexity of style could be explained in terms of the religious profundity of his/her visionary meanings, meanings that were said to surpass the rational limits of linguistic expression.

Thus, one of the aims of this chapter has been to demonstrate how ‘mystic ineffability’ was a by-product of the nineteenth-century idealist trend of literary thought, which endeavoured to defend the stylistic irregularities of mysticism by positively attributing them, not to a want of eloquence on the mystics’ part, but rather to the inherent incapacity of language itself to accommodate their intuitions of an infinite and supernatural reality. ‘Mysticism’, in this sense, was transformed from an accusatory term into an honorific title, one that was meant to connote the transcendental legitimacy of a given poet. Another significant aim of the chapter has been to underscore how these attempts at positively redefining ‘mysticism’ were implicated in issues of cultural and ideological power: namely, in the need to delegitimize the period’s dominant belief in the supreme authority of autonomous reason, while advocating the sacrosanctity of private intuitive experience in the face of positivist reductions of it by mainstream secular writers. I have attempted to achieve this by exploring various examples from Carlyle’s early writings, as well as from those of other significant poets and critics of the period, including Tennyson, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Swinburne, and Arthur Symonds. Carlyle’s place as a chief ‘apologist’ for German literature and thought in nineteenth-century England has long been recognized, perhaps as early as 1828, when he received six medals from Goethe, who commissioned him with ‘the enviable duty’ of awarding it to ‘people

who had served German literature in Britain'.¹⁵⁵ My analysis of Carlyle in this chapter was intended to show that this legacy extends not only to the leading role he played in popularizing mysticism among the British public, but also to his substantial contribution in the formation of modern 'mysticism' as an 'ineffable' category. As for my discussion of the other Victorian writers in this chapter, this was for the purpose of revealing that Carlyle's pioneering engagement with this category was only part of a larger process of redefinition, one that can be traced in the writings of a considerable number of other prominent literary figures in the period. Such writings, I believe, stand as a testimony to the indebtedness of twentieth-century philosophy and psychology to Victorian poetic theory for their arguments about the unspeakable nature of mystical experiences.

¹⁵⁵ *The Carlyle Encyclopedia* (pp. 79, 117, 392); Jerry A. Dibble, *Pythia's Drunken Song*, pp. 2-5; *CL*, IV, pp. 352-55; and William Christie, ed., *Jeffrey Letters*, p.17 (n1).

CHAPTER IV

'Poetic Inspiration' in James Thomson's Two Phases of 'Mysticism'

In *James Thomson (B. V.): Beyond "The City"* (1965), William D. Schaefer traces the moral and intellectual development of James Thomson as a parallel movement, occurring on three levels that are closely intertwined and 'inseparable' from each other. He discusses this over the course of three chapters, which are entitled 'Theist to Atheist', 'Optimist to Pessimist', and 'Romantic to Realist'. As far as Thomson's poetic theory is concerned, the final chapter argues that Thomson started his literary career with Romantic and Shelleyan notions about the divine mission of 'the poet' as a 'hierophant' of an 'unapprehended inspiration', along with the conviction that true poetry must not be merely 'Self-possessed', but 'God-possessed'. 'This', Schaefer claims, 'was the vital point in the entire philosophy', and it was 'the Achilles' heel that [...] caused its downfall'; 'when finally convinced that God did not exist', so the argument goes, Thomson's 'entire philosophy of poetry had been shattered', and from thence commenced his 'journey' from Romanticism to realism. In short, as Schaefer would have it, Thomson 'had disowned Romantic inspiration' as a necessary part of his development toward his final position as an atheist in the late 1860s.¹

This last conclusion is obviously based on the assumption that a Romantic theory of inspiration would not remain intact, without positing a divine source of inspiration – whether the divinity is conceived in a Christian, Neo-platonic, or in a pantheistic sense. But as a number of recent, and in-depth investigations of the category of 'inspiration' have shown, there had in fact emerged, from the late nineteenth century onwards, alternative theories of creativity that had sought to disengage from notions of the sacred while continuing to idealize 'inspiration' in Romantic terms, a development that was especially helped by the rise of the psychological turn in philosophy. Timothy Clark's *The Theory of Inspiration* (1997) is exemplary in this regard, arguing that the naturalistic strain of humanism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries assumed 'inspiration' 'to be a "natural" category, referable entirely to the individual mind'. This, Clark believes, was an attempt to 'locate some privileged inner source of authority' in place of an external supernatural one: 'The archaic notion of inspiration as dictation from another was reconfigured in a

¹ Schaefer, pp. 142, 118-24, 129, 135.

humanist cult of an otherness supposedly within us, a source of hidden powers and transformations'. He explains, moreover, that such a theory is too often accompanied by the same old Romantic valorization of the process of composition, so that episodes of inspiration attain that 'seductive status as modern versions of miracle', offering a secular 'sacralization of the writer as unique individual'. 'Glimpses of the creative process', he writes, 'remain like brief visions of a promised land. They are, in effect, secularized versions of religious conversion narratives such as those of St Paul and St Augustine'. One way to look at this, according to Clark, is to consider the 'Romantic-idealist conception of inspiration' as having persisted 'not as a metaphysical but as a psychological ideal'.²

This view is supported by Todd M. Thrash and Andrew J. Elliot in 'Inspiration as a Psychological Construct' (2003), which discusses the continuity of traditional notions of inspiration up to recent times. Their section on 'Inspiration from Within: Intrapsychic Sources' points out that, 'with the emergence of the field of psychology toward the end of the 19th century, theorists sought a scientific account of inspiration in terms of intrapsychic processes', with the purpose of 'replacing supernatural with deterministic explanation'. Thrash and Elliot more importantly argue that, despite the anti-spiritual framework of these theorists, they did indulge in a Romantic discourse of 'transcendence'. In this case, as they explain, 'transcendence is illustrated by the fact that the individual gains access to and uses ideas that are felt to be more elegant or novel than those generated willfully' – given that inspired ideas are believed here to 'impinge on consciousness from the unconscious, the preconscious, or the perceptual field'.³ This is perhaps what Maria Walsh intended by asserting, in *Art and Psychoanalysis* (2013), that 'the Romantic view still exists that art stems from the eruptions of a magical, inspirational unconscious'.⁴ It is also not far from Rob Pope's argument, in 2005, that modern conceptions of the 'unconscious' reveal how 'psychology has taken over the roles previously assumed by religion and myth in providing the dominant discourse for the more mysterious aspects of the creative process', 'especially so where creativity is associated with stereotypically Romantic

² Timothy Clark, *The Theory of Inspiration: Composition as a Crisis of Subjectivity in Romantic and Post-Romantic Writing* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997; repr. 2000), pp. 4-7, 282, 174. Clark's comments here are mostly cited from his evaluation of Rosamund Harding's *An Anatomy of Inspiration* (1940), which he takes to be a representative work providing 'a clear articulation of assumptions at work in the discourse of inspiration in Romantic and post-Romantic writers'.

³ *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 84.4 (2003), 871-889 (p. 872).

⁴ *Art and Psychoanalysis* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2013), p. 2.

notions of “inspiration” or “genius”.⁵ Perhaps Art Berman best describes this movement from ‘idealism’ to ‘psychologism’ in the Romantic conception of art, which he identifies as a defining feature of the Modernist aesthetic:

The modernists’ resolution is to import the romantic theory of creativity as a power and place it inside mentality at a special place, where mechanistic psychology cannot get at it. Romanticism is detached from nature (the earth) and relocated in the mind. The romantic philosophy becomes a modernist psychology, yet it is kept outside the range of empiricist psychology by retaining the romantic transcendence of art. The artwork continues to inspire romantic awe; each artist personally arrogates the mystery.⁶

Although it is not my intention in this chapter to suggest that James Thomson’s later views on poetry show a special preoccupation with nineteenth-century psychological theory,⁷ I do believe that they reflect the residual Romanticism toward which the nontheistic humanist currents of contemporary thought were gravitating, particularly in Thomson’s treatment of ‘inspiration’ as a completely internalized phenomenon. His ‘A Strange Book’ of 1879, written three years before his death, is significant in this regard, in that it attempts to accommodate Romanticism within a naturalistic interpretation of the classical *furor poeticus*, the ‘divine madness’ of poetic composition. I argue that his interpretation, while not yet informed by the Romantic permutations of psychoanalysis, belongs to the pre-Freudian intellectual culture of the late nineteenth century that was witnessing attempts to ‘neutralize’ Romanticism’s ‘revelatory moments’,⁸ by displacing its concept of the ‘creative

⁵ Rob Pope, *Creativity: Theory, History, Practice* (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 70, 91-96.

⁶ Art Berman, *Preface to Modernism* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1994), pp. 102, 180. For other discussions along these lines, see M. Ursell, ‘Inspiration’, in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. by Roland Greene and others, 4th edn (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), pp. 709-10 (p. 710); Robert R. Smith, *Death-Drive: Freudian Hauntings in Literature and Art* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), p. 111; and Suzanne R. Kirschner, *The Religious and Romantic Origins of Psychoanalysis: Individuation and Integration in Post-Freudian Theory* (Cambridge University Press, 1996).

⁷ Of course, Thomson’s engagement with some of the contemporary, psychological notions of ‘the poetic mind’ was inescapable. In *The Poet’s Mind: The Psychology of Victorian Poetry 1830-1870* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 3-4, 12, 21, Gregory Tate argues that, over the course of the mid-nineteenth century, ‘with the rise to respectability within British culture of the discipline of psychology’, the psychologized ‘idea of the mind permeated almost every aspect of Victorian culture’; ‘so wide could the net be cast that nineteenth-century psychology was, in many senses, more a way of thinking, a self-analytic habit of mind, than a clearly demarcated discipline’. Of ‘the discursive links between literature and psychology’, he writes ‘that the relation between poetry and the study of psychology was of crucial significance to Victorian poets’, evident in how ‘the psychological preoccupations of the mid-nineteenth century are reworked and redefined by [these] poets’.

⁸ Patricia Rae, ‘Modernism, Empirical Psychology and the Creative Imagination’, *Volume XXI* (2007), 405 (p. 408).

imagination' within a more empirical model of human subjectivity.⁹ This is what Art Berman describes as the period's quest for 'a mediating theory', between the aesthetics of idealism and science,¹⁰ something that scholars have rightly associated with the early modernist project, but which obviously had its beginnings in late-Victorian poetics.

Berman explains that such a reconciliation 'detaches or uncouples romanticism from its source in idealism and attaches it to a realism that is at least not incompatible with the empiricist environment' in which it must operate. The reconciliation, in this sense, is 'not simply romanticism extended', in the way of the mid-nineteenth century, with its insistence on a transcendental imagination, lying above the reach of Enlightenment rationality.¹¹ Its goal, instead, is to de-spiritualize and transform the Romantic aesthetic, by 'bringing the creative imagination down from its long-standing place in the heavens' to what is believed to be 'its proper place on earth';¹² and this namely by moving from a metaphysical conception of selfhood to one that is predominantly psychological. This kind of compromised Romanticism retains the sense of mystery and awe that surrounds the 'unseen' and 'invisible' world beyond matter, still crediting poets with a perceptive intuition that could penetrate to the heart of the mystery. The difference here is that the 'unseen' and the 'invisible', while belonging to an 'immaterial' realm, is still within the bounds of the 'physical'; moreover, whereas the intuitions of the older Romanticism yield 'access to a higher truth that has a Platonic form', the new aesthetic can 'sustain no intuited truth higher than psychological truth': that is, the truth of 'humanity's knowledge of its own

⁹ Besides Thomson's, another attempt 'to "scientize" the theory of art', to borrow Peter Allan Dale's phrasing, is found in the work of George Henry Lewes, who was both a psychologist and a literary critic. This is especially true in relation to the final two volumes of *The Problems of Life and Mind*, interestingly published in 1879, the same year as the publication of Thomson's 'A Strange Book'. According to Gregory Tate, Lewes was a 'convinced physiological psychologist', and his account of the mind and the imagination was 'rigorously empiricist', but the fact that he so often resorted to metaphysical terminology indicates the persistence of 'late-Romantic' ideals in his poetic and psychological theories. Dale has also argued that Lewes's attempt to disengage from Romanticism's metaphysical 'ideology of the symbol' results in a positivist reconfiguration of the same ideology: 'no less than the Romantics he wants to affirm a vision of nature and mind united in an encompassing economy of love', but his vision is grounded 'in the science of biology and not [...] in the phenomenology of spirit or imagination'. See Gregory Tate, *The Poet's Mind*, pp. 8, 134, 132, 12, 19-20; and Peter Allan Dale, 'George Lewes' Scientific Aesthetic: Restructuring the Ideology of the Symbol', in *One Culture: Essays in Science and Literature*, ed. by George Lewis Levine and Alan Rauch (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), (pp. 93-5, 102). For another discussion of the presence of metaphysics in Lewes's writings, see Jack Kaminsky, 'The Empirical Metaphysics of George Henry Lewes', *Journal of the History of Ideas* (1952), 314-332.

¹⁰ *Preface to Modernism*, p. 106.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 21-2, x.

¹² Patricia Rae, 'Psychology and the Creative Imagination', p. 406.

capabilities'.¹³ With this in mind, I believe that an analysis of Thomson's later critical position will reveal that the poet never abandoned the theory of poetic inspiration, only the belief in its divine origin, and that his reconfiguration of it was in such a way that allowed him to maintain his early Romantic notions about the prophetic role of the poet as the possessor of a unique and privileged insight.

But this chapter is not a study of Thomson's Romantic poetics per se, as I am only concerned with these insofar as they exemplify what has been elaborated in the previous two chapters, regarding the Victorians' conception of the relationship between poetry and mysticism. Building on Grace Jantzen's and Richard King's premise that definitions of mysticism represent the conceptual site of a historical struggle over meaning and authority, I have argued there that Victorian poets and critics have attempted to construct an aesthetic (or poetic) mysticism as a way of asserting the cultural authority of poetry in the increasingly secularized milieu of nineteenth-century culture. My discussion, in this chapter, of Thomson's developing theory of poetic inspiration is in view of this. After all, Timothy Clark has explained that 'inspiration is not, despite appearances, an issue primarily of the genesis of poetry, rather of the power, knowledge, and authority at work in the poetic performance'.¹⁴ I particularly intend to highlight how Thomson's characterization of poetic inspiration, throughout his career, is typically in reference to a certain understanding of mysticism, and how both are couched in notions of authority.

This will involve an analysis not only of the poet's later thoughts in relation to the key concepts at hand, but of his early views as well, because, as noted in the introduction of this thesis, tracing the modifications of Thomson's aesthetic theory along his religious and intellectual development will help underscore two central points of the study: the first is the conceptual elasticity and openness of 'mysticism', how it may encompass a wide range of meanings according to the spiritual or cultural needs of the individual/group by which it is employed; secondly, that the one common element that lies behind all definitions of the term is the drive for authority. In this sense, Thomson's significance for a study of the cultural construction of mysticism as a modern category in Victorian poetry and poetics lies in this fact: that his career-long engagement with this concept, including his later adaptations to its definition, reflects on a larger scale the history of its development in the second half of the Victorian age:

¹³ Art Berman, *Preface to Modernism*, pp. 104-5, 22, 45.

¹⁴ *The Theory of Inspiration*, p. 53.

how the Romantic appropriation of the term in the mid-nineteenth century was especially freighted with religious meanings, and how this would gradually change at the turn of the century, where it would become more open to secular and naturalistic interpretations.

After offering a literature review of previous scholarly investigations of the question of mysticism in Thomson's writings, the analysis in this chapter will be divided into two sections, of which the guiding argument will be that mysticism functions in Thomson's texts as a category of resistance to cultural marginalization. This could be understood as a response either to the general marginalization of poetry as a cultural power, or to the intellectual relegation that Thomson himself had suffered in consequence of his association with the militant atheism and radicalism of Charles Bradlaugh's *National Reformer*. More specifically, the first section will deal with early Thomson, and is essentially an extension of the analysis of Chapter II: it aims to call attention to the religious claims that Thomson was making for poetry in his search for a spiritual and moral substitute for traditional Christianity, and how this involved his definition of mysticism as being the highest form of poetry. In doing so, I will, at the outset, dedicate a good part of the discussion to Thomson's early proto-Victorian concerns about how Christianity was gradually being rendered obsolete by the era's radical changes in science and industry. The purpose is to demonstrate that the poetry and essays of this early period offer a cultural criticism of the moral dissolution of society, whose redemption is possible only in the hands of a Carlylean type of hero, most likely of the class of 'Poets'. Referring to a number of his essays of the 1860s, such as 'Shelley' (1860), 'The Poems of William Blake' (1864), 'Open Secret Societies' (1865), and 'Sympathy' (1865), I will then endeavour to show Thomson's conception of 'poetic inspiration' as a form of mystical experience, falling back on the complex web of relations he weaves between 'Poets' and 'Mystics'. I draw attention here to Thomson's deployment of 'mysticism' in his attempt to differentiate between two types of poetry, the *inspired* and the *uninspired*, with the former being construed as representative of 'quintessential poetry'. The section will finally turn to a discussion of how Thomson's aesthetic recourse to mysticism is, in effect, a 'protective strategy' to secure art and poetry in an autonomous sphere, away from the pressures of scientific inquiry, thereby safeguarding their religious authority. As for the second section, this will focus on the points of continuity between Thomson's early and later poetic theory, particularly in relation to the quasi-naturalistic

understanding of the principle of ‘poetic inspiration’ that he adopts in ‘A Strange Book’, and how this connects with his later redefinition of ‘mysticism’. But a central concern of this final section is also to highlight how Thomson’s construction of an ineffable mysticism was a way of challenging his intellectual relegation to the fringes of Victorian cultural life. I argue that ‘mystical obscurity’, or the quality of ‘not being understood’, served for Thomson as an apologetic for a poet’s obscurity of reputation, something that could help justify his own unfavourable reception by reviewers.

1. Thomson and ‘The Mystical’: A Literature Review

In discussing James Thomson’s unpopularity in public opinion, Henry Stephen Salt, the poet’s first biographer,¹⁵ recounts the reaction of Thomson’s former landlady upon requesting her contribution to his biography. She ‘sourly regarded’ him, he recalls, ‘as if she resented any mention of her impecunious lodger’, only willing to say that he had ‘passed away’, but that if the inquisitor wished ‘to write the life of a truly good man, a cheerful Christian, and an earnest teetotaller, [...] there was—her dear departed husband’. This not too implicit suggestion by the landlady of Thomson’s irreligiousness exemplifies, as Salt explains, how the poet’s reputation was ‘heavily weighted’ by his association with the secularism, atheism and republicanism of the Freethought party. It is, Salt moreover believes, what eventually ‘jeopardized’ Thomson’s ‘chance of literary fame’, as reviewers ‘seem to have been disqualified for forming a just estimate of him by the dislike or timidity with which they regarded what was heretical and unpopular in his career’.¹⁶ Harold Hoffman is of the same view, particularly with regard to what is considered Thomson’s greatest literary achievement, *The City of Dreadful Night*, with its clear atheistical sentiments: ‘It is a poem which places its author among the immortals, but its fame has been circumscribed by reason of the prudery of the British public and by virtue of the fact

¹⁵ Salt’s interest in Thomson is unsurprising, as both were ‘Shelleyans’, and disbelievers in ‘established religion’, entertaining, instead, some form of belief in universal brotherhood. More importantly, Salt was, as he would describe himself, ‘an ist with a foot in every ism’, a vegetarian, humanitarian, and socialist freethinker, who held many rebellious views that served to estrange him from respectable circles, giving him a ‘sympathetic understanding of outcasts and unrespectables’ such as Thomson. See George Hendrick, *Henry Salt, Humanitarian Reformer and Man of Letters* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), pp. 1, 88, 97-9; and David Allen, *The Naturalist in Britain: A Social History*, 2nd edn (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 181.

¹⁶ Henry Salt, *The Life of James Thomson* (“B.V.”), rev. edn (London: Watts, 1914), pp. vii-viii, 39.

that its theme forbids popularity'.¹⁷ Indeed, one might say that Thomson's heretical writings and secularist connections are so integral a part of his literary career that, even if it could no longer deny him critical approbation, or – eventually – a place in the English poetic canon, it does tend to hinder our appreciation of other noteworthy aspects of his thought and character. This certainly appears to have been the case at least with the critical evaluations that have attempted to make sense of the place of mysticism in Thomson's work.

It cannot be denied, of course, that the writings of James Thomson present a curious case for anyone investigating the question of if, and how, they are related to the literature of mysticism, especially for such a study as the present one, which adopts a constructivist-oriented approach. For here is a poet who, for nearly the last two decades of his life, continually published anti-Christian and blasphemous¹⁸ satires in the secularist journals of the nineteenth century, addressed 'to the most irreligious audience London could then provide',¹⁹ but whose major work is surprisingly reminiscent of the mystical writings of saints. Could such a poet possibly have contributed to the modern construction of an idealized and essential mysticism, one that is now being characterized by religious and cultural historians as an 'ahistorical' and 'universal' construct? This seems doubtful if we are to accede to the previous critical literature engaging with the question of mysticism in Thomson's texts, the greatest part of which rests on the assumption that, being at the forefront of Victorian intellectuals who attacked religion, Thomson naturally held antagonistic views towards mystics and the mystical.

The most notable critique from the literature espousing Thomson's anti-mysticism is the chapter dedicated to the subject in Isobel Armstrong's *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics, Politics*, entitled 'James Thomson: Atheist, Blasphemer, and

¹⁷ Harold Hoffman, 'An Angel in the City of Dreadful Night', *The Sewanee Review* (1924), 317-335 (p. 320).

¹⁸ Although Thomson was never legally prosecuted for blasphemy, his writings very often provoked angry responses from readers and critics, protesting against what the 'Christian World' described as his 'blasphemous irreverence' or 'horrible and blasphemous invocation', a fact that led him to the writing of 'A Word on Blasphemy' (1867). He argues there that an atheist cannot be guilty of blaspheming God, because a man can only blaspheme that which he holds holy. William Schaefer explains that it was 'only through good fortune' and the 'limited circulation' of the *National Reformer* that Thomson escaped the similar fate of his friend G. W. Foote, who spent a year in prison in 1883 for publishing something far less blasphemous than Thomson's satires. See James Thomson, *Satires and Profanities* (London: Progressive Publishing Company, 1884), pp. 132, 65-9; and Schaefer, *James Thomson (B.V.): Beyond "the City"*, p. 66.

¹⁹ Henry Paolucci, *James Thomson's the City of Dreadful Night: A Study of the Cultural Resources of the Author and a Reappraisal of the Poem*, 2nd edn (Dover, DE: Griffon House, 2005), pp. 147-8.

Anarchist: The Grotesque Sublime'. Although Armstrong acknowledges that *The City of Dreadful Night* is steeped in mystical language, her main contention is that Thomson's 'project is to construct single-handed a new symbolic language and a wholly new mythological system', 'the mythos of atheism', and that this 'reconstructed modern myth had to be made out of existing forms of thought, images and language'. She suggests that the poem, not only aims at 'stealing the language of spiritual rhapsody to portray a materialist universe'; but, more elaborately, that it uses the different 'categories of spiritual discourse', including the 'traditional symbolism of the dark night of the soul', to enter fully into its conditions, 'and at the same time withdraws from it to expose it as a mystified mythology which collapses under an antagonistic alternative materialist mythology'. In other words, and according to Armstrong, what is striking about Thomson's poem is its 'use of the traditional language of spiritual experience to overturn it, a language overturned by its own oppressive weight'.²⁰

On another occasion, Armstrong similarly rejects *The City's* affinity with mysticism, on the same grounds, particularly in comparison to T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*:

Nothing could be further from Eliot's poem, with its humanized quasi-mystical symbolism taken eclectically from different spiritual traditions [...] than Thomson's poem. The estrangement of *The City of Dreadful Night* is not caused by spiritual breakdown but precisely by the oppression of theist and Christian ideology itself. Thomson, almost always described as a 'pessimist' and not the anarchist and atheist he was, is easy to misread because his project was to rewrite Christian language, using its symbols against itself.²¹

This reading of *The City* as being essentially a 'parody'²² of the Christian spiritual tradition is, in fact, a recurrent one in Thomson criticism. It is suggested, for example, in the analysis offered by David Seed, who, at first, discusses the poem's Dantesque elements, not failing to mention 'the paradox of how a poet who has lost his faith, indeed developed an outright scepticism towards the symbolic system of Christianity, could even contemplate imitating an allegory based on medieval Catholicism'. Seed, then, follows Armstrong's cue, arguing that Thomson employs 'the most traditional

²⁰ Armstrong, (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 461-4.

²¹ 'Victorian Poetry', in *Encyclopaedia of Literature and Criticism*, ed. by Martin Coyle and others (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 278-94 (p. 290).

²² Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics, Politics*, p. 475.

tropes in spiritual symbolism' only in a 'parodic spirit', because 'the stylistic manifestation of his atheism is a series of attacks or inversions of such conventional symbolism'.²³

Again, the key factors here are the poet's anti-Christian and radical politics. And it is because of these that we find Lothar Hönnighausen, in his commentary on Thomson's 'Hymns to the Night', hastily dismissing the possibility that Thomson could entertain an interest in anything mystical. This is when he comments on the poet's 'preoccupation' or 'obsession' with the 'mystical German' Novalis,²⁴ which, he believes, 'seems rather puzzling'. Hönnighausen suggests that this preoccupation must have developed through Thomson's reading of the laudatory 1829 'Novalis' essay by Carlyle, who diligently sought there to redeem the obscurity of German mysticism from public contempt. He insists that the poet's enthusiasm for the German writer could not have been for any other reason than the 'biographical parallel' between the two (that is, of having both mourned the death of a 'child bride'),²⁵ 'since Carlyle's essay on the mystic German romantic', he unhesitatingly adds, 'could scarcely have made him attractive to a Victorian follower of the radical reformer Bradlaugh'.²⁶

But, that being said, what is evidently problematic with these and similar studies is that, in order to make their case, they must ignore a great deal of the poet's writings, together with other facts demonstrating how Thomson, in fact, had a deep interest in mystics and mysticism. An indispensable context for understanding *The City*, for instance, is the poet's 1865 essay 'Open Secret Societies', which these critics fail to consider. The essay, along with Thomson's closely dated critical pieces on Blake (1864), Shelley (1860) Emerson (1858), and, not to mention, the one on Garth Wilkinson, written as late as 1879, all offer a powerfully sentimental and idealizing portrait of mysticism. As Gurdit Singh suggests in reference to his prose criticisms, it is with nothing short of a 'whole-hearted reverence' expressed in 'a tone of exquisite

²³ David Seed, 'Hell Is a City: Symbolic Systems and Epistemological Scepticism in *the City of Dreadful Night*', in *Spectral Readings: Towards a Gothic Geography*, ed. by Glennis Byron and David Punter (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), pp. 88-107 (pp. 97, 101-2).

²⁴ Novalis was the penname of the eighteenth-century German poet and writer Georg Friedrich von Hardenberg.

²⁵ Although Novalis was indeed betrothed to the young Sophie von Kühn, who was barely fifteen when she died, there is no biographical evidence indicating that there was so much as a romantic attachment between Thomson and Matilda Weller, the thirteen year old daughter of an armour-sergeant that Thomson befriended during his army service in Ireland. For a discussion of the highly conjectural nature of the 'supposed romance', see William Schaefer, *Beyond "The City"*, pp. 8-20.

²⁶ Lothar Hönnighausen, *The Symbolist Tradition in English Literature: A Study of Pre-Raphaelitism and Fin De Siècle*. trans. by Gisela Hönnighausen, 2nd edn (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 178.

tenderness' that Thomson regards the mystical, whether it manifests itself in the works of saints, poets, the Persian orient, or Buddhism.²⁷ Lothar Hönnighausen's assumption that Thomson would not have been inclined to read Novalis for his mysticism clearly proves unfounded, when one considers his readings not only of other mystical literature, but also of the critical studies on the subject, all of which indicate that his preoccupation with mysticism was more serious than has often been supposed.

We know, for example, that Thomson was an admirer of Emerson, whose 'verse', Thomson states, 'as well as his essays and lectures [are] little else than the expression of [the] mystical'.²⁸ He moreover wrote that 'the purest fountain and the most copious river' of mysticism is to be found in the literature of the East,²⁹ which he read in translation 'with the ardour of a great lover', as suggested by Singh. According to Henry Paolucci, Thomson was not only acquainted with Hafiz and Saadi,³⁰ but also with the *Divan* of Goethe,³¹ particularly through his reading of Heinrich Heine, who was himself not without his personal engagement with mysticism.³² Singh has even contended that the depth of Thomson's reading in oriental poetry has left its clear mark on his writings, offering several examples from the poet's work 'to show how deeply saturated his mind was with the Persian imagery and symbolism'.³³ This is to say nothing of the fact that Thomson had read the scholarly considerations of mysticism in William Jones's *Dissertation on the Mystical Poetry of the Persians and Hindus* (1792), as well as Emerson's 'Swedenborg; Or, The Mystic' (1850), both of which he cited in his own discussions of the mystical.³⁴ As for his familiarity with Buddhism, suffice it to say that Thomson knew enough to be able to critique Schopenhauer's philosophical system inspired by the religion; to be sure, in the short

²⁷ Gurdit Singh, *The Vision of James Thomson ("B.V.") : An Exploration* (New Delhi: Bahri, 1980), pp. 109, 154-6.

²⁸ James Thomson, 'The Poems of William Blake', in *Biographical and Critical Studies*, ed. by Bertram Dobell (London: Reeves & Turner and B. Dobell, 1896), pp. 240-69 (p. 267). The essay, henceforth referred to as 'Poems of Blake', was written in 1864, and published in 1866 in the *National Reformer's* instalments of Jan. 14, 21, 28, and Feb. 4.

²⁹ James Thomson, 'Open Secret Societies', in *Essays and Phantasies* (London: Reeves & Turner, 1881), (p. 208). Written in 1865, the essay was published in the *National Reformer's* instalments of Feb. 18, 25, and March 4, 1866.

³⁰ The pennames of Abu Muhammad bin Abdullah Shirazi, and Khawaja Shamsu-Din Shirazi, two of the most celebrated Persian poets of the medieval period.

³¹ Paolucci, p. 94.

³² See, for example, *Poetry and Prose: Heinrich Heine* (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1982), p. 137.

³³ Singh, p. 152-4.

³⁴ James Thomson, *Essays and Phantasies*, p. 208; and *Biographical and Critical Studies* (London: Reeves and Turner, and Bertram Dobell, 1896), p. 319.

memoir on Thomson that appeared in the *Freethinker*, in Feb. 10, 1889, J. M. Wheeler ‘recalls how he was amazed at Thomson’s knowledge of Buddhism, a subject on which Wheeler had been doing research in Thomson’s last years’.³⁵

Aside from this, one must also not entirely dismiss the impact of Thomson’s early religious training, by a mother who was ‘mystically inclined with Edward Irving’, and a father who would regularly take him to ‘small meetings in a private room where the members detailed their spiritual experiences of the week’.³⁶ Indeed, Schaefer argues that the importance of this is hard to deny, but given that it occurred in Thomson’s early childhood, it ‘was probably more on emotional, and to use the word loosely, psychological levels than on a purely intellectual one’.³⁷ It is the same view expressed by Imogene B. Walker in her critical study on Thomson:

The significant point is that during his first six years Thomson lived in a home wherein religious emotionalism was high and that this emotionalism was intensified during the two following years. Certainly such an atmosphere left its mark.³⁸

This is a more cautious view than Hugh Walker’s, who considers Thomson’s religious influence by his parents a purely ‘hereditary’ matter; he declares that the poet ‘strikingly illustrated the law of inheritance from both the paternal and maternal strain’, the latter of which he deems to be responsible for the ‘melancholy and mystical religion’ that is found in Thomson.³⁹ But regardless of whichever view one is inclined to accept, both seem to suggest that Thomson was not at all hostile to mystics and mysticism. It is telling, after all, that Thomson had chosen ‘B. V.’ as his pseudonym, standing for ‘Bysshe Vanolis’, the latter of which is an anagram of none other than Novalis, and Bysshe being the middle name of Shelley, whom, as we shall see, Thomson idolized throughout his career as the quintessential mystic-poet in the English language.⁴⁰

Indeed, the significance of the factors just mentioned have not altogether escaped the notice of Thomson critics, and – although quite rare – have led some to even argue that a number of his works rightfully belong to the literature of mysticism; in other words, that instead of merely revealing an admiration or ‘reverence’ for the

³⁵ William Schaefer, *Beyond “The City”*, p. 157.

³⁶ This is from a private letter by Thomson to his sister-in-law, later published in Salt, p. 4.

³⁷ Schaefer, *Beyond “The City”*, p. 38.

³⁸ James Thomson (*B.V.*): *A Critical Study* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1970), p. 6.

³⁹ *The Literature of the Victorian Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1910), pp. 586-7.

⁴⁰ See, for example, *Biographical and Critical Studies*, pp. 261-4, 278-81, 326.

mystics, such works offer an honest account of an experience that can essentially be called ‘mystical’. Of the earliest critics to adopt this position is Henry Salt, who called Thomson a ‘mystic visionary’, as early as 1889, arguing that while Thomson was ‘one of the shrewdest logicians’ of the age, he possessed a duality of mind that would explain why his poetry also displayed moments ‘of rapturous joy and spiritual exaltation’: ‘in the highest heaven of his most spiritual flights he is still the keen, calm reasoner, while in his coldest speculations he retains something of the impassioned poet’.⁴¹ But perhaps the most extensive commentary on this is found in the 2005 comprehensive study of ‘The City’, by Henry Paolucci, who states that the poem’s concluding canto symbolizes ‘the mystical reality’ of Thomson’s ‘phantasmagoric vision’, an ‘ecstatic experience of spiritual darkness’ that is akin to what Dante has undergone while briefly wandering in the ‘selva oscura’, but told ‘from a superior vantage point’. Paolucci points out the importance of ‘Open Secret Societies’ to this analysis, explaining that it should be interpreted as the poet’s claim to having ‘experienced the *ecstasis* of Platonic, or, to use Plato’s term, erotic love’ that is particularly exclusive to the mystics, who are the most exalted and encompassing class of Thomson’s secret societies. This *ecstasis*, he adds is ‘the point of unity where the mysteries of bravery, purity, wisdom, and beauty are dissolved momentarily in an ineffable experience of infinite love’. It is also a ‘sublime paradox’, coupling ‘the profoundest spiritual anguish’ with ‘the supremest joy’ and ‘loftiest hope’. After noting how mystical writings, throughout history, have dwelt either on the dazzlingly brilliant raptures of such a unity, or the darkest miseries of its subsequent disunity, Paolucci finally concludes that ‘in the *City* [Thomson] has attempted to picture, in Dantesque language, this world [...] as it appears to one who has just sunk back into it from the highest experience of erotic ecstasy’.⁴²

In addition to Salt and Paolucci, we also find two other critics who make similar assertions of the poet’s mysticism, Lyman A. Cotten, as well as Thomson’s contemporary fellow-Scotsman and correspondent, William Maccall. Cotten calls attention to this, in 1945, in his investigation of the relationship between Giacomo Leopardi⁴³ and Thomson: ‘Both men were melancholiacs by reason of certain experiences which can best be termed mystical’. He namely argues that, in ‘A Lady of

⁴¹ *The Life of James Thomson ("B. V.")* (London: Reeves and Turner, and Bertram Dobell, 1889), pp. 315, 57.

⁴² Paolucci, pp. 183-4, 106-8.

⁴³ An Italian poet, essayist, and philosopher of early nineteenth-century Romanticism.

Sorrow' (1862-67), Thomson charts the stages of his spiritual 'enlightenment', beginning with his ability to see the world 'with catholic vision', and culminating in that 'mystical insight' found in Leopardi's *Zibaldone* that 'tuttoè è nulla': 'all is nothing'. This conviction, Cotten observes, generates 'a mystical love of death' that teaches 'the justice of annihilation and the blessedness of Nirvana'.⁴⁴ Maccall interestingly also finds in the Nirvana of Buddhism a central concept for an understanding of the poet's ethical and literary life, as indicated in the title of his book *A Nirvana Trilogy: Three Essays on the Career and the Literary Labours of James Thomson* (1886). Maccall proclaims here, more seriously than 'in jest', that he himself, as 'a Mystical Panontist', 'an Oriental born in the North', is probably 'the only religious man ever born in Scotland', with the exception of Thomson, whom he believes was very 'religious with a religion that Pharisees can never know or feel'. This comes in the context of criticising the Christianity of his countrymen, who 'have taken as religion the arid and sterile faith which the Hebrews offered them', and 'never rose higher than, a naked Monotheism'. In his definition of mysticism, he identifies the mystic as one who 'rejoices in the mysterious, adores it for its own sake: where the veil is dark and deep he would make it still darker and deeper', and this precisely, he believes, was the overriding principle in the drama of James Thomson's life: 'Beyond and above the drama [...] was the vision, was the void of something neither life nor death – something far more deep and awful than that which men vaguely and helplessly call mystery'. The ultimate objective of Maccall's book – which, in effect, is an unabashedly idealising 'funeral oration' – is to offer the poet's legacy as 'the prophecy of Nirvanaism as a new religion', for far from being a mere 'scoffer' and 'blasphemer', Maccall declares that Thomson should be remembered as one of 'Nirvana's grandest apostles', 'a godlike man' and 'a priest of the Infinite'.⁴⁵

Aside from how sneeringly embarrassed Thomson would have been had he lived to read such epithets, the difficulty with Maccall's evaluation, as well as those of Cotten and Paolucci, is that they commit the same 'essentialist fallacy'⁴⁶ that I have observed in the case of Tennyson and Hopkins critics in Chapter I. That is, the fallacy of evaluating a text against a proposed definition of the 'essence' of mysticism, one that necessarily complies with the critic's personal ideology, while disregarding the

⁴⁴ Lyman Cotten, 'Leopardi and "the City of Dreadful Night"', *Studies in Philology* (1945), 675-689 (pp. 679-80).

⁴⁵ Maccall, (London: Watts & Co., 1886), pp. 19-20, 27, iii-v, 31.

⁴⁶ King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and "the Mystic East"*, p. 10.

fact that all textual representations of ‘the mystical’ – including those from which the proposed definition was derived – cannot escape the influence of their broader historical, cultural and political contexts. As pointed out in the first chapter, the methodological deficiencies of the essentialist paradigm have led to an increased demand to subject such texts to a cultural analysis that gives no privileged authority to one or a group of texts over others, but rather sees mysticism as a shifting social and cultural construct in the history of ideas.⁴⁷ This would eventually help neutralize the view that mysticism is *nothing but* an intense private subjective experience that provides genuine insights into the nature of reality, the view implicit in the evaluations of Maccall, Cotton and Paolucci, itself a product of the modern construction of mysticism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In this sense, such evaluations, to borrow Richard King’s phrasing, continue to ‘construct’ the ‘object that they purport to explain’.⁴⁸ Therefore, while supporting the latter critics’ view that Thomson’s writings show a positive preoccupation with mysticism, I depart from them in that my analysis is only concerned with the cultural dimensions of Thomson’s involvement with this category.

2. Thomson’s Career from 1855-1866

2.1. Early Aesthetic Theory: The Poet as a Surrogate Guide

In *England and the English* (1833), Edward Bulwer Lytton captures the sense, felt by many intellectuals writing in the early and mid-nineteenth century, that theirs was a period of moral and social transformation, characterized by the erosion of old religious beliefs and the absence of a new alternative:

We live in an age of visible transition – an age of disquietude and doubt – of the removal of time-worn landmarks, and the breaking up of the hereditary elements of society – old opinions, feelings, – ancestral customs and institutions are crumbling away, and both the spiritual and temporal worlds are darkened by the shadow of change.

Lytton declares that while this change is being optimistically ‘hailed’ by ‘the sanguine’ as an indicator of ‘the coming of a new Millennium’, to him, ‘such epochs

⁴⁷ Jantzen, *PGCM*, p. 24

⁴⁸ *Orientalism*, p. 81.

appear but [...] the times of greatest unhappiness to our species’, ‘uncertainty’ being ‘the greatest of all our evils’.⁴⁹ As Carlyle had put it in 1831, ‘the Old has passed away, but, alas the New appears not in its stead; the Time is still in pangs of travail with the New’.⁵⁰ Probably the period’s most eloquently concise expression of this motif of being caught up in a moral or spiritual limbo comes in Matthew Arnold’s famous lines from ‘Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse’ (1855), a poem which seems to have strongly resonated with readers and poets of the time, one of whom was the twenty-one year old James Thomson.⁵¹ ‘Wandering between two worlds, one dead / The other powerless to be born’, was Arnold’s estimation of nineteenth-century religious anxieties, and within three months of the publication of this poem, Thomson responded with one of his earliest poems, “Suggested by Matthew Arnold’s ‘Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse’”.

Published in 1855, the poem reflects Thomson’s religious views during his early years as an army schoolmaster, how he was troubled by the same doubts and apprehensions that plagued nineteenth-century thinking, but how he remained loyal – at least emotionally – to the Evangelical inheritance of the early religious training he received, both at home, and in his eight years as a student at the Royal Caledonian Asylum.⁵² In ‘Suggested by Matthew Arnold’,⁵³ Thomson opens by describing Arnold’s poem as a ‘Dirge for a mighty Creed outworn’, recognizing that Christianity’s spirit is ‘fading from the earth’, ‘almost quenched in death’, and how it

⁴⁹ *England and the English*, 2 vols (London: Richard Bentley, 1833), II, pp. 166-7. Walter Houghton, in *Victorian Frame of Mind*, p. 10, called my attention to Lytton’s discussion.

⁵⁰ Houghton, *Victorian Frame of Mind*, pp. 8-10. For another good example, see John Stuart Mill’s 1831 ‘The Spirit of the Age’, in *The Spirit of the Age: Victorian Essays*, ed. by Gertrude Himmelfarb (Yale: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 50-79 (pp. 63-4).

⁵¹ A contemporary poet and commentator argued that the ‘genesis and importance’ of Arnold’s ‘Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse’ (1855) parallels that of Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*, particularly in its expression of this motif. See Carl Dawson, ed., *Matthew Arnold: The Critical Heritage*, 2 vols (London: Routledge, 1973), II, pp. 218-20.

⁵² Several scholarly studies have attempted to offer a history of Thomson’s religious development, starting from the Calvinism of his earliest childhood to the religious doubts of his youth, and then to his subsequent rejection of Christianity, which, in turn, led to his formation of an alternative pantheistic faith that was finally abandoned for a more pessimistic and godless worldview. The most valuable of these are the chapter entitled “‘Doubt and Fear,’ 1834-1862” in Imogene Walker’s *James Thomson (B.V.): A Critical Study* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1970), pp. 1-38; William Schaefer’s chapter ‘From Theist to Atheist’ in *Beyond “The City”*, pp. 37-81; and Henry Paolucci’s discussion of Thomson’s ‘Religious and Moral Preparation’ in *James Thomson’s the City of Dreadful Night: A Study of the Cultural Resources of the Author and a Reappraisal of the Poem*, 2nd edn (Dover, DE: Griffon House, 2005), pp. 32-63.

⁵³ James Thomson, *The Poetical Works of James Thomson*, ed. by Bertram Dobell, 2 vols (London: Reeves & Turner, and Bertram Dobell, 1895), II, pp. 368-80. All references to Thomson’s poems are to page numbers, and (unless specified otherwise) are from this edition – hereafter abbreviated as *Poetical Works*.

is no longer deemed fit 'to lead the modern march of thought'. Arnold's 'sad and deep' 'dirge-moan', according to Thomson, 'befits our anguished time too well', a time that is 'blinded' by its political strength, 'material might', and the 'wealth' that is 'gorging' its 'imperial marts'; it has become 'absorbed in frantic worldly strife' that it is 'fast losing all / Earth has of heaven; bereft of faith; / And living in Eternal Death'. The poet explains that, in such a 'matter-lusting' world, driven by its 'greed for gold', the few rich 'yet wealthier rise' while the 'great mass' of the starving population sink deeper in 'want and woe', and 'in both the spirit dies.' On the intellectual front, moreover, the situation is equally grim: this 'proud strong Age', he says, is beset by 'black disbelief, substantial doubt' and 'gloom-involved unmoving lies', and so, 'in despair's stark sinfulness', it rejects and 'reviles the promised Paradise' (368-72).

But Thomson urges his fellowmen not to 'turn hastily away' from the dead, sprawled figure of the 'Son of God', which represents here the formal doctrines of Christianity. For, although 'the great Form lies there nerveless still', it might not be a genuine death, only a 'slumber', from which it will 'awake', 'refreshed and strong, full-powered to sweep / The darkness' of disbelief. Yet, if 'it be death' indeed, Thomson believes that it is 'the Form alone – its earthly shrine' that 'is subject to earth's mortal sway', because he is convinced that 'there is no death for the Divine / Which lives in ever-perfect youth'. In other words, if the forms and doctrines of one religion 'expire', God would always substitute them with 'new and nobler' ones, while its spiritual essence remains the same: 'In the Old's death the New has birth'. Thomson, thus, insists that their duty is to remain by the side of their 'death-bound Monarch', and 'gaze in deep reverence on' His holy 'features', in the hope that they would 'recognise / That Greater One who shall succeed' (373-4):

Yes, let us stay in loving grief,
Which patient hope and trust yet cheer,
Silent beside our silent Chief,
Till His Successor shall appear;
Till death's veil fall from off His face,
Or One anointed take His place. (379)

What is particularly significant about this poem, for the purposes of my analysis, is that Thomson is also contending that 'God never can / So utterly depart from man', that even in the interval of this transition from one great religion to another, mankind would never be left without human guides:

Nay, – our adoring love should have
More faith than to believe that He,
Before Another comes to save,
Can leave us in blind misery
Without a Guide. (379)

The guides, we are made to understand, are those who are exalted above others by reason of their ability to discern the presence and movements of the Divine spirit in the world, when the rest of humanity, ‘with blinded sight’, ‘dare to cry, There is no light!’. Thomson argues that whoever proclaims that ‘the Divine is dead’, or ‘dumb’, should recognize that God reveals Himself only according to one’s ability to perceive Him: ‘He gives us all we can receive; / He teaches all we can believe’. As such, ‘He is obscure’ only to those who have become spiritually ‘blind’ and ‘deaf’, through their reliance on their physical faculties of perception, and not to those who have cultivated their spiritual senses:

For measured to each eye and ear
His glory shines, His voice outspeaks;
To each He gives the most it seeks.
[...]
The pure can see Him perfect – pure;
The strong feel Him, Omnipotence;
The wise, All-wise. He is obscure
But to the gross and earth-bound sense. (379)

This elite group of ‘the pure’, ‘the strong’ and ‘the wise’ are identified elsewhere in the poem as ‘our noblest captains, priests and seers’, and, in more specific terms, as the ‘grand crowd of sages, bards, saints, [and] heroes’ (377, 369). Interestingly, the latter classification is not only identical to the one Thomson employs in his poem ‘Shelley’ (1861),⁵⁴ but reappears, almost verbatim, in his ‘Open Secret Societies’ (1865), an essay in the fashion of Carlyle’s *On Heroes*,⁵⁵ where the ‘need

⁵⁴ ‘God sends thee age by age, / In pity of thy wild perpetual moan, / The saint, the bard, the hero, and the sage’ (257).

⁵⁵ Thomson’s critical writings show great familiarity with Carlyle’s work, including his notion of the hero. See, for example, *Essays and Phantasies* (London: Reeves and Turner, 1881), pp. 52, 101, 118, 126, 143-144, 285, 299; and *Biographical and Critical Studies*, pp. 205, 271, 280, 394-5, 417, 450, 469. For Thomson, Carlyle was one of the few intellectuals in whom ‘the thought of the age in our country is embodied’, believing that he was endowed with a ‘creative genius’ in history and philosophy that commands ‘homage of which a lofty-minded and strong-minded man could justly be proud’: *Essays and Phantasies*, p. 126; and Carlyle was also one of the writers to whom Thomson sent a copy of *The City*, when he was seeking recognition in 1874, and William Schaefer suggests that the fact that Carlyle – unlike George Eliot – never replied partly accounts for why he was considered with ‘less enthusiasm’ by Thomson in the seventies: *Beyond “The City”*, p. 174.

for a Messiah is the central motivation'.⁵⁶ In this essay, Thomson observes that the world's 'loftiest' brotherhoods may be distinguished into five classes, those of 'the Heroes', 'the Saints', 'the Philosophers', 'the Poets', and finally 'the Mystics', whom he considers the most exalted of all, being the culmination of all the other four fraternities, 'Saints of Saints, Heroes of Heroes, Philosophers of Philosophers, and Poets of Poets'. Although written a decade after his poetic response to Matthew Arnold, when Thomson was already contributing religious satires to the *National Reformer*, much remained the same in terms of his emotional attachment to the figure of Christ; no longer able to believe in the divinity of Jesus, the 'Son of God' now becomes 'a poor carpenter's son', but one who is elevated to the greatest rank in Thomson's hierarchical classification of the world's noblest brotherhoods. That is to say, he is deemed a mystic, and, at that, is given the status of the ultimate mystic of Western tradition.⁵⁷ I shall of course go into more detail about 'Open Secret Societies' in the course of my analysis, but for now, the important point to highlight is this: that the essay's treatment of the class of 'Poets' further illustrates the widely-accepted critical argument that Victorian aesthetic theory called upon poetry 'to defend the religious spirit', as Lawrence J. Starzyk puts it, 'seeking an alternative in literature for an effete religion'. To further use Starzyk's words, this involved viewing the poet as 'the high-priest who intimates to man the movement ordered existence is pursuing. Where the many see multitudinousness and purposelessness, he sees order and meaningful progress',⁵⁸ an observation that accurately applies to Thomson's Poets.

Obviously influenced by Carlyle's 'The Hero as Poet', Thomson asserts that Poets 'are they who feel that the universe is one mighty harmony of beauty and joy', an 'eternal music whose orchestra comprises all things' from 'the worm to man'.⁵⁹ In feeling this, moreover, they are able to reproduce it 'in the language of men', the impact of which is spiritually ameliorating:

⁵⁶ Houghton, *Victorian Frame of Mind*, p. 311. Also, see generally pp. 310-16 for the nineteenth-century vogue of hero-worship, and veneration for great men, and how it is connected with the Victorian's search for a 'Messiah' or a 'savior' in 'a period of radical transition' where 'the problems to be solved are so vast' and 'the need for guidance is so imperative'.

⁵⁷ See p. 211 of *Essays and Phantasies*, hereafter abbreviated as *EP*.

⁵⁸ "'That Promised Land": Poetry and Religion in the Early Victorian Period', (pp. 270, 280, 283).

⁵⁹ Compare to Carlyle's *On Heroes*, p. 78: 'It is man's sincerity and depth of vision that makes him a poet. See deep enough, and you see musically; the heart of Nature *being* everywhere music'. See also William Schaefer's *Beyond "The City"*, pp. 94,165 (n15), on Thomson's conception of the poet along Carlylean lines.

In all these imitative songs of theirs is a latent undertone, in which the whole infinite harmony of the whole lies furled; and the fine ears catch this undertone, and convey it to the soul, wherein the furled music unfurls to its primordial infinity, expanding with rapturous pulses and agitating with awful thunders this soul which has been skull-bound, so that it is dissolved and borne away beyond consciousness, and becomes as a living wave in a shoreless ocean.

That poetry has this power to effect a religious experience is also true, Thomson adds, when it is visually consumed by readers in its printed form:

If, however these their poems be read silently in books, instead of being heard chanted by the human voice, then for the eye which has vision an underlight stirs, and quickens among the letters which grow translucent and throb with light; and this mysterious splendour entering by the eyes into the soul fills it with spheric illumination, and like the mysterious music swells to infinity, consuming with quick fire all the bonds and dungeon-walls of the soul, dazing it out of consciousness and dissolving it in a shoreless ocean of light.

It should be noted that, having abandoned the belief in the divinity of Jesus in this essay, Thomson also seems to have abandoned hope in the future regeneration of Christianity through another ‘anointed’ savior. He now preferred to believe that ‘while creeds and systems [...] languish and die away’, what endures ‘throughout the centuries and millenniums’ is the spiritual force of poets, saints and other great men, who are ‘ever ready in battle array to repel or to assault’ the evils of a disenchanting age.⁶⁰

In fact, as far as Thomson’s contemporary scene is concerned, his writings suggest that it is the ‘Poets’, more than any other force, who are capable of offering a moral and spiritual alternative to the faltering Christianity of his day, which is evident in how often he turns to poetry for a possible solution to nineteenth-century problems. Prime examples of this are his 1861 poem ‘Shelley’, and the earlier poem ‘The Doom of a City’ (1857), as well as the essay ‘Per Contra: The Poet, High Art, Genius’ (1865). In ‘Shelley’,⁶¹ as in ‘Open Secret Societies’, there is no mention of the possibility of a Christian revival, but Thomson’s imagination is evidently still dependent on a Christian worldview. The poem begins with a vision of Raphael, surrounded by a host of angels, mourning the deteriorating state of Christendom.

⁶⁰ *EP*, pp. 197, 205.

⁶¹ *Poetical Works*, II, pp. 244-258.

According to the archangel, 'the Churches are polluted' with 'old errors' that are being exploited by those in power 'to stifle Freedom'. An obvious symptom of this, he declares, is how religion's original 'laws [...] of justice' are being violated, serving as 'silken meshes for the great / But iron nets to hold the poor and mean'. But what is most detrimental about the 'false[ness]' of 'the priests', and the 'impur[ity]' of 'the shrines' is that 'mankind in God Himself all faith have lost', and 'would live henceforth without any law' (246-7). Raphael finally poses a question that demonstrates the Victorian mind in search of a religious saviour:

Who will go down amidst these desolations
Of fire and blood and lunacies and woe,
To chant aloud to all the wildered nations
Those heavenly truths no earth can overthrow,
The changeless truths Eternal? Who will go
To preach the Gospel of our Lord above,
Chanting perpetually the law of Love? (247)

The answer to this comes from a poet, and this poet is Shelley, who is portrayed as a 'fervent Seraph' whose breath is of 'the heavenly air / Of perfect holiness and love and truth'. He volunteers to be God's messenger, and is sent down to earth disguised in 'mortal flesh'. The poem then dramatizes the achievements of Shelley, which, in effect, turns into a poetic treatise on the divine potential of poetry to assume religion's role in addressing the spiritual and social ills of the time. True poets, we learn, are 'a witness of the one true Lord of all / Amidst a world gone mad with sin and crime'. They are 'a voice of right amidst a world's foul wrong / A voice of hope amidst a world's despair', giving assurances of a triumphant future, and a blessed afterlife (248-50). Their 'Song' is driven by one aim: 'to teach' men, not the God of established religion, but 'the true God, Whose reign / Is infinite love for all things that exist' (255), making 'the World a Poem, and Earth a Paradise' (251). Such spiritual guidance naturally translates into social and political reform, as this kind of poetry strives not only to cure men of 'their greed for dross', 'their pride and fawning in the palaces', and 'their solemn church-attending worldliness', but also to bring together 'the tyrant and the slave', charging them to recognize 'their common brotherhood' (254-5). In this sense, Thomson was obviously seeking to reaffirm the religious, social and political role that Shelley had set out for the artist in 'A Defence of Poetry' (1821), an essay that was never far from Thomson's mind when

formulating his poetic theory, and from which he actually quotes a line in a footnote to the poem.⁶² Shelley had stated thus:

Poets [...] are not only the authors of language and of music, of the dance, and architecture, and statuary, and painting: they are the institutors of laws, and the founders of civil society, and the inventors of the arts of life, and the teachers, who draw into a certain propinquity with the beautiful and the true that partial apprehension of the agencies of the invisible world which is called religion.⁶³

Indeed, such a view of the cultural centrality of the poetic vocation also finds expression in Thomson's earlier poem 'The Doom of a City' (1857).⁶⁴ In this poem, and similar to the one on Shelley, the central figure is also a poet who is singled out to be God's messenger to an England in moral and spiritual decline, delivering a message that encompasses all aspects of life, the social, the civil, the economic, the political, and, not the least, the religious. Addressing England as the 'Queen of the Sea', Thomson bemoans the decaying state of Christianity, which seems a body without spirit: 'Thy Church has long been becoming the Fossil of a Faith; / The Form of dry bones thou hast, but where are the blood and breath?'. Although the Church 'swarest' that 'The King is but sick, not dead', referring of course to a metaphorical Jesus, Thomson declares that he cannot detect 'the signs of His life' anywhere around him: this is especially true in relation to the country's 'Priesthood', who 'vouchsafe in His name to write, pretend by His will to act', but are, in fact, nothing more than 'scribes' and 'placemen' for the Monarchy (184-6). As in 'Suggested by Matthew Arnold', however, 'The Doom' shows that, in 1857, Thomson was still not immune to the belief that Christianity 'lives and shall for ever reign', through a future regeneration of its essential teachings. His scepticism here is merely toward a nation that, according to him, hypocritically makes such a proclamation while, in practice, it 'spurnest the laws most sacred of all' that have been ordained by this religion (187).

Thomson namely argues that 'should Christ come now from Heaven to reap the harvest sown' by His sacrifice, He would find that, among the 'myriads who claim in Him a share', there are 'scarcely enough' true Christians to save their world from

⁶² See p. 257 in *Poetical Works*, II, and also see pp. 207, 228 in *EP*, and pp. 279, 330-32 in *Biographical and Critical Studies* (hereafter abbreviated as *BCS*), for examples of how Thomson draws on Shelley's essay when formulating his own poetic theory.

⁶³ 'A Defence of Poetry', in *Essay, Letters from Abroad, Translations and Fragments*, ed. by Mary Shelley, 2 vols (London: Edward Moxon, 1840), I, pp. 1-57 (pp. 6-7).

⁶⁴ *Poetical Works*, II, pp. 109-190.

an impending doom (188). It is a world, he explains, whose ‘chief social laws seem strictly framed to secure / That one be corrupting rich, another bitterly poor, / And another just starving to death’ (184). Their streets are consequently afflicted ‘with an holocaust of woes, sins, lusts and blasphemies’, among which are the ‘thousands of harlots’ who are not more accountable than ‘those who made them first and who keep them harlots yet’ (185-6). In terms of the country’s trade, it is ‘fretted by gambling greed’, ‘slimed by creeping fraud’, ‘trading in lies and in human bodies and souls’ (184-6, 189). On a similar note, the country’s political status depends on justifying the rightfulness of its imperialism, by priding itself for its inherent strength, wisdom, goodness and freedom, while depreciating all other nations: ‘This one is blind, this deaf, and the other is but a mute; / This one is fair indeed, but drunken and dissolute; / [...] This one is proud and great, but a heathen in her soul [...], etc.’ (183). A self-centred philosophy also dominates the empire’s national politics, as ‘rulers’ and politicians ‘rule for the good of themselves alone’, ‘with scarcely one noble aim’, rendering themselves ‘infidels to pure Right, / Deaf to the holy voice of the Conscience of the World’ (189, 185).

But not all are deaf to the World’s transcendent voice, and this is where the role of the poet in ‘The Doom’ gains legitimacy. That the poem’s narrator is indeed depicted as ‘a Carlylean poet-prophet’, as William Schaefer has suggested,⁶⁵ is evident from the fact that he qualifies for both Carlyle’s and Thomson’s definition of a poet: he is endowed with heightened spiritual perceptions that enable him to discern the divine musicality underlying the phenomenal world. Take the following lines, for instance, in which the speaker, through his ‘pure celestial ears’, is able to perceive the heavenly ‘Chorus’ forever reverberating within the movements of the planets:

The stars for ever sweep through space, surrounding
 Their sun-kings and God's central hidden Throne
 With splendour and deep music far-resounding,
 Though heard by pure celestial ears alone:
 Their music chants His lofty praise for ever,
 Their splendours burn to Him the Light Divine;
 In their grand uneager motions pausing never,
 They live and sing and shine. (176)

It is one of the thematic concerns of ‘The Doom’ to suggest that this privileged insight into the metaphysical harmonics of the universe sets poets apart from society,

⁶⁵ *Beyond “The City”*, p. 44.

and invests them with the religious and cultural authority to redeem men from corruption and moral degradation. This is conveyed by means of Romantic allegory, where the poem's main persona (Thomson's alter ego) is portrayed as a solitary figure, who, driven by such transcendent intuitions, flees his native urban setting, a city very much reminiscent of Victorian London.⁶⁶ He embarks on a long boat journey, surviving a violent storm, and a horrific encounter with a sea-monster, after which he is finally granted the proverbial Romantic revelation that leaves him with the obligation to deliver a message to his fellow city-dwellers. It is telling that the poem's narrator depicts the moment of revelation as being converted into musical instrument, a symbol of his poetic initiation:

That Spirit which will never be withstood
Came down and shook and seized and lifted me, —
As men uplift a passive instrument
Through which to breathe whatever fits their mood,
Stately triumphal march or war-note dread,
Anthem, gay dance, or requiem for the dead;
And through my lips with irrepressible might
Poured forth its own stern language on the night. (182)

The revelation involves an apocalyptic vision of the destruction of a city similar to the one he had left behind, and the message is a simple warning: 'Repent, reform or perish' (184). As Schaefer notes, the warning 'to repent' is Thomson's own message to his present-day England, and is significant in how it reveals Thomson's recourse to Christian notions in his early social criticism.⁶⁷ But more than that, given the poem's allegorical representation of the quest for poetic identity, the message has a clear implication about Thomson's poetic theory. It symbolizes poetry's claim to a didactic and moral authority that is predicated on its divine origin. After all, the city-dwellers in the poem are expected to heed the poet-persona only because the message he had 'poured forth' came from an overwhelming divine 'Spirit' that had transformed him into a mere 'instrument' of song, an event made possible by his own intuitive

⁶⁶ For commentaries on how 'The Doom of a City' is a precursor of Thomson's representation of London in *The City of Dreadful Night*, see Philip Tew, 'James Thomson's London: Beyond the Apocalyptic Vision of the City', in *A Mighty Mass of Brick and Smoke: Victorian and Edwardian Representations of London*, ed. by Lawrence Phillips (New York: Rodopi, 2007), pp. 107-30 (pp. 114-5); Valeria Tinkler-Villani, 'Ruins of an Unremembered Past': Poetic Strategies in James Thomson's *The City of Dreadful Night*', in *Babylon Or New Jerusalem?: Perceptions of the City in Literature*, ed. by Valeria Tinkler-Villani (New York: Rodopi, 2005), pp. 125-34 (pp. 125, 131-2); and William B. Thesing, *The London Muse: Poetic Responses to the City* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1982), pp. 136-41.

⁶⁷ *Beyond "The City"*, p. 45.

attunement to the spiritual rhythms of the universe. Thomson seems to be arguing that, in a time when Christianity was losing its hold on English cultural and religious life, it is the responsibility and rightful place of poetry to act as a spiritual mediator between God and the rest of mankind.

With regard to Thomson's essay 'Per Contra', it similarly assigns an exalted religious role for the poet, but his language here appears less Christian and more pantheistic. It is, in fact, a companion piece to his satirical essay 'Bumble, Bumbledom, Bumbleism' (1865),⁶⁸ where he draws upon Matthew Arnold's conception of the middle class as 'Philistine' to offer his own critique of British public life. His critique here differs from those found in the previous two poems in that it refrains from cataloguing the various symptoms of the country's social, economic, and political problems, focusing instead on what he believes to be the temperamental defects of English mainstream culture, particularly in relation to the powerful middle class. Although he agrees with Arnold's characterisation of its members as 'humdrum people, slaves to routine, enemies to light, stupid and oppressive, but at the same time very strong', Thomson believes that, in England, they are not so dignified as to procure the German term 'Philistine'. He particularly argues that, unlike its continental counterpart who commit 'atrocities' of oppression against the 'children of light', the English middle class 'is not terrible, nor malignant, nor sanguinary; it is simply a very great bother and bore', hence his labelling of it with the awkward term 'Bumble', which equally stands for the head of a typical Victorian family of that class.⁶⁹ The greatest vice of Bumble, we are told, is his prude conventionalism, his

⁶⁸ On the possible connection between Thomson's Bumble and the beadle in Dickens's *Oliver Twist*, William Schaeffer writes:

The *O.E.D* reveals that Dickens' Mr. Bumble had already been adopted into common usage by the time Thomson wrote this essay. As early as 1856 in the *Saturday Review* there are references to "collective Bumbledom of the West-minster" and to the "great Bumble mind." Similarly, the *Spectator* (April 22, 1865) had used the phrase, "the true spirit of parish Bumbledom."

Citing the following section from Thomson's essay, moreover, Richard Pawley argues that 'unlike Dickens' Bumble of a decade before, Thomson's is not hypocritical':

Let no one accuse Bumble of conscious insincerity; dissimulation he detests [...] When he seems to the irreverent observer to be playing the hypocrite in concert with his brother Bumbles, be assured that he is doing what he is doing with the very best intentions, and the saintliest anxiety for the continuation of the stability and prosperity of that Bumbledom which he honestly loves and venerates.

See Schaeffer (ed.), *The Speedy Extinction of Evil and Misery*, p. 114; and Richard Pawley, *Secret City: The Emotional Life of Victorian Poet James Thomson (B. V.)* (Oxford: University Press of America, 2001), p. 170.

⁶⁹ Richard Pawley, *Secret City*, p. 170.

intolerance and aversion to new ideas, which become culturally crippling because he has the power to control ‘public opinion’:

Bumble is not malignant [...] but one thing he does hate [...]: this thing is a new idea, or even the semblance of a new idea such as a novel opinion [...] Every new idea is a reproach and insult cast upon our old doctrines and institutions.

Thomson’s main contention is that Bumble is able to exert an oppressive hold over popular opinion because he financially controls the public-intellectual market: he ‘can afford to buy the journals in thousands and tens of thousands’, and journalists (who are mostly ‘born Bumbles’) know that they ‘depend for their livelihood upon the favour of their stronger brother Bumbles’. This means that ‘woe be to any one who shall have the audacity to shock his cherished, his sacred convictions, on any social or moral or religious matter’:

If the English paper or book ventures beyond the bounds of Bumbledom’s restrictions in religion or morals, it is effectually suppressed by Bumble, – he won’t buy it, however brilliant and thoughtful and honest it may be.⁷⁰

For Bumble, as Thomson asserts in another essay, ‘the naked beauty is obscene and the naked truth is blasphemous’.⁷¹

This brings me to Thomson’s recommendation of the best way to cure Bumble, which, as William Schaefer notes, depends on ‘shock treatment, waking him from his lethargy by bluntly revealing truth and beauty as objects of veneration’, a role that ‘not surprisingly, fell to the poet’.⁷² In his ‘Per Contra: The Poet, High Art, Genius’, Thomson identifies ‘Poets’ as ‘the antithesis to Bumble’, ‘the men of new ideas, the men always in advance of their age’, and, in the same manner of ‘The Doom’ and ‘Shelley’, he ascribes religious and spiritual significance to the progressive role given them in this essay. This is evident in how he defines the key terms of the essay’s title, at first describing ‘the Poet’ as ‘the Priest of Beauty in general, whatever material he consecrates to its service’. ‘High Art’ is, then, said to be ‘the loftiest Expression of the Beautiful, in which more or less latent are involved the Good and the True’. But what infuses these with spiritual meanings is his definition of

⁷⁰ *EP*, ‘Bumble, Bumbledom, Bumbleism’, pp. 105-6, 108, 113-4, 116-7.

⁷¹ See ‘The Swinburne Contraversy’ (1866), pp. 104, in *Satires and Profanities*, hereafter abbreviated as *SP*.

⁷² *Beyond “The City”*, p. 93-4.

‘Genius’ as ‘the divine (never forget the divine) Inspiration of the Poet and Spirit of High Art’, which, again, gives the poet access to transcendental knowledge that is kept hidden from others. This is not to mention the highly spiritualised language Thomson employs when elaborating on his argument that the ultimate function of poetry is to offer its student ‘some breath of a really divine afflatus’. Explaining what he means by ‘divine afflatus’, he writes:

Something that will rock the walls and rend the foundations of his old prison-house of habit as with an earthquake, something that will daze and blind his earthly vision as with a great light from Heaven, something that will melt and consume away his old commonplace existence with the fervent heat of enthusiasm!⁷³

One of the subtexts of ‘Per Contra’, however, is that such spiritual ecstasy has become much less feasible as a result of the spiritual malaise of modern age, whose distinctive feature is its ‘abjectness under the yoke’ of the ‘inert commonplace and monotonous routine’. Thomson believes that this monotony and disenchantment has especially affected the ‘intellectual and moral life’ of the nation,⁷⁴ including its literary production, as indicated in a later essay: ‘The condition of our literature in these days is disgraceful to a nation of men: Bumble has drugged all its higher powers, and only the rudest shocks can arouse them from their torpor’.⁷⁵ ‘Per Contra’ suggests, therefore, that, before poetry and art can be rehabilitated to their natural functions of spiritually inspiring their ‘hearers or spectators to ecstasy’,⁷⁶ it is the responsibility of poets to revive nineteenth-century society from its moral inertia, by rudely shocking its sensibilities with the boldest expression of ‘the Good and the True’.

2.2. ‘Mysticism’ in Thomson’s Early Poetic Theory

Having touched upon some principal aspects of Thomson’s poetic theory, and how it involved a belief in the religious responsibilities of the poet amidst the ideological crisis created by Christianity’s decline, it is now time to consider how his writings stand as a representative example of the Victorians’ aesthetic preoccupation with mysticism. Indeed, in a way that is probably comparable only to Carlyle’s writings, Thomson’s work displays a consistent interest in mysticism that virtually spans his

⁷³ *EP*, ‘Per Contra’, pp. 140, 125, 127.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, ‘Bumble, Bumbledom, Bumbleism’, pp. 104, 108.

⁷⁵ *SP*, ‘The Swinburne Contraversy’ (1866), pp. 100-101.

⁷⁶ *EP*, ‘Per Contra’, pp. 127.

entire career. In the earlier part of his career, by which I mean the period up to the mid-1860s, his conception of the term, as it will be shown, was clearly in the Romantic sense of a divine state of consciousness that is deeply rooted in aesthetic and poetic experience, the same conception that is found in the various examples cited in the previous chapter from Carlyle, Mill, Swinburne, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and others. As I have discussed there, and as Grace Jantzen would have it, such a definition was not without a power agenda: I have worked to establish that this was ideologically oriented toward the general cause of advancing religious belief, and its cultural sphere of influence, as well as the more immediate objective of asserting the spiritual function of poetry in a modern secular setting. Both objectives are, of course, better understood in relation to the recurrent nineteenth-century objection that scientific rationalism – while rightly undermining traditional religion – offers an incomplete approach to reality, because its modes of discovering truth fail to appeal to the whole of man’s faculties, the imaginative (or emotional), in addition to the rational. The following discussion on Thomson will, therefore, serve to further illustrate my previous argument, that mysticism, as a modernist (Romantic) category, is inherited to a large degree from the Victorian discourse on poetry, particularly that which reflected the spiritual concerns of a post-Christian perspective. The hope, however, is that by exploring this element in the work of a poet-critic significant in his own right, the discussion will also offer a useful addition to Thomson scholarship, helping to challenge some longstanding misconceptions about him while casting more light on the less acknowledged aspects of his thought and character.

That being said, it may be well to point out at the outset that Thomson’s conceptualisations of mysticism frequently occur in tandem with his attempt to negotiate a view of Shelley as a ‘quintessential poet’.⁷⁷ One of his earliest critical works that conflates the mystical with the poetic, for instance, is his essay ‘Shelley’ (1860), written primarily in defence of Shelley’s poetry, but also offering an instructive articulation of Thomson’s poetic credo. For the most part, the essay is a medley of Romantic notions drawn from Wordsworth, Coleridge, Carlyle, Emerson and Shelley, where poetry is celebrated throughout as an instrument of direct contact with an ultimate divine principle. ‘The essence of poetry’, Thomson states, ‘is communication with the Infinite and the Eternal’, so that ‘to be strongly inclined to

⁷⁷ *BCS*, ‘Shelley’, p. 281.

such communication is to be gifted with the first requisite for a poet'. In a deferential nod to Plato, moreover, he identifies 'inspiration' as the 'essential law of poetic creation', citing relevant lines from Shelley's translation of the *Ion*, to highlight the spiritual nature of aesthetic creativity: 'a poet', the translation reads, 'is, indeed, a thing ethereally light, winged, and sacred; nor can he compose anything worth calling poetry until he becomes inspired'. And again: '[poets] do not attain to excellence through the rules of any art; but they utter their beautiful melodies of verse in a state of inspiration, and, as it were, *possessed* by a spirit not their own'. Indeed, placing this Platonic concept of poetic inspiration at the 'climax' or 'threshold' of critical inquiry,⁷⁸ Thomson invokes it here as the highest standard by which to judge any given poet – in this case, Shelley.

But by what practical means, one would ask, could a critic judge whether or not a poem was 'poetically inspired'? Thomson argues that it is through what had become known in literary-critical jargon as 'mysticism', as it is indicated in the following excerpt, where he raises the question of whether or not Shelley is entitled 'to the epithet *inspired*', the answer to which involves his assertion of the definitive place of mysticism in poetic inspiration:

Is he entitled, in a high sense, to be called *inspired*? That he was a singer who sang songs beautiful, wise, and pure may be affirmed of many a poet, though of no two with the same emphasis. What is it, then, which differentiates him from the second-class poets, and exalts him to sit with Isaiah and Dante, as one of the small choir of chief signers who are called transcendent? It is that of which I but now spoke; it is that of which he is so often accused under the name of mysticism.

The lines here suggest that there are two types of poetry, the *inspired* and the *uninspired*, and while the latter has much merit, it is considered 'second-class' to the former. For Thomson, moreover, there is no greater measure of a poet's superiority than his/her mysticism, because mysticism is an indicator of poetic inspiration. Of course what Shelley was being consistently accused of 'under the name of mysticism' is the intentional use of unintelligible and obscure language. But Thomson argues in this essay (and elsewhere) that, in this case, any perceived vagueness or unintelligibility indicates a failing on the part of the critics, not the poet: that is, that they lack the transcendental intuitions necessary to comprehend a poet of the first

⁷⁸ *BCS*, pp. 273-4, 278-9.

order, one whose spiritual insights lie in the realm of the mysterious, beyond the rational boundaries of language. For that reason, Thomson contends that ‘the accusations of mysticism but ignorantly affirm that [Shelley] was most intensely and purely a poet’.⁷⁹

This last point is an important one that I shall return to in more detail later in this chapter, when I come to discuss Thomson’s part in the Victorian effort to reconstruct mysticism from a term indicating a negative obscurity into a positive marker of ineffability, and how such a redefinition attempts to overthrow the epistemological sufficiency of autonomous rationalism. As far as Thomson’s early poetic theory is concerned, however, the key points to be emphasized here are two. The first is his insistence on the conceptual link between mysticism and poetic inspiration, and therefrom arises the essay’s principal claim to theoretical significance, being otherwise largely eclectic. That is, it may be fairly said that the essay’s main contribution to Victorian formulations of poetic theory is how it frames its definition and defence of mysticism – an undertaking for which Thomson was clearly indebted to Carlyle – in an argument for a Shelleyan brand of Platonic inspiration. This, as we shall see, would remain the one unwavering feature of Thomson’s poetic theory, even through his final years. Secondly, unlike his later materialist, anti-spiritual interpretation of the term, a belief in spiritual transcendence through a divine source stands at the centre of Thomson’s understanding of mysticism at this stage of his career, which is exemplified in the embedded supernaturalism of the essay’s following description of mystical poetry:

The experience contained in it has been spiritually transmuted from lead into gold. [...] It perceives always the profound identity underlying all surface differences. [...] It is unadulterated with worldly wisdom, deference to prevailing opinions, mere talent or cleverness. [...] It is most philosophic when most enthusiastic, the clearest light of its wisdom being shed from the keenest fire of its love. [...] It is ever-fresh wonder at the infinite mystery, ever-young faith in the eternal soul. Whatever be its mood, we feel that it is not self-possessed but God-possessed; whether the God came down serene and stately as Jove, when, a swan, he wooed Leda; or with overwhelming might insupportably burning, as when he consumed Semele.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ *BCS*, pp. 273, 278-9.

⁸⁰ *BCS*, pp. 278-80.

In addition to 'Shelley', two other essays in which Thomson recognizes Shelley as a mystic poet are 'Open Secret Societies' and 'Sympathy', both written in 1865, and both similarly presenting a valuable contribution to the Victorian dialogue on the relationship between poetry and mysticism. In 'Open Secret Societies', Thomson charts this relationship in terms that give supremacy to mysticism, but in which mysticism and poetry depend on each other for their definitions. As mentioned earlier, the Open Secret Society of the Mystics comprises those who have become initiated, to the highest degree, into all the other four societies discussed in the essay, those of the Heroes, the Saints, the Philosophers, and the Poets. What this means in the context of the present discussion is that Thomson believed that while not every Poet is a Mystic, every Mystic must be a Poet: put otherwise, to be a fully-initiated Mystic, one must be a fully-initiated Poet, though the reverse is not true. However – and this is an important point – Thomson also acknowledges that the 'divisions and subdivisions' of these societies are, in fact, more complicated and not as neat as one might assume, so that a member of a given society 'while belonging supremely to one, belongs in lower degrees to many of them, for every point in the circle of his nature touches a point in the circle of some other nature'. That being the case, the essay suggests that the point of contact between Poets and Mystics is the phenomena of poetic inspiration, which is essentially a mystical experience, as Thomson's essay on Shelley had previously indicated; this means that mysticism, as an experience, is something that the Poet may have temporary access to, without necessarily becoming a thorough Mystic. Although the essay uses the term 'interior illumination', or 'mysterious trance',⁸¹ instead of 'inspiration', Thomson's description of the Society of the Poets here – cited at length earlier in this chapter⁸² – certainly reiterates the same views that had been expressed in relation to the 'inspired' poets of his Shelley essay, likewise differentiating them from what he had called the 'uninspired poetasters'.⁸³ Unlike the poetasters, referred to here as the 'uninitiate', who, at best, produce beautiful and wise utterances in skilful rhyme and meter, the 'genuine bards' of this Society possess a transcendent sense of sight and hearing that enables them to

⁸¹ *EP*, pp. 197, 206-7.

⁸² See pp. 13-4.

⁸³ *BCS*, p. 279.

perceive the spiritual homogeneity underlying all things and beings, great or small, that make up ‘the music and splendour of infinity’.⁸⁴

Another principal point to recognize with regard to the relationship drawn in this essay between poetry and mysticism is the idea that fully-initiated Mystics are considered the most exalted Poets, seeing how Thomson classifies them as ‘Poets of Poets’. This further reveals the commanding place he assigns to mysticism in the definition of poetry: not only is it crucial for Poets to temporarily experience the supernatural ‘entrancements’ of Mystics in order to produce genuine poetry, but those of them who have become complete Mystics are the ones who have attained to the highest ideals and standards of poetry.⁸⁵ The same notion is also found in Thomson’s Shelley essay, where after having declared that the mystical element is ‘displayed in the works of Shelley more gloriously than those of any other poet in our language’, he had named Shelley ‘the poet of poets’, and insisted that he must be studied ‘for quintessential poetry’.⁸⁶ All of this indicates how Thomson seems to have held Mysticism and Mystics to be the archetypes of Poetry and the Poet. As for Thomson’s wish to construct an image of Shelley as a mystic poet in ‘Open Secret Societies’, it is evident in the fact that Shelley features as a prime example in his discussion of the secret ‘fraternities’ of both the Poets and the Mystics: in the former, for his ‘Defence of Poetry’; and, in the latter, for his *Epipsychidion*.⁸⁷

It should be noted that, in asserting the comprehensive virtues of the Open Secret Society of the Mystics, Thomson refers to its members as ‘the very flower and crown’ of the best and noblest in mankind, an expression that reappears verbatim in his essay ‘Sympathy’, also in the context of discussing poets and mystics. In the case of this essay, Thomson’s veneration for these figures rests upon Shelley’s concept of ‘sympathy’, which features as an aesthetic, moral, and spiritual principal in his

⁸⁴ *EP*, pp. 205-7.

⁸⁵ *EP*, pp. 207, 205.

⁸⁶ *BCS*, pp. 280-81.

⁸⁷ *EP*, pp. 207, 201. See also how the following passage (*Poetical Works*, II, p. 250-1) from Thomson’s poem ‘Shelley’ (1861) suggests that his poetry is informed by what ‘Open Secret Societies’ would later declare as the Mystic’s all-inclusive virtues ‘of heroism, purity, wisdom, beauty, and infinite love’ (*EP*, pp. 211), showing that Thomson had entertained a notion of what constituted a mystic, as early as 1861, and that Shelley was judged to fit the criteria:

All powers and virtues that ennoble men
The hero’s courage and the martyr’s truth,
The saint’s white purity, the prophet’s ken,
The high unworldliness of ardent youth,
The poet’s rapture, the apostle’s ruth,
Informed the Song; whose theme all themes above
Was still the sole supremacy of Love.

‘Defence of Poetry’. Shelley had stated there that the imaginative faculty is ‘the organ of the moral nature of man’, because it is the seat of one’s capacity for ‘sympathy’, what he defined as ‘a going out of our own nature and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action or person, not our own’. Poetry, Shelley had consequently argued, is one of the vital avenues for the moral elevation of society, not due to any notion of its value for didactic moralism, but on the grounds of his belief that aesthetic experience – both poetic creation and appreciation – is a supreme exercise in sympathy; in this sense, poetry is effective in how it constantly ‘awakens’ and ‘enlarges the circumference of the imagination’, itself ‘the great instrument of moral good’. To Shelley, this was possible through the spiritually transformative effects of sympathy: ‘Poetry [...] transmutes all that it touches, and every form moving within the radiance of its presence is changed by wondrous sympathy to an incarnation of the spirit which it breathes’.⁸⁸

In the hands of Thomson, these notions become informed by the Carlylean heroicizing impulse, as the capacity for imaginative sympathy comes to be identified as a true mark of greatness. Thomson argues that ‘so rare and priceless is genuine sympathy’ that we should deem those who possess it ‘so much purer and higher’ than the rest of mankind. Unsurprisingly, poets and mystics are among those celebrated by Thomson in the catalogue of heroic-types that he presents in the essay:

The uncommon sentimentalists, the men and women supremely sympathetic, are the very flower and crown of our race; they are the poets who are more than great wits, the heroes who are greater than conquerors, the mystics who are wiser than sages, the saints who are purer than theologians, the martyrs more sublime than any church or creed; they are Pascal and Leighton, Joan of Arc and Charlotte Corday, Shelley and Jesus.⁸⁹

It is unclear why the mystics are placed here at the same rank as the other great figures, but it is likely that ‘Sympathy’ was written prior to ‘Open Secret Societies’, before Thomson had decided to set them apart, above the rest. The unquestionable fact remains, however, that Thomson believed that the poetic and mystical faculties shared the same locus, and were cultivated by the same creative principle, and that these were profoundly spiritual in nature.

⁸⁸ Shelley, ‘A Defence of Poetry’, pp. 16-7, 51.

⁸⁹ *EP*, pp. 228, 236-7.

Yet another essay of Thomson's that takes note of Shelley's mysticism is 'The Poems of William Blake' (1864), which actually devotes the most substantial part of its discussion to surveying nineteenth-century poets according to their manifestation of 'this spirit of mysticism', indicating how mysticism constituted a valid criterion of judgment in Thomson's art criticism. His conclusion is that 'consummate singer as he was', 'Shelley possessed, or rather was possessed by, this [spirit] to the uttermost', ranking him above Wordsworth, Coleridge, Tennyson and the Brownings, in terms of the genuineness and degree of their mysticism.⁹⁰ As the title of the essay suggests, however, this work is chiefly an investigation of Blake's poetry, of which a full appreciation is not possible, so Thomson argues, without taking account of its mystical subject matter. As a side note, it should be pointed out that part of the essay's achievement, as a nineteenth-century piece of literary criticism, lies in the fact that it was published in 1864, 'anticipating even Swinburne's famous early study' of Blake,⁹¹ something that has been duly acknowledged by Blake critics.⁹² I argue here that another part of its historical significance is related to how well the essay demonstrates the place of mysticism, as a construct, in Victorian conceptualizations of 'poetry', including how mysticism bolstered the kind of apologetics needed to safeguard poetry from the encroaching effects of positivist materialism.

Much like Thomson's essay 'Shelley', the concepts of mysticism and poetic inspiration are inexorably linked in 'The Poems of Blake', and both are similarly understood to involve a direct experiential awareness of an ultimate divine reality. The only difference in this essay is that Thomson conceives such an experience in terms of a religious conversion in which the old self leaves behind a so-called 'adult' religious consciousness and returns to a primal or 'childlike' state of spiritual purity. Bearing in mind that the adult-child distinction employed in the essay is better understood as a continuum rather than a clear dichotomy,⁹³ the traits that Thomson associates with 'adult' religion are those of virtue, intellectualism, ritualism and melancholy, whereas

⁹⁰ *BCS*, p. 261, 264.

⁹¹ William Schaefer, ed., 'Introduction and Notes', in *The Speedy Extinction of Evil and Misery* (Cambridge University Press: London, 1967), (p. 10). Gurdit Singh, *The Vision of James Thomson*, p. 126.

⁹² For William B. Yeats, and Edwin J. Ellis, for instance, the essay made Thomson 'one of the century's most important Blake commentators'; Harold Bloom, ed., *William Blake: Bloom's Classic Critical Views*, ed. by Alexis Harley (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2008), p. 104.

⁹³ Thomson believed, for example, that Emanuel Swedenborg's 'adult-like' engagement with the dialectics of scholastic theology detracted from the authenticity of his mysticism, hampering its childish simplicity and spontaneity; but he considered him a mystic nonetheless. See pp. 252-3 in *BCS*.

a ‘childlike’ religiosity is taken to have a strong connection with innocence, intuitiveness, joyfulness and purity; and it is the youthful traits that Thomson deems to be closest to the spirit of mysticism. ‘Blake was supremely a mystic’, he declares, designating Blake’s mature years, ‘when he was withdrawn from common life into mysticism’, as ‘his second childhood and boyhood and youth’, a description that conveys Thomson’s belief that an ‘infantine’ innocence and simplicity are characteristic features of mysticism. This is confirmed in the final part of his lengthy definition of the term in the essay:

Its supreme tendency is to remain or to become again childlike, its supreme aspiration is not virtue, but innocence or guilelessness: so that we may say with truth of those whom it possesses, that the longer they live the younger they grow, as if “passing out to God by the gate of birth, not death”.⁹⁴

This is why, throughout the essay, the term ‘mysticism’ is either coupled or interchanged with the word ‘simplicity’: the ‘spirit of mysticism’ that is the subject of the lines above, for example, is later described twice as ‘this mystical simplicity’, and six times merely as ‘this simplicity’.⁹⁵

As far as the principle of poetic inspiration is concerned, Thomson refers to it in the essay as ‘the breathing of song’, by which he makes the familiar allusion to the Latin root of *inspiration* – *inspiratio* (noun) from *inspirare* (verb) – which literally means ‘breathing in’, or ‘the breath of God’.⁹⁶ In fact, Thomson develops this allusion into an elaborate metaphor of ‘breathing’ in a discussion that is couched in the same terminology of religious conversion that governs the essay’s treatment of mysticism – with the same child-adult opposition for its guiding trope. He particularly draws on James Garth Wilkinson’s distinction between a child’s and an adult’s physiological act of breathing in an attempt to analogically differentiate between inspired and uninspired poetry. In *The Human Body and Its Connection with Man* (1851), Wilkinson had maintained that an adult can never ‘breathe like a child’ because ‘adult breath’ is burdened by ‘a peopling of multitudinous thoughts, [...] hardness and troubles, as does not cede to the attempt to act the infantine even for a moment’. Framing his analogy along these lines, Thomson suggests that true poetic inspiration

⁹⁴ *BCS*, pp. 252-3, 260, 263.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 262-7.

⁹⁶ *Oxford Dictionary of English*, ed. by Angus Stevenson and others, 3rd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998; 2003; 2005; 2010), p. 905.

and creation – or ‘the breathing of song’ – can only occur when the poetic-self has spiritually metamorphosed back into its infantine state of religious purity, whose musical ‘lisp’ can not be imitated by any adult consciousness that has not undergone such a transformation:

What is true of common breathing, is true more conspicuously of breathing idealised and harmonised, of the breathing of song in which psychical have superseded the physical rhythms. The adult cannot sing like a child; but Blake in these Songs [*Songs of Innocence and Experience*] does so: he did not *act* the infantine, for he *was* infantine, by a regeneration as real while as mysterious as ever purest saint experienced in the religious life.⁹⁷

In other words, Thomson is arguing that a ‘mysterious’ regeneration makes up a necessary part of the poetic creative process, placing poetic inspiration on a par with the spiritual experiences of saints.

It hardly bears noting that Thomson’s use of the word ‘mysterious’ in the lines just quoted is intended to signal a connection with mystical phenomena, which is confirmed in how he immediately goes to compare the mysticism of Blake with that of the eighteenth-century Swedish scientist, philosopher and theologian, Emanuel Swedenborg, the latter of whose reputation was widely being established as a mystic-saint.⁹⁸ According to Thomson, the evidence for Blake’s and Swedenborg’s mysticism is found in the autobiographical reports of their experiences of the various sights and sounds of the spiritual world, which reinforces his definition of mysticism as a phenomenon related to the possession of visionary powers. For Thomson, then, the poet’s ‘inspiration’ and the saint’s ‘mysticism’ are virtually one and the same, both involving an intense regenerative experience that leads to the awakening of the spiritual senses. But the interesting thing about the comparison offered here is the suggestion that the poet’s mysticism can sometimes surpass that of the religious saint, with Blake being considered more authentically mystical than Swedenborg; Thomson suggests that Blake is more in touch with the mystic’s childlike dependence on

⁹⁷ *BCS*, p. 251-2.

⁹⁸ See Leigh Schmidt, *Restless Souls*, pp. 46-7, for Swedenborg’s rapidly growing reputation as a mystic in the mid-nineteenth century. The period’s most notable commentary on this aspect of Swedenborg is Emerson’s famous lecture ‘Swedenborg; or, the Mystic’, which Thomson had read and was familiar with, citing it in his later essay ‘A Strange Book’ (1879): see Thomson, *BCS*, p. 319; and Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Representative Men: Seven Lectures* (London: John Chapman, 1850), pp. 67-71.

intuitions, as opposed to Swedenborg's serious commitment to intellectual and rational argument:

[Blake] was emphatically a seer, and had the disdain of all seers for the pretensions of gropers and guessers who are blind. Like Swedenborg, he always relates things heard and seen; more purely a mystic than Swedenborg, he does not condescend to dialectics and scholastic divinity.⁹⁹

I cite below Thomson's summation of the mystical quality of Blake's poetry as well as that of the leading poets of the nineteenth-century whom he believed were influenced by Blake.¹⁰⁰ Although the excerpt is long, it is worth its space given that few examples in Thomson's early criticism so effectively capture how his preoccupation with mysticism was essentially an aesthetic preoccupation, one that was motivated toward the Romantic conception of the poet as a mediator of visionary and transcendental knowledge. In this sense, the excerpt also serves as a representative example supporting my general thesis that Victorian poetic theory, especially from the mid-century onwards, displayed an increasing interest in employing or defining such terms as 'mysticism', 'mystics' and 'mystery' as a way of asserting the religious authority of poetry in what was perceived to be a post-Christian world:

The essence of this poetry is mysticism, and the essence of this mysticism is simplicity. [...] It [this mysticism] sees, and is continually rapturous with seeing, everywhere correspondence, kindred, identity, not only in the things and creatures of earth, but in all things and creatures and beings of hell and earth and heaven, up to the one father (or interiorly to the one soul) of all. [...] For it "there is no great and no small;" in the large type of planets and nations, in the minute letters of dewdrops and worms, the same eternal laws are written; and merely as a matter of convenience to the reader is this or that print preferable to the other. And the whole universe being the volume of the Scriptures of the living word of God, this above all is to be heeded, that man should not dwell contented on the lovely language and illustrations, but should live beyond these in the sphere of the realities which they signify. It is passionately and profoundly religious, contemplating and treating every subject religiously, in all its excursions and discursions

⁹⁹ *BCS*, pp. 252-3.

¹⁰⁰ *BCS*, p. 260, 268.

issuing from the soul to return to the soul, alone, from the alone, to the alone.¹⁰¹

As it may be obvious, the basis of this Romantic appropriation of mysticism as a visionary state of consciousness that is deeply rooted in aesthetic and poetic experience is the much-discussed Victorian desire to ‘set[...] up a relationship of essential relatedness between poetry and religion’. The relationship, in this instance, is not the kind that is grounded on that traditionalist ‘servant/master’ paradigm of John Keble’s *Praelectiones* (1832-41), where the religious value of poetry is considered only in terms of its perceived subservience to ‘the Christian cause’: namely, how it should merely aim ‘to make emotionally appealing the intellectually profound doctrines of faith’. Instead, the kind of relationship Thomson is promoting belongs to the same hero-worshipping intellectual culture of Carlyle and company that went beyond viewing poetry as a mere emotional auxiliary for orthodox religion to the notion of the ‘divine agency’ of poets who become themselves the source of a unique divine revelation, capable of imparting new religious truths.¹⁰²

What makes ‘The Poems of Blake’ post-Christian in its adoption of this conception of poetry is Thomson’s apparent agnosticism about the nature of the divine: on the one hand, he contemplates a cosmological structure that is in continuity with the Christian tradition, with its understanding of God as a transcendent being; on the other, he suggests that this could be equally replaced by a pantheistic worldview, where the divine is conceived as the ‘interior’ soul of all. Either way, one thing is for certain, and that is that his belief here in the visionary capacities of poets, and their direct access to divine reality, lends to poetry a religious authority that is valuable in itself, independent of orthodox religion, whose role it could in fact assume, if the latter proved unable to withstand the scientific and intellectual challenges of the time. Although Thomson indicates in the opening of the lines above that his remarks are true of a certain class of poetry (not of poetry per se), one must not forget that his ‘Shelley’ essay had judged this type of poetry to be of ‘the highest’ kind, labelling poets who write in the mystical mode as ‘transcendent’, and those who do not as

¹⁰¹ *BCS*, pp. 261-2.

¹⁰² Cynthia Scheinberg, *Women's Poetry and Religion in Victorian England: Jewish Identity and Christian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 46; and Lawrence J. Starzyk, ‘That Promised Land’ (p. 270). See also pp. 45-8 of the former, and pp. 270-75 of the latter, as well as David DeLaura’s ‘The Future of Poetry’ in *Carlyle and His Contemporaries* (pp. 162-3), for a more detailed account of the difference between the ‘traditionalist’ and Romantic models of the relationship between poetry and religion, as epitomized in the writings of Keble and Carlyle.

‘second-class poets’. This is not to mention what has been pointed out earlier in my discussion of both ‘Shelley’ and ‘Open Secret Societies’: that Thomson assigns archetypal status to mystic-poets (poets who are also full-fledged mystics), naming them ‘Poets of Poets’, hence implying that the more a poet’s work displays elements of mysticism, the closer it is to the quintessential ideals of poetry. The above-quoted passage from ‘The Poems of Blake’ should be read, therefore, not only as Thomson’s characterization of the mystical strand in nineteenth-century poetry, but also as a description of the core properties of genuine poetry. After all, ‘The Poems of Blake’ was written in 1864, after his essay on ‘Shelley’ (1860), and before ‘Open Secret Societies’ (1865), which suggests that it must have contributed to the theoretical continuity between them.

Aside from that, ‘The Poems of Blake’ also demonstrates an important point that has been discussed in the previous chapter: how nineteenth-century arguments for the religious authority of poetry through the Romantic aestheticization of mysticism depended in no small degree on securing mysticism against the onslaught of scientific and materialistic analysis. This involved defining mysticism in a way that excluded all rational modes of perception from its domain, ensuring that it stood separately and independently from the realm of logic, either on an equal or superior footing. By extension, it also meant that the validity of poetic truths could not be tested or measured by any logical means. In ‘The Making of Modern “Mysticism”’, Leigh Schmidt highlights the importance of Wayne Proudfoot’s *Religious Experience* (1985), particularly his chapter on ‘Mysticism’, for an understanding of the origins of this category’s development as an anti-positivist and anti-materialist construct.¹⁰³ Proudfoot traces the roots of modern attempts to ground religion on *intuitive experience* to the first major work of the German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers* (1799), which he argues arose as a Romantic reaction to eighteenth-century criticisms of traditional religious doctrines, and to the Kantian critique of speculative metaphysics. In Proudfoot’s view, Schleiermacher’s ‘program’ rested on an understanding of religion, not as a prescribed set of dogmas, but as an ‘independent’ and ‘autonomous moment in human experience’ taking place only on the affective level of consciousness, an understanding that would develop, by the mid-nineteenth-century, into a powerful

¹⁰³ Schmidt (p. 274).

‘protective strategy that serves apologetic purposes’: it ‘sought to free religious belief and practice from the requirement that they be justified by reference to nonreligious thought or action and to preclude the possibility’ of any ‘conflict with the results of science or any other kind of secular inquiry’.¹⁰⁴

In the case of ‘The Poems of Blake’, this can be observed in Thomson’s differentiation between the visionary senses of mystics and the natural (or normative) senses of the rest of mankind, as well as his recognition of the distinctive integrity of the mystical consciousness, how it is insusceptible to the evaluative judgments of secular arguments:

Blake and Swedenborg and other true mystics (Jesus among them) undoubtedly had senses other than ours; it is as futile for us to argue against the reality of their perceptions as it would be false in us to pretend that our perceptions are the same.¹⁰⁵

Not only is this an attempt to separate the religious from other realms of experience, but it is also a rejection of the epistemic sovereignty of the analytic and rationalist perspective. Such a perspective, Thomson says, would prove ‘futile’ if it were tasked to refute the phenomenological reality of mystical perceptions, as these take place only subjectively in the inner life of experience, and are therefore resistant to external standards of authority. Proudfoot offers a befitting commentary on the kind of discourse to which Thomson’s argument belongs:

It suggests that the religious consciousness can be portrayed as an autonomous way of perceiving the world. As an attitude that is complete in itself, it is independent of and cannot conflict with common sense or the results of scientific inquiry. Some people see the world in religious terms; others regard it in naturalistic terms. These are mutually exclusive perspectives, but they can never come into direct conflict.¹⁰⁶

Indeed, this is why Thomson argues that, unlike the tendency of the natural, material consciousness toward analytic differentiation and categorization, the mystical mode of perception is chiefly characterized by its inclination to see unity and correspondence in the world that it thus stands indifferent to the concepts and principles of the scientific literature: ‘it thus ignores or pays little heed to the countless

¹⁰⁴ Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*, pp. 1-3, 228, xiii, 233. For his chapter on ‘Mysticism’, see pp. 119-154.

¹⁰⁵ *BCS*, p. 253.

¹⁰⁶ *Religious Experience*, p. 172.

complexities and distinctions of our modern civilisation and science, a knowledge of which is generally esteemed the most useful information and most valuable learning'. This belief that the mystical consciousness exists independently of material and rational categories is also why Thomson maintains that Blake's mystical faith had no place for the rational arguments of the natural theology of William Paley or Richard Whately, commonly known as the 'Christian evidences':

As to the "Christian Evidences," as they are termed, of which the mass of good people are so enamoured, in trying to argue themselves and others into a sort of belief in a sort (and such a sort!) of deity, he would have no more dreamed of appealing to them than he would have tried elaborately to argue himself into belief in the existence of the sun. "I feel the warmth, I see the light and see by the light: what do you want to argue about? You may call it sun, moon, comet, star, or Will-o'-the-Wisp, if so it pleases you; all I know and care for is this, that day by day it warms and lights me."¹⁰⁷

For Thomson, Blake's was an experientially-based belief system: just as his belief in the existence of the sun was derived from his sensory experience of its 'warmth' and 'light', so were his religious beliefs derived from his immediate spiritual experience of the divine through his intuitive senses.

An obvious corollary of this separation between the mystical consciousness and the rational one is that each would have its own sphere of influence and utility, something that Thomson apparently had in mind. One might certainly argue that 'The Poems of Blake' aims to make a legitimate case for the value and significance of mysticism as an independent cultural force capable of addressing society's moral and spiritual needs in a way that could not be met by modern science. As evidence of the rising significance and contemporary relevance of the 'spirit of mysticism', Thomson observes how 'in eighty years the influence of this spirit has swelled from the "Songs of Innocence" to the poems of Emerson – a rapid increase of the tide in literature'. Beyond Emerson and the major English poets of the century, moreover, he adds that 'other signs of its [mysticism's] increase meet us everywhere in the best books of verse published during the last few years', one of which indicates that 'perchance the increase has been even more rapid than the most of us have opportunity to learn'. By this, Thomson is referring to John Garth Wilkinson's *Improvisations from the Spirit* (1857), which he had not yet read at the time, but would review fifteen years later in

¹⁰⁷ BCS, pp. 261, 252.

‘A Strange Book’ (1879), primarily for its mystical interest. His suggestion that ‘it would be a boon to the public’ to make this ‘volume easily accessible’, coupled with his following prediction about Emerson’s mystical poetry, reflects the high hopes that Thomson held for the future of mysticism:

Anyone with ears to hear may catch pregnant hints of what poetry possessed by this spirit can accomplish, and therefore *will* accomplish; for no pure inspiration having once come down among men ever withdraws its influence until it has attained (humanly) perfect embodiment.¹⁰⁸

While it is true that mysticism’s attainment of ‘organic perfection’ in poetry must have been part of Thomson’s intended meaning by its ‘(humanly) perfect embodiment’,¹⁰⁹ both his earlier review of Emerson and later review of Wilkinson suggest that another part of his meaning relates to the social functionality of mystical poetry. In ‘Notes on Emerson’ (1858), for example, he argues that the real worth of reading Emerson – whom he also labels as a ‘Mystic’ there¹¹⁰ – is how his mystical writing has a moral and spiritual effect on his readers: ‘it raise you to a grand sphere of thought, inspire you to a lofty mood’.¹¹¹ After recognizing Wilkinson’s mysticism in ‘A Strange Book’, moreover, Thomson similarly argues that, when writers are endowed with such ‘splendid powers’ as Wilkinson’s, they can only attain ‘their full development and happiness in usefulness’, and this is by answering to society’s profound need for ‘much that is pure and wise and beautiful’. ‘Our poor race [is] pining for illumination’, he declares, and ‘the supreme warmth and light of genius and intellect are so rare, so sorely needed’, that it is the obligation of all ‘fulgent spirits [...] to be effulgent’: to ‘let their light shine forth before men’.¹¹²

3. Points of Continuity Between Thomson’s Early and Later Aesthetic Theory

In the opening of this chapter, I have called attention to the view put forth by William Schaefer, in *James Thomson (B. V.): Beyond “The City”*, that Thomson ‘had

¹⁰⁸ *BCS*, pp. 267-68. Compare with Carlyle’s optimistic expectations of 1831, how he said of the ‘Mystical School’ emerging then in London that ‘good will come of it. Let us wait, and see in what way’: *CL*, V, pp. 394-402.

¹⁰⁹ *BCS*, pp. 260-61.

¹¹⁰ *Poems, Essays and Fragments by James Thomson (“B. V.”)*, ed. by John Robertson (London: Reeves & Turner, 1892), p. 75. Also see how Thomson’s description of Emerson’s spirituality on p. 77 is identical to his definition of ‘mysticism’ in ‘Poems of Blake’, in *BCS*, p. 261.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

¹¹² *BCS*, pp. 326, 369-70.

disowned Romantic inspiration' as a necessary part of his development toward his final position as a self-proclaimed atheist in the late 1860s, a view that finds similar expressions elsewhere in Thomson scholarship.¹¹³ This section will be dedicated to problematizing this view, which I intend to do by casting some light on a few points of continuity between Thomson's early and later poetic theory with the overall purpose of highlighting his late Romanticism. In this sense, the analysis herein seeks to elaborate on previous critical commentaries that have noted the indebtedness of Thomson's later poetics to his early idealist conceptions of inspiration, such as the one found in Valeria Tinkler-Villani's (2003) historical and literary-critical account of Shelley's reception in the nineteenth century. In the course of her discussion, Tinkler-Villani responds to the view proposed by R. A. Foakes that *The City of Dreadful Night* marks the culmination of the Victorian's negation of Romantic visionary poetry. She argues that Thomson's five studies on the structure of *Prometheus Unbound*, published in 1881 (a year before his death) were, in fact, based on his 1860 essay on Shelley, an essay she primarily describes as a 'romantic reading of the Romantic poet, in which greatness is defined by inspiration'. Foakes, it should be noted, had observed that Thomson's poem 'inverts the rhetoric and the images of the Romantic vision, and applies them to an assertion of despair, the negation of that vision'.¹¹⁴ But Tinkler-Villani's defence is that the poet's debt to Shelleyan Romanticism 'goes beyond images, assertions of certainties or the adoption of a rhetoric of vision': it is dedicated, she states, 'to the essence of poetic skill', which Thomson believed would entitle a poet 'the epithet inspired', something that he attempted to reproduce 'in his own verbal and metrical virtuosity in the complex forms and verse of *The City of Dreadful Night*'.¹¹⁵ Another significant commentary of Thomson's late Romantic poetics is Jerome J. McGann's 1963 analysis of the same poem, which builds on Harold Bloom's *Shelley's Mythmaking* and *The Visionary Company*. Contrary to Foakes, he regards Thomson as 'a direct descendent of the Visionary Romantic type', arguing that any inversion in *The City of Shelley's Prometheus Unbound* is an inversion of its mythic structure, rather than of its visionary inheritance. Dubbing Thomson 'the

¹¹³ See, for example, R. A. Foakes, *The Romantic Assertion: A Study in the Language of Nineteenth Century Poetry* (London: Yale University Press, 1958), pp. 169-79.

¹¹⁴ Foakes, *The Romantic Assertion*, pp. 169-79.

¹¹⁵ Valeria Tinkler-Villani, 'Victorian Shelley: Perspectives on a Romantic Poet', in *Configuring Romanticism: Essays Offered to C.C. Barfoot*, ed. by Theo D'haen and others (New York: Rodopi, 2003), pp. 89-104 (pp. 93-4). See also her discussion of how Thomson's work 'mediates between romantic and modernist poetics', in her "'Ruins of an Unremembered Past': Poetic Strategies in James Thomson's the City of Dreadful Night'" (pp. 127, 134).

Victorian disciple of the great Romantic’, McGann writes that ‘he too sees visions, dreams dreams, makes myths’, but in his case ‘the myth as a vehicle for unifying all experience is destroyed and in its place is established an anti-myth, a vehicle for promoting and unifying none- or negative experience’.¹¹⁶

My analysis here differs from that of Tinkler-Villani and McGann in that I intend to explore Thomson’s late Romanticism in the context of his contribution to the modern construction of mysticism, and with particular attention to his 1879 essay ‘A Strange Book’. Where Thomson’s notions of the mystical are concerned, I have so far focused on how his early poetry and criticism attempted to attribute religious authority to poetry through a conception of it as a source of divine revelation, and how this was significantly grounded in his definitions of mysticism. The rest of this chapter will further explore Grace Jantzen’s premise that ‘defining mysticism is a way of defining power’, but in the more particular light of Thomson’s self-fashioning as a poet and critic. In other words, I have previously argued that Thomson’s Romantic appropriation of mysticism was a means of asserting the general authority of poetry as a cultural force, but now I will endeavour to look more closely into how it was also an important means of conferring authority upon himself within his literary and critical scene. This necessitates a discussion of the intellectual relegation that Thomson had suffered in consequence of his association with the militant atheism and radicalism of Charles Bradlaugh’s *National Reformer*.

When Henry Paolucci and J. Edward Meeker respectively referred to Thomson as a ‘disreputable rebel’ and a ‘Bohemian in the very respectable Mid-Victorian period’,¹¹⁷ they both meant something along the lines of Isobel Armstrong’s remark that ‘Thomson belonged to a group politically and ideologically out of the mainstream of cultural life’, one that may be qualified to constitute ‘Another Culture’.¹¹⁸ Space does not allow me to deliberate here on this group’s political and ideological orientations, and the extent of the poet’s involvement with it,¹¹⁹ but it is pertinent to merely note that Thomson’s lengthy literary career with the *National Reformer* aligned him with that radical secular community surrounding Charles Bradlaugh,

¹¹⁶ ‘James Thomson (B.V.): The Woven Hymns of Night and Day’, *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 3.4 (Autumn, 1963), 493-507 (pp. 495-7).

¹¹⁷ Henry Paolucci, *James Thomson’s the City of Dreadful Night*, p. 51; and J. Edward Meeker, *The Life and Poetry of James Thomson (B.V.)* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1917), p. 5.

¹¹⁸ *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics*, p. 463.

¹¹⁹ For this, see William Schaefer, *Beyond “The City”*, pp. 14-81; Henry Paolucci, *James Thomson’s The City*, pp. 37-61; and Tom Leonard, *Places of the Mind*, pp. 103-46.

which practiced a ‘militant’ or ‘negative’ form of secularism, as opposed to the ‘positive’ one espoused by George Holyoake. In discussing how these two differ, Susan Budd explains that Bradlaugh believed that the only effective means of extending secular principles was to prepare a ‘bold front’ against Christianity, regardless of how much atheism was feared or despised by polite society: ‘You must go boldly to them in your Freethought propaganda and break their teeth, or else they bite those members of your party who are the weakest’. Holyoake, on the other hand, believed that Bradlaugh’s approach only served to repel the much more needed support of the middle class, so he sought to make the movement ‘more respectable’ by moderating its anti-religious nature, and focusing instead on the positive establishment of a ‘scientific morality’ and the promotion of liberty. The result was that, whereas Holyoake was able to attain certain – albeit limited – social and political privileges among the respectable circles, Bradlaugh’s group remained ‘perpetual outsiders’ to all but the working-class radical culture.¹²⁰

That Thomson would have personally felt the effects of this kind of cultural exclusion is understandable, given the low status and readership achieved by the *National Reformer* throughout his association with it. As pointed out by Meeker and Bertram Dobell, ‘Bradlaugh’s paper seemed far from respectable to the upper classes of Mid-Victorian society’, its readers being ‘chiefly the more intelligent members of the working classes’.¹²¹ Indeed, those of his reviewers who wished to devalue his work rarely failed to point out the paper’s marginal position among mainline periodicals, deprecatingly referring to it, for instance, as a ‘foolish working men’s paper’,¹²² or a ‘little-read periodical’.¹²³ One paper even compares its combative outspokenness to its small following, describing it as ‘an outsider’ who – recognizing that its own ‘sentiments’ are ‘confined to a very few’ – seeks to attract attention by ‘amateur trumpeting’. ‘The *National Reformer*’, it stated, ‘makes a noise quite disproportioned to the number of its adherents’.¹²⁴

¹²⁰ Susan Budd, *Varieties of Unbelief: Atheists and Agnostics in English Society 1850-1960* (London: Heinemann, 1977), pp. 27, 36, 45-46, 70.

¹²¹ Meeker, p. 60; and Bertram Dobell, *The Laureate of Pessimism: A Sketch of the Life and Character of James Thomson (“B.V.”)* (London: Dobell, 1910), p. 28.

¹²² ‘Optimist and Pessimist Poetry’, *London Quarterly Review*, 56.111 (1881), 231-239 (p. 232).

¹²³ George Saintsbury, rev. of *The City of Dreadful Night*, by James Thomson (B.V.), *The Academy*, 423 (1880), 432-433 (p. 432).

¹²⁴ ‘Literary Notices’, rev. of *Heterodox London: or Phases of Free Thought in the Metropolis*, by Maurice Davies, *London Quarterly Review*, 43 (1874), 195-199 (p. 196).

This is not to mention that Thomson was guilty of much of this ‘noisy, wordy,’ and ‘angry’ proselytizing that went on in Bradlaugh’s paper, a stance that, according to Budd, was itself partly a reaction to such marginalization. The secularist, she explains, ‘found himself in a position of self-sustaining rebellion, an attitude to society which could find no channel except violent hostility to the symbols of the respectable *mores* which excluded him’.¹²⁵ As for Thomson’s justification, he believed that ‘disrespectable’ militancy should be considered a sign of intellectual honesty: ‘Alas for the times when honesty and valour must turn rebels! Not the least harm done by shallow and hypocritical respectability is its disgusting sincere men into disrespectability’. He further makes this point in his rejection of Thackery’s ‘salon morality’ that chooses to criticise the middle class on its own terms, where it should have ‘taken up a more honourable and commanding position of attack *outside* the mansion’.¹²⁶

Thomson’s choice of this more ‘honourable’ vantage-point from ‘outside the mansion’ of course meant that he also found himself subject to constant rejection and censure by mainstream publishers, editors and critics, who, in their turn, wished to ensure that he *remained* ‘outside’. As Bertram Dobell has put it: ‘He had dared to transgress the most stringent of all commandments of the British Philistine “Thou shalt before all else, be respectable,” and he paid the due penalty for his contumacy’.¹²⁷ Indeed, we are told that at the outset of his literary career, from 1862 to 1869, and before he had given up on the matter, Thomson struggled with ‘almost uniform ill-success, to obtain admission’ for his work into the major magazines of the time, despite the fact that he was not ‘an especially faulty artist’¹²⁸ – His poetry, indeed, brought him the friendship and ‘admiration of so many good literary judges’, such as George Meredith, the Roessettis, Froude, Herman Melville, E. C. Stedman, P. B. Martson, George Eliot, Kingsley and Saintsbury.¹²⁹ Dobell is right in suggesting that Thomson was fortunate enough to have in Bradlaugh’s radical paper a sure place to publish his heterodox pieces,¹³⁰ but even his success to publish there exposed him

¹²⁵ Budd, Susan, *Varieties of Unbelief*, pp. 39, 49.

¹²⁶ Henry Paolucci, p. 51; and Tom Leonard, *Places of the Mind: The Life and Work of James Thomson* (‘B.V.’) (London: Jonathan Cape, 1993), p. 134.

¹²⁷ Dobell, *Laureate of Pessimism*, p. 2.

¹²⁸ Dobell, *Laureate of Pessimism*, p. 19; and Meeker, p. 5. In the 1914 edition of *The Life of James Thomson* (‘B.V.’), Henry Salt similarly wrote: ‘The scanty recognition which Thomson gained as a poet was and still is absurdly out of proportion to his merits’, p. viii.

¹²⁹ Dobell, *Laureate of Pessimism*, p. 34; and Salt (1914), pp. viii-ix.

¹³⁰ Dobell, *Laureate of Pessimism*, p. 18.

to far more critical and public reproach than admiration. It is safe to say, for example, that the hostility of the following 1876 excerpt from the *Christian World* towards certain sections from Thomson's work is not at all uncommon of the critical attention he attracted from reviewers:

This is but a specimen of the disdainful and derisive tone with which this writer, who at length leaves himself stranded in a region of the dreariest Atheism, continually speaks of that Book which what he terms 'the illusions of our younger days' might have taught him to respect.¹³¹

In fact, the poet's work sometimes managed to become too audacious even for *National Reformer* readers, as evidenced in a letter of April 9, 1874, where the poet mentions how the first instalments of *The City* drew from subscribers 'three or four letters energetically protesting against its publication' next to 'only one praising it'.¹³² Bradlaugh was even compelled, at least once, to discontinue one of Thomson's contributions, when its previous instalments elicited a letter of this kind:

The very mention of your name is enough to make the hair stand. [...] I showed your last number to a neighbour who was so horrified that he said your paper, yourself, and all your supporters ought to be burned.¹³³

Neither were Thomson's opportunities more congenial when it came to publishing his work in book form. Unable to raise the costs of a publication from the scanty earnings of his writings, he ventured between 1874 and 1880 to find a publisher who would 'risk money' on his work, but was never successful. 'Verse by an unknown man', he believed, 'is always a drug in the market, and when it is atheistic it is a virulently poisonous drug, with which respectable publishers would rather have nothing to do'.¹³⁴ It is only by Dobell's 'fortunate application', on behalf of his friend, to the more liberal Reeves and Turner – and by the fact that Dobell had also covered half of the publication's expenses – that Thomson lived to witness the favourable reception of his first volume of poetry, *The City of Dreadful Night and Other Poems* (1880).¹³⁵ Still, this achievement was short-lived, as the following year came with the unprofitable publication of his second volume of poetry *Vane's Story*

¹³¹ *SP*, p. 128.

¹³² Salt (1914), p. 85.

¹³³ Schaefer, William, *Beyond "The City"*, p. 78.

¹³⁴ Dobell, *Laureate of Pessimism*, p. 26; and Salt (1914), p. 101.

¹³⁵ Salt (1914), p. 111.

and Other Poems (1881), and his first prose collection, the latter becoming practically paralyzed by public apathy and critical neglect:

“Essays and Phantasies” [...] received scarcely any notice from the leading organs of critical opinion, and was almost a failure as a publishing venture. Not much more than three hundred copies of the book had been disposed of when, in 1890 (nine years after its first issue), the remaining copies [...] were destroyed by fire.¹³⁶

That Thomson realized the full extent of his obscurity is shown in his confession to Rossetti:

No living writer can have much less reputation than myself, who am simply known to some readers of the *National Reformer* as “B. V.,” the author of many pieces and scraps in prose and verse. [...] The only production in reputable society, which I can cite in my favour is ‘Sunday Up The River’.¹³⁷

Elsewhere he declared: ‘I am an author thoroughly unknown and writing for a periodical of the deepest disrepute’. And although the poet attempted to imply his own indifference to the obscurity of his reputation, stating in 1874 that he had ‘neither tried nor cared to win any popular applause’, Ian Campbell’s observation that there is reason to question this is not without support.¹³⁸

In addition to Campbell’s keen insights in demonstrating how the poet’s ‘surviving notebooks and correspondence show an acute sensitivity to what reviews, and to what others were saying’ of his work, these private sources also indicate how thrilled Thomson was for receiving any favourable acknowledgment of his writing, whether they were from George Eliot, the Rossettis, or even an anonymous critic of a respectable – or ‘popular’ – periodical. Dobell may have gone too far in suggesting that Eliot’s commendation of the poet ‘probably gave him the greatest degree of pleasure that he was capable of feeling’, but Thomson’s letters of gratitude to his admirers do, if anything, tell of the isolation of an unknown poet, who is hardly indifferent to recognition. They show how Thomson was always in ‘haste’ to ‘heartily’ thank them for the ‘very valuable’ approval with which they have ‘rendered

¹³⁶ Dobell, *Laureate of Pessimism*, p. 47.

¹³⁷ Salt (1914), p. 54.

¹³⁸ Ian Campbell, “‘And I Burn Too’: Thomson’s “City of Dreadful Night””, *Victorian Poetry*, 16 (1978: Spring/Summer), 123-33 (p. 123).

[...] to an obscure stranger’, helping to ‘cheer’ him ‘on a somewhat lonely path’.¹³⁹ Aside from that, some of Thomson’s correspondence with Dobell clearly reveals how distressed he was for being repeatedly turned down for publication – at times, complaining of ‘the damned Dizzy suspense’ of having to wait to get published – and, at others, venting his frustration on ‘the infernal impolicy of our Jewish-Jingo misgovernment’, which he blamed for the general ‘depression of trade’ that had led publication companies into hard times.¹⁴⁰ What this all meant, moreover, is that, instead of focusing on his poetry, Thomson was very often constrained to write articles ‘of the hack order’ to pay for his bare expenses: ‘Pity me for the nonsense I have to scribble for the *NR* in these bad days’.¹⁴¹ In fact, William Schaefer believes that one of the contributing factors to Thomson’s pessimism of the seventies is how ‘he undoubtedly felt’ that, ‘as a crusading essayist’, ‘his work was already doomed to obscurity in the back issues of the disreputable’ periodicals of the time. Commenting on the subject, Dobell recalls how his friend ‘was, indeed, quite destitute of that persistence and “push” which enables some men of quite ordinary talents to achieve a success which is often denied to those of far greater powers’.¹⁴²

This brings me to the first point of continuity in relation to Thomson’s critical views on poetry, namely, his estimation of the work of Shelley, a poet whom Thomson felt was ‘starved with scorn’ in his lifetime by an unsympathetic public,¹⁴³ something with which Thomson could easily associate.¹⁴⁴ A brief look at some evidence of Thomson’s enduring admiration for the Romantic poet is instructive in the sense that it reveals how ‘poetic inspiration’ was a viable category in Thomson’s later critical vocabulary. In a prefatory note to a posthumous collection of Thomson’s writings on Shelley, Dobell indicates the depth of his friend’s lasting veneration for the earlier poet, which dated back to a time when Shelley was still an obscure figure:

¹³⁹ Bertram Dobell, ed., ‘James Thomson: A Memoir’, in *A Voice from the Nile: And Other Poems, with a Memoir of the Author* (London: Reeves and Turner, 1884), pp. vii-xlix (pp. xxx, xxxii); and Salt (1914), p. 55.

¹⁴⁰ Dobell, *Laureate of Pessimism*, pp. 31-32.

¹⁴¹ Salt (1889), p. 96; and Ian Campbell, “‘And I Burn Too’” (p. 126).

¹⁴² Schaefer, *Beyond “The City”*, p. 71; and Dobell, *Laureate of Pessimism*, p. 20.

¹⁴³ ‘Shelley’, in *Poetical Works*, II, p. 257.

¹⁴⁴ On Thomson’s financial difficulties, Dobell writes in *Laureate of Pessimism* that “‘B.V.’, suffering under disadvantages of poverty and unpopular opinions, was scarcely able to gain a bare subsistence by his writings, and remained almost to the end of his career unknown and unappreciated’, p. 2. For other accounts of Thomson’s ‘poverty’, see Salt (1914), pp. 40, 76, 90, 101; Meeker, p. 1; and Dobell, *Laureate of Pessimism*, p. 26. In fact, it was George Meredith’s opinion, following Thomson’s death, that ‘the taking away of poverty from his burdens would in all likelihood have saved him to enrich our literature: for his verse was a pure well’: see Salt (1914), pp. 136-7.

Not one of SHELLEY'S admirers, I am convinced, ever surpassed JAMES THOMSON in affectionate devotion to his memory, or ever studied his writings with more minute and loving care. His poetry inspired THOMSON in his youth, at a time when SHELLEY'S reputation had not yet risen above the fogs and clouds that so long obscured its radiance: it was a resource and a consolation to him under the misfortunes of his manhood: and to the last he never ceased to regard with gratitude and love "the poet of poets and purest of men."¹⁴⁵

Dobell was evidently taking cues from Thomson's deleted introduction to 'Notes on the Structure of "Prometheus Unbound"' (1881), written in 1878, and posthumously published under the title 'A Note on Shelley' (1884).¹⁴⁶ In it, Thomson is keen to separate himself from the crowds of Shelley's superficial admirers, distinguishing himself as a long-devoted 'genuine student' of the poet, whose early unfavourable reputation never deterred this critic from discerning the 'breath of divine inspiration' that infuses Shelley's verse:

It is no longer needful to excuse or vindicate this poet of poets. It is now fashionable and facile to laud him, with or without understanding. Even church-going belles are now free to admire "that poor dear Shelley;" even pious pastors may now sleek him with praise soft and pitiful, as an erring lamb which, had it lived to mature shephood, would certainly have found its way back to the one secure fold. For genuine students the time to simply praise is past, the time to fitly appraise not yet come; [...] In the meantime, those who from their youth up, when he was despised and rejected of men, have loved and revered him with a rapture of enthusiasm such as no other singer of these latter days has excited, to whom he, far beyond any other, has been a glorious light of truth, a burning fire of love, a breath of divine inspiration, can perhaps render him no better public service, in addition to that intimate service of devout following on his pathway so far as their strength will permit, than the very humble one of endeavouring, while it is yet time, to make his text as clear, accurate, genuine, and complete as possible.¹⁴⁷

In the part that made it in 'Notes on the Structure of "Prometheus Unbound"', moreover, Thomson had similarly invoked Shelley's power of 'inspiration' in what

¹⁴⁵ Bertram Dobell, ed., 'Prefatory Note', in *Shelley: A Poem* (Chiswick: Charles Whittingham, 1884), pp. vii-xii (p. vii).

¹⁴⁶ Thomson's decision to delete the introductory part of the original article was due to some objections raised by the editor of *Cornhill Magazine*, where Thomson first sent the piece for publication. After several alterations, it was later published in the *Athenaeum*: Dobell, ed., *Shelley: A Poem*, p. 71.

¹⁴⁷ James Thomson, *Shelley: A Poem*, pp. 72-3.

seems to be another attempt to stake a claim to a pioneering recognition of the Romantic poet's genius:

Whatever my rashness and errors [in commenting on Shelley], certainly I love and have loved much, from the earliest study of my youth through thirty long years; I yield to no one living in the fulness of my tribute of gratitude and love and reverence, as no one in the measure of his or her capacity can be indebted for fuller delight and inspiration to this glorious poet of the glorious possible future of Humanity, "in one word, and that the only proper word, Divine."¹⁴⁸

Aside from this, Thomson's letters of correspondence with William Rossetti between February 1872 and September 1873 provide further evidence of Thomson's abiding admiration for Shelley, and of how this was predicated on a belief in poetic inspiration. I cite here one example from his letter of 18 April 1873, where Thomson disagrees with Rossetti's appraisal of Shelley's *Epipsychidion*:

While agreeing with you in ranking *The Witch of Atlas* very high, I cannot agree with you in preferring it to the *Epipsychidion*. It has always seemed to me that Shelley never soared higher than in this poem, which I find full of supreme inspiration.¹⁴⁹

As for how all this relates to Thomson's later understanding of mysticism, I have previously noted that Thomson's early conceptualisation of mysticism in terms of poetic inspiration frequently occurred as part of an attempt to negotiate a view of Shelley as a 'quintessential poet'; and this interestingly holds true with regard to Thomson's later literary thought. This is evidenced in 'A Strange Book', to which I shall shortly return, but it will suffice for now to point out that Thomson there profusely quotes Shelley's 'Defence of Poetry' in his attempt to make a case for the fundamental relationship between mysticism and 'this doctrine of inspiration'. In doing so, moreover, he asserts that Shelley is 'the most spontaneous and inspired of modern poets', which is another way of saying that he is the most mystical.¹⁵⁰

In addition to this, another way in which Thomson's continuing appreciation of Shelley relates to his later notions of mysticism is the fact that it reflects his belief in the ineffable nature of the mystical, which is actually the second point of continuity

¹⁴⁸ *Shelley: A Poem*, pp. 67-70. The quoted words are, as Thomson indicates, from Swinburne's 'Notes on the Text of Shelley's Poems' (1869).

¹⁴⁹ *Shelley: A Poem*, pp. 96-7.

¹⁵⁰ *BCS*, pp. 330-32.

between his early and later poetic theory. This is also where Thomson's personal search for cultural authority is most clear. Indeed, a comparison between a few sections from his early critical pieces and the general argument of 'A Strange Book' will reveal that Thomson's appropriation of this category was in such a way that reflects his desire to overturn his position of cultural otherness, by allowing him to invent or fashion for himself a superior place at the centre of literary culture. This is related to his attempt to positively redefine mysticism's negative signification of 'obscurity' into ineffability, which – I suggest – turns out to be nothing less than an exercise in redefining his own status as an obscure or unknown poet. The examples referred to in the discussion below will show that, following in the footsteps of Carlyle, Thomson contended that critics and literary reviewers who contemptuously speak of the 'vagueness' or 'difficulty' of mystical language are but unwittingly betraying their own incapacity as true judges of poetry. For him, as it was for Carlyle, verse that is rich in obscure expression signifies the poet's possession of a higher intuitive faculty that allows him/her to discern prophetic truths that are too profound for ordinary language; and equally, only readers possessing a similar faculty are able to apprehend its insights. Again, as stated in the previous chapter, this was to say that it is not the mysticism of the poetry that is at fault, but the critics' inability to develop the necessary intuitions to comprehend it.

That this is not free from a hidden power agenda becomes apparent when we are made to understand that Thomson himself is endowed with that superior intuition, a suggestion that is made through his nearly didactic, all-too-authoritative judgments of what (or who) may and may not count as mystical. This, I argue, was meant not only to convey Thomson's authority as a critic over the alleged majority of incompetent ones, but also to assert his own claims to genuine poetry. It may help us understand why his defence of mysticism often comes hand in hand with his defence of such poets as Shelley, Blake and Browning whose obscurity of language, according to Thomson, attracted enough censure as to hinder their attainment of the recognition due their poetic genius.¹⁵¹ One can assert from this that the notion of 'mystical obscurity', or the quality of 'not being understood', served for Thomson as an apologetic for a poet's obscurity of reputation, something that could help justify his own unfavourable reception by reviewers.

¹⁵¹ For Thomson's discussion on the obscurity of these poets, see *Shelley: A Poem*, pp. 110-111; *Essays and Phantasies*, p. 289; and *BCS*, pp. 288, 259-260.

To demonstrate this, the best place to start with is Thomson's previously discussed essay of 1865 'Open Secret Societies', whose title is a clear invocation of Goethe's 'offenbar geheimniß', an expression that Carlyle had Englished as 'the open secret' in 'The Hero as Poet' (1840), with which Thomson was familiar. In fact, Thomson had earlier translated the first stanza of Goethe's 1814 poem of the same title¹⁵² in 'The Poems of Blake' (1864), and would later not only translate the full poem in his essay 'The Divan of Goethe' (1871), but also quote it again in 'A Strange Book'. This suggests the strong hold that Goethe's conception of the mystic-poet exercised on Thomson's mind throughout his literary career. I cite here the first and last stanzas of Thomson's translation, which reveal Goethe's desire to subvert the negative implications of the term 'mystic' in favour of the poem's subject, the Persian poet Hafiz. As in the case of Carlyle, moreover, the stanzas show Goethe endeavouring to question the position of authority from which Hafiz's critics ridicule his writings:

They have called you, O holy Hafiz,
 They have called you the Mystic Tongue:
 Nor knew, the great word-scholars,
 The sense of the words they sung.
 [...]
 But you are mystic only
 As quite transcending their wit;
 That you are not pious and yet are blest
 They cannot at all admit.¹⁵³

As it would not have been lost on Thomson, the poem's 'open secret' is related to the highly intuitive and ineffable meanings of Hafiz's poetry, which are beyond the grasp of the 'great word-scholars' who pay too close an attention to the peculiar technicalities of the Persian poet's language. Indeed, this is the meaning that Thomson appropriates in 'Open Secret Societies'.

But what is important to point out is that Thomson further extends Goethe's notion, adopting it as the central principal around which he constructs his five 'secret societies': these are represented as eternal communities whose members are linked by ineffable ties of kinship that transcend the artificial and mechanical means of association that govern earthly societies. Unsurprisingly, Thomson's description of

¹⁵² 'Offenbar Geheimniß' in the *West- östlicher Divan*: Thomson, *Poems, Essays and Fragments* by James Thomson, pp. 205, 209.

¹⁵³ *Poems, Essays and Fragments* by James Thomson, p. 210.

these societies heavily relies on a language of inclusion/exclusion, which is interesting to note, considering that it belongs to a poet-critic who was conscious of his own marginality in the literary scene of his day. Of the eternal character of these societies, Thomson states:

There always have been and always will be in the world countless genuine Secret Societies of the most open, while of the most hidden, character. Continuous and unadulterate these have flowed, separate streams through the Sea of Time, from an antiquity which makes all nobilities and castes unreverend; holding in solution secrets and mysteries so august, so ineffable. [...] Exactly what they cherish and adore as the inmost mystery of their being, their whole being ever strives to utter most clearly abroad to the senses and hearts and intellects of the whole world; only the initiated ever truly hear and read it, to all others it is sound without meaning and letters without significance.¹⁵⁴

As for the ‘initiated’ and ‘uninitiated’ members of each society, they are described as follows:

Their members are affiliated for life and death in the instant of being born; without ceremonies of initiation, without sponsorial oaths of fidelity. Their bond of union is a natural affinity, quite mysterious in its principles and elements, precise and assured in its results as the combination and proportions of oxygen and hydrogen in water, or oxygen and nitrogen in air. No spy or traitor, no unworthy or uncongenial brother, can obtain entrance among them, any more than a hemlock or a lily can be adopted into the family of the roses, any more than an ape or a tiger can pass as one of a herd of elephants. [...] But it must be admitted that these loftiest of the Open Secret Societies, which exist everywhere and endure with the aeon of our race, are parodied and counterfeited and traduced by ingenious Societies of the artificial kind, and that many simple people confuse the parody with the original, the artificial with the natural.¹⁵⁵

That Thomson’s assertion of the ineffability of mysticism is accompanied by an attempt to assert his own authority as a poet and critic is evident in how he implicitly suggests that he is an ‘initiate’ member of the ‘Open Secret Society of the Poets’. This he does by differentiating between genuine poetry and its parodies, and then placing himself as a judge of what can count as the former and what should pass

¹⁵⁴ *Essays and Phantasies*, pp. 195-6.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 195-8.

as the latter. This becomes clear when the essay is placed next to Thomson's criticism of the various poets of his day in 'The Poems of Blake'. Blake, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats, The Brownings, and Emerson are deemed to be true members of this fraternity while Byron, and Scott are excluded from it. But the clearest example of this is found in how Tennyson fairs under Thomson's critical scrutiny. In 'Open Secret Societies', Thomson describes the parodies of true poetry as follows:

Serious parodies of these divine songs abound in every age, and are welcomed by the uninitiate (who are usually what we call persons of liberal culture [...]) as the most beautiful utterance of the inmost mysteries of this veritable Secret Society; and the authors thereof win during their lifetime wealth and honour and renown. For many of them can copy with marvellous adroitness the rhythms and rhymes and melodious phrases which are much loved by the true brotherhood, so that not only by others but also by themselves they are believed to be genuine bards. But *when one who is initiate* hears or reads their productions, he discerns that they are as fair bodies without souls; for the music and the splendour of infinity are not within them, and they are utterly unrelated to eternity.¹⁵⁶ [my italics]

And this is exactly Thomson's verdict on the Laureate's poetry:

Tennyson has no more of this simplicity than had Byron: his chief youthful fault was such a young ladyish affectation as could not exist together with it. But he is fully aware of its value, and woos it like a lover, in vain. [...] Scarcely any other artist in verse of the same rank has ever lived on such scanty revenues of thought (both pure, and applied or mixed) as Tennyson. While it cannot be pretended that he is a great sculptor, he is certainly an exquisite carver of luxuries in ivory; but we must be content to admire the caskets, for there are no jewels inside. [...] He is continually petty with that littleness of the second degree which makes a man brag aloud in avoiding some well-known littleness of the first degree. [...] Nothing gives one a keener insight into the want of robustness in the educated English intellect of the age than the fact that nine-tenths of our best-known literary men look upon him as a profound philosopher. When wax-flowers are oracular oaks, Dodona may be discovered in the Isle of Wight, but hardly until then. [...] A great school of the poets is dying out: it will die decently, elegantly, in the full odour of respectability, with our Laureate.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁶ *Essays and Phantasies*, pp. 206.

¹⁵⁷ *BCS*, pp. 265-66.

CONCLUSION

This thesis contributes to the recent turn in Victorian and Modernist Studies towards eschewing the ‘spectacular privileging of disjuncture’ that has traditionally governed how scholars of Modernism characterize the shift from the nineteenth to the twentieth century in a way that overlooks the many contributions of the former to Modernist art, culture and ideology.¹ The main thrust of my argument has been to highlight how the nineteenth-century’s post-Romantic definitions of mysticism were a constitutive discourse in Victorian poetry and poetics, whilst also attempting to fill a long-standing gap in the existing postmodernist scholarship that endeavours to problematize the modern category of mysticism. In particular, my work partly serves as a response to how previous problematizations of the category promote the view that the Western preoccupation with mysticism – a preoccupation that is traceable back to an early period of its intellectual history – was temporarily interrupted by the scientific and materialist culture of the nineteenth century which had almost sounded its death-knell, only to be revived at the turn of the twentieth century by Modernist philosophers, religionists and aesthetes. As earlier mentioned, and according to Leigh Schmidt, studies contributing to this account of mysticism’s discursive history have duly acknowledged the role of both the seventeenth and twentieth centuries in the process of the category’s modern formation, but they have kept silent about the nineteenth-century’s significant legacies in this regard. Building on Schmidt’s work and that of other recent scholars, my study sought to offer a modest step toward redressing the balance, particularly calling attention to the imperative part played by the Victorians in how twentieth-century mysticism came to be primarily defined by its ineffability, as well as by its fundamental affinity to poetry and the arts.

In doing so, I have employed a cultural constructivist method of analysis similar to that adopted by Richard King (1998) and Grace Jantzen (1995), one that acknowledges that ‘mysticism’, ‘culture’ and ‘power’ are mutually overlapping categories, and that any definition of the mystical constitutes a conceptual site of struggle for authority, whether individual or institutional. The theoretical underpinnings of this approach were outlined in my first chapter, whose chief purpose was to offer a rationale for this methodological choice, as well as a critique of

¹ Lisi Schoenbach, *Pragmatic Modernism*, p. xiv.

previous literary-critical scholarship that adopts ‘mysticism’ as a primary analytic category. After giving an overview of the two theoretical understandings of mysticism that have dominated its academic study in the fields of Philosophy and Religion (namely, the essentialist and the constructivist), the chapter argued that the majority of previous critical investigations of the question of mysticism in Victorian poetry have been conducted from a predominantly essentialist perspective, and that this is particularly true of the scholarship that was published before the 80s of the past century. With the rise of Katzian constructivism in the late 1970s, there has been an evident decline in the status of the essentialist approach to the mystical that, as I have contended, parallels a similar decline in scholarly interest in the relationship between Victorian poetry and mysticism. It was my contention that this lapse in the status of the perennial paradigm does not mean that mysticism should become an outmoded category in critical discussions of nineteenth-century poets, and that adopting a constructivist approach to the subject can, in fact, do much in the way of recuperating it as a viable category for the analysis of the period’s poetry and its poetics.

Referring to the constructivists’ theoretical objections to the essentialist school, Chapter I also sought to underline that one of the methodological deficiencies of the essentialist phenomenology of mysticism which has precipitated its decline is that it is implicitly theological, often generating ideologically exclusionary narratives. This point was demonstrated by reviewing the representative opinions of literary critics who have interrogated the mysticism of Tennyson and Hopkins, two Victorian poets who have especially attracted this kind of critical attention. With a focus on the critics’ phenomenological evaluations of the poets’ mystical experiences (that is, their investment in the question of whether or not the poet’s experiences are worthy of being called ‘mystical’), I have shown that such criticism is too often culpable of making onto-theological truth claims that are imposed on the reader, or on the literary text itself. The examples referred to in this discussion were specifically for the purpose of exposing how this critical approach depends in its analysis on a number of ontological and phenomenological categories that it unreflectively takes as self-evident, universal, and as constituting stable referents from which the meaning of the literary text can be derived, and this without addressing the problem that categories of this kind are, in fact, highly contentious.

It is important to note, moreover, that my critique of the essentialist-oriented critical literature in this chapter necessitated that I to draw attention to the fact that my

rejection of it is not a rejection, per se, of the use of the essentialist approach in literary criticism, but rather of how it has almost always been employed without the introduction of critical reflexivity, the latter of which is not necessarily incompatible with the essentialist model of analysis. While embracing the interpretive strategies of the constructivist method, therefore, I noted that my application of it is innocuous of any attempt to silence the voices of contemporary literary critics who are interested in the phenomenology of mysticism, as I do not wish to further contribute to the entrenchment of the essentialist/constructivist divide in scholarly debates on this topic. In terms of its location on the essentialist-constructivist spectrum, the approach that has been applied here is situated somewhere in a middle position: this is in the sense that it de-ontologizes mysticism merely for interpretive purposes, while suspending judgment on questions pertaining to the philosophy and phenomenology of religion, as opposed to the practice of abolitionist constructivism that completely seeks to invalidate the ontological reality of mystical experiences. As I have explained, my own preference for employing the constructivist method in this thesis has been prompted by my belief that the past dominance of the essentialist method in literary critical inquiries of mysticism has led to the treatment of ‘mystical texts’ as being nothing but a record of intense private subjective experiences that provide genuine insights into the inner world of the writer/poet, a perspective that, I believe, ought to be neutralized by turning our attention to the cultural aspects of mysticism.

Although this study is not alone in examining Victorian literature’s engagement with mysticism through an interpretive approach that is mindful of its cultural constructedness, one of my contributions to this line of research is my attempt to define the conceptual and theoretical parameters of the debate that informs this approach in relation to the literary scholarship on Victorian poets. This was done with the hope of explicitly clarifying and reinforcing an already emerging literary-critical discourse that deals with this category, and is, in my opinion, a necessary step toward providing what may be considered an overdue corrective to the essentialist literary interpretations of the mystical corpus of Victorian writers. To my knowledge, none of the existing constructivist interrogations of the category in the literary context of nineteenth-century England have addressed the essentialist scholarship that has been – and is still being – conducted on mysticism within the field of literary studies, leaving open a lacuna that I hope my introductory chapter has partially filled. I have ventured to do this by importing some of the key theoretical questions and concerns that have

been raised in the fields of Philosophy, Religion and History regarding mysticism to the field of literary studies. As well as helping lay the groundwork for my analysis, Chapter I's review of the essentialist critical scholarship on Tennyson and Hopkins is significant in that it invites essentialist-minded literary critics to go beyond debating the question of mysticism on solely essentialist terms, and take into account other critical perspectives that are not merely in contention with one or another specific phenomenological definition of mysticism, but with the whole essentialist paradigm on which these definitions are based. Aside from this, I believe that if literary scholars from both the essentialist and constructivist camps agree that mysticism – whether it is taken as an experiential or a conceptual category – or both – was crucial to the Victorian literary and critical imagination, then they at least ought to agree that an awareness of the complexities and subtleties that any adequate definition of the mystical must admit and reconcile is equally crucial for any interpretation that seeks to do justice to the subject under consideration.

In addition to this, and as noted in Chapter I, a central concern of previous literary research on the Victorian construction of mysticism has been its interest in tracing the category's relationship to the developing field of psychology in the second half of the nineteenth century, particularly in how mysticism was shaped by the shift of emphasis from a philosophical to a physiological perspective in mid-nineteenth-century scientific studies of mind. The major context in which this has been examined is the Victorian realist fiction of the 1860s onward. This thesis extends the application of the constructivist method to a new context in which the concerns of Victorian poets and their critics are brought to the forefront, going back as early as the mid-1820s that saw the coming together of the 'mystic clique' within the society of the Cambridge Apostles, of which Tennyson and Arthur Hallam were chief members. Changing the context of analysis has allowed me to highlight how the century's earlier attempts to rehabilitate mysticism from public censure had firmer ties to German philosophical Idealism, and how nineteenth-century poetic theory, and the period's poetic enterprise as a whole, constituted a major arena where this German-inspired development took place.

Previous research that has taken up the important task of documenting the role of Germany in the Western construction of the mystical is Grace Jantzen's work of 1995, which extends and builds on the findings of Wayne Proudfoot's *Religious Experience* (1985). I have said in Chapter II that one of the valuable contributions of

Jantzen's work is her analysis of the debt that modern mysticism owes to the post-Kantian epistemology at the centre of German Romantic Idealism: namely, for mysticism's key characteristic of ineffability, and, not less importantly, for the *experiential* emphasis in its definition as a state of 'immediate consciousness of the Deity' – immediate because intuitively felt, rather than rationally perceived, in a way that overcomes the Kantian subject-object dichotomy. Jantzen's account, however, neglects to acknowledge that much of the influence of post-Kantian Romantic Idealism in the formation of an ineffable mysticism was firmly grounded in nineteenth-century formulations of poetic theory. Her emphasis is rather on the 'theological and philosophical' aspects of this influence, so that even when citing Carlyle's and Emerson's foundational role in the development of William James's notions, the aesthetic preoccupations of their Romanticism are hardly mentioned, along with how these must have equally shaped their own conceptions of the mystical.²

In fact, very little has been said in the available cultural studies on this category of the fact that modern mysticism figured as a poetic construct in the writings of William James and subsequent (Modernist) scholarship, or of the nineteenth-century's part in this. While there is nothing in Jantzen's work that explicitly points to a possible connection between mysticism and poetry, the conceptual 'genealogy' of the category offered by Richard King briefly notes how medieval Christian notions of the mystical (as being related to the sacraments and the allegorical hidden meaning of the scripture) gradually became secularized from the seventeenth century onwards to be 'associated with the metaphors and mysteries of poetry and "literature"'. King explains that this association was increasingly attached to what was conceived as 'irrational, uncivilized and feminine', and was part of a Western Orientalist project that was concerned with 'exorcising' the anti-Enlightenment aspects of its own culture and projecting it on an Oriental other as a way of controlling and manipulating the East. But aside from pointing out this post-medieval tendency to generally group the mystical with the poetic as part of the culture's 'Dionysian' impulses,³ King's analysis makes no reference to the way in which attendant notions of poetry may have contributed to the nineteenth-century remaking of mysticism. Such an omission is similarly found in Leigh Schmidt's work

² Jantzen, p. 307-20.

³ King, pp. 161, 16, 3, 33.

on the subject, which goes little beyond the – albeit significant – assertion that the art and poetic literature of the period were not without their role in this process of remaking.⁴ Alex Owen's *The Place of Enchantment* comes closest to rectifying this omission in her cursory glance at the links between 'occultism' – a term that she recurrently uses to include the mystical – and 'French Symbolism, literary "decadence," and the poetics of Yeats and others', all of which she describes as being part 'of the rich cultural repertoire within which occultism was defining itself at the dawn of the new century'. This nonetheless remains merely suggestive in scope, not only because 'occultism' has a much broader meaning than that of my study's key term; it is also because Owen's remarks principally aim to demonstrate the fin de siècle occult 'consciousness of self',⁵ rather than to particularly highlight the way in which modern mysticism had become an aestheticized category by the beginning of the twentieth century, a discussion that is significant in its own right.

The discussion of Chapter II in this thesis is, therefore, my attempt to answer to the lack in previous scholarship of any serious recognition and analysis of the fact that modern mysticism is fundamentally a poetic and aesthetic construct, one that was shaped by the nineteenth-century discourse on poetry and art. By its substantive engagement with the conceptual overlap between mysticism and poetry in both Modernist and Victorian discourse, the chapter in turn offers an important contribution to a post-modernist understanding of mysticism, as well as some new insights about a significant aspect of Victorian poetic theory. Referring to such various writers and poets as Carlyle, Tennyson, Swinburne, Barrett Browning, or even John Stuart Mill, Chapter II worked to demonstrate the growing Victorian tendency towards positively defining 'poetry' in terms of 'mysticism' and vice versa, with a sufficient commentary on the cultural and ideological agenda implicit in such definitions. Its overall aim was to identify and characterise a particular nineteenth century critical mind-set which found in the mystical tendencies of Romantic and post-Romantic poetry an authoritative voice that could compete with the cultural influence of the pragmatic and materialist ideologies of the day. This is the same agenda behind the many religious claims that were being made for poetry during the period, occurring at a time when it seemed that the Bible was losing its credibility as a cultural force, their chief aim being to transfer what can be salvaged of its spiritual

⁴ 'MMM' (p. 283); and *Restless Soules*, pp. 201-3.

⁵ *The Place of Enchantment*, pp. 139-40.

and moral functions to the realms of poetry and art. In short, Chapter II centred on the argument that the Victorian aestheticization of mysticism came as an answer to a pervasive contemporary angst over the possible (or even inevitable) prospect of a faithless future, and the need to assert and make sense of the place of poetry in it. This is suggestively confirmed by the following words of W. S. Lilly's 'Modern Mysticism' (1885) on the significance of mysticism for his time, stated immediately after declaring the religious authority of mystical art (including mystical poetry):

So much must suffice to indicate the transcendent importance which mysticism seems to me to possess in these days, when so many a fair philosophy lies in ruins, and time-honoured theologies are threatened with swift extinction, as mere collections of meaningless words about unintelligible chimaeras.⁶

This argument was extended in Chapter III, one objective of which was to demonstrate that it was a similar preoccupation with these anxieties about the future possibility of a godless England – and the poet's place in it – that motivated Victorian poets and critics to defend the ineffability of mysticism. It was my contention that the then-emerging discourse on the ineffability of the category developed as a response to how 'mysticism' featured as a significant term of reproach in early and mid-nineteenth-century literary-critical reviews, those which had certain notions about poetry's moral responsibilities toward its readers, as well as the conceptual and stylistic demands that should be made upon it. As I have shown, 'mysticism', as a condemnatory term, was often used in the sense of 'unintelligibility', 'mistiness', 'vagueness' and 'obscurity', a usage that reflects the primarily pragmatic nature of the criticism of the period, and its preoccupation with the human/social reference of the work of art; catering to a prevalent taste for practical and materialist principles (over idealist ones), it was employed by critics who held that one of the poet's moral obligations was to write in simple and lucid language about common, everyday experiences, so as to readily arouse the readers' sympathies, the accomplishment of which was claimed to be the measure of true poetry. According to such criteria, the mystical poets' use of what was deemed a strange and uncommon vernacular indicated that they were morally and emotionally deficient in sympathy. With a focus on Carlyle's writings, I have sought to demonstrate that it is in this nineteenth-century context that mysticism's ineffability arose as a defensive construct, something that

⁶ W. S. Lilly, 'Modern Mysticism', pp. 293, 305-6.

was invoked by critics in defence of poets whose works were believed to supply the much-needed spiritual nourishment for withstanding the increasingly pervasive secularism of the time.

Building on some key notions discussed in the previous two chapters, Chapter IV explored James Thomson's relationship to mysticism. The chapter began with a study of Thomson's early career, and how his preoccupation with mysticism was essentially an aesthetic preoccupation, one that was motivated toward the Romantic conception of the poet as a mediator of visionary and transcendental knowledge. It focused on a number of excerpts from his early criticism, particularly on Thomson's belief that time in a time when Christianity was losing its hold on English cultural and religious life, it is the responsibility and rightful place of poetry to act as a spiritual mediator between God and the rest of mankind. The discussion has also endeavored to show Thomson's conception of 'poetic inspiration' as a form of mystical experience, falling back on the intricate network of relations he develops between 'Poets' and 'Mystics'. It has also drawn attention to his deployment of 'mysticism' to differentiate between two types of poetry, the inspired and the uninspired, with the former being construed as representative of 'quintessential poetry'. In this sense, one of the central concerns of this chapter was to demonstrate how Thomson's writings offer a representative example of the Victorians' aesthetic preoccupation with mysticism. As for the second part of the chapter, it focused on the points of continuity between Thomson's early and later poetic theory, particularly in relation to the quasi-naturalistic understanding of the principle of 'poetic inspiration' that he adopts in 'A Strange Book', and how this connects with his later redefinition of 'mysticism'. It has attempted to look more closely into how Thomson's Romantic appropriation of mysticism was an important means of conferring authority upon himself within his literary and critical scene. This involved discussing the intellectual relegation that Thomson had suffered in consequence of his association with the militant atheism and radicalism of Charles Bradlaugh's *National Reformer*. The aim of this was to emphasize that Thomson's attempt to positively redefine mysticism's negative signification of 'obscurity' into ineffability turns out to be nothing less than an exercise in redefining his own status as an obscure, or unknown poet.

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