

Introduction

Let us be the holocaust that, in the fire
of love, turns into ashes.

—François de Fénelon

Known for her hair so long that it covers her entire body, we now see her fully naked, her long locks blowing in the wind. She is floating high above the woods and lakes below, carried by three little angels. Her arms open wide and her eyes looking up, she is surrendering herself to what awaits her in heaven.

So we see in the painting by the Italian Baroque artist Giovanni Lanfranco, entitled *The Translation of the Magdalen* (1617) (Figure I.1).¹ And in the *Legenda aurea* we read that Saint Mary Magdalene makes this journey a few times a day.² Indeed, “every day at the seven canonical hours” (that is, at each of the hours of the day when monks gather to pray), angels take Mary Magdalene all the way to God’s celestial places, where she is given the opportunity to feed herself, not with earthly but entirely with heavenly food.³ As is known, in the past, she used to take all too earthly food, living the sinful life of a prostitute. But since, burdened by repentance, she washed Jesus’s feet and received his blessing, her life has become that of a saint. After Jesus’s death and ascension, so the *Golden Legend* continues, she played an important role in the settlement of the first Christians in the Rhone Valley in Gaul (France). There, after a life of charity, she suddenly “disappeared.” Only thirty years later, she was rediscovered. During all those years she lived in the woods in absolute isolation. It is during this period that, seven times a day, she was carried to heaven to be fed by celestial food only.



Figure I.1. Giovanni Lanfranco, *The Translation of the Magdalen*, 1616–17.

It is in this sense that Mary Magdalene can be seen as an emblematic example for monastic life and for mysticism in general.⁴ To fully live her love for the unique God, she has left behind the finite and sinful way of life that she knows like no one else, in order to anticipate a life that will be lived in the other world to come, in the divine realm that God has brought us thanks to his Son Jesus. In her radical isolation, she has stopped living off nature and, even in her most basic needs, is directly nourished by the divine. It is the result of a life-long asceticism in which she gradually eliminated all reflexes of natural self-interest. The state in which she is now, is of course due to God's grace, but it is also the consequence of a lifelong effort of fighting against her natural selfishness, of effacing her own self. Effacing the self: this is the practice of the Christian mystic: erasing my own I as the center of my life in order to really live by God's grace only.

Effacing the self. Did Mary Magdalene succeed in it? Of course, she succeeded in effacing her human, all too human self. But did she indeed efface *the* self? In fact, by effacing her own finite self, she regained an infinite Self, the Self that is at the basis of everything that is, including her natural self. By effacing that false self of hers, she is absorbed by God's true Self. This is what Lanfranco's painting shows: she has lost everything and has given up even her "self," but precisely for this reason, angels carry her to heaven in order to regain her true origin, her true ground, which is in God, and which is God.

Effacing the self. Is it something that is limited to Christian mysticism only? Has such an intention become outdated since our modern, multicultural societies have ceased to be dominated by Christianity? Is "effacing the self" incompatible with a typically *modern* way to understand life?



Figure I.2. Rémy Zaugg, ICH/ ICH BIN/ NICHT/ ICH, 1999.

Of course, modernity is characterized first and foremost by a non-effaced, strongly self-assured self. And yet, the desire to get rid of this self and the effort to efface it are far from absent. To stick to the realm of visual art, one can easily find modern examples that express a message similar to the one of Lanfranco's seventeenth-century painting. Take, for instance, a work by the Basel conceptual artist Rémy Zaugg, entitled *ICH / ICH BIN / NICHT / ICH* (I / I AM / NOT / I, 1999) (figure 1.2). The message cannot be misunderstood: If there is a "self" mentioned in this work of art, it is there to efface itself. "I am not I." Zaugg's work perfectly fitted the Frankfurt exhibition that it was part of, entitled *Ich: the German word for "I," Ich, struck out*. The exhibition collected all kinds of "iconoclastic" self-portraits, each of them performing a particular way of effacing the self.⁵

The difference between the Lanfranco painting and Zaugg's work of art is that, in the latter, the effacing of the self is not linked to regaining another, true, divine Self. Is, then, the modern version of "effacing the self" more radical and sincere than the Christian version exemplified by Lanfranco's *Mary Magdalene*? Is the modern version *really* "effacing the self"?

Looks can be deceiving. Does it really suffice to strike out the self to eliminate it? Is this not also an excellent way to emphasize it? By claiming "I am not I," one is also able to perform a particularly strong I. Pablo Picasso became a great painter precisely by *not* painting the "Picassos" with which the public identified him over and over again. His "lack of self" made him the giant he became. Many modern artists are serious when they seek to leave their ego behind in an attempt to make, if this is at all possible, completely selfless art; yet the more explicitly they strive for it, the greater the risk of their ego coming even more to the fore.

The trick that the ego often succumbs to in its attempts to become selfless is not the exclusive privilege of modern art. This ruse is everywhere. Almost every Hollywood movie presents an ego brimming with self-confidence, recklessly flirting with selflessness and repeatedly on the verge of drowning the self in a bath of evil and seduction. What we see, in fact, is an unstable, threatened ego. And precisely the threat of selflessness ensures that, at the end of the movie, the ego reemerges stronger than ever. It is with this strong ego that the spectators identify themselves—not without allowing themselves to give vent to a surreptitious desire for selflessness.

This trick is typical of modernity in general. Being modern, we cannot do without a solid, self-assured ego, yet we are haunted by the dream of finally being liberated from our very self, leaving our problematic ego-condition behind and losing ourselves in mere selflessness. The latter is indeed never more than a dream, in the service of an ego that never fails in performing its sovereignty. So, the modern performance of a strong ego easily goes hand in hand with the inclination (hidden or not) to have that ego effaced.

What is at stake with an ego that is asked both to overestimate the power of its own self *and* to cherish the dream of getting lost in selflessness? How is it possible that the modern human promotes an exaggerated self on the one hand and on the other longs for selflessness?

Each from a different angle, all chapters in this volume deal with this question. However, to investigate the subtle-yet-complex battle between self and selflessness, I do not focus on contemporary art or Hollywood movies but on an altogether different area: Christian mysticism.

Rather than to the experience of being one with the divine, the term *mysticism* as used in this volume refers to the written tradition describing in detail the vicissitudes on the path toward that union. In this tradition, descriptions of the experience of the union with God are in fact rather rare, and most of the textual reports focus on the inner struggle to get there. The mystic tries to reach a God who is radically “other” and “beyond”—that is, beyond anything that has to do with the human “self.” To become one with God implies overcoming the own self—to efface it—and becoming selfless, in the strongest sense of the word. This is not without paradox. For to follow the path to selflessness, the mystic needs a solid self. And yet, the strongest obstacle that has to be overcome on this path is nothing but that very “self.” Only the strongest self is able to fight—to efface—that self and become selfless. This paradox, which I mentioned as being at play in both modern art and Hollywood movies, is clearly at the heart of mystical texts. Moreover, these texts often explicitly question and reflect on this paradox. Those searching for insight into the strange dialectics of self and selflessness will benefit greatly from a close reading of texts from the mystical tradition, and this is exactly what I intend to do in this volume.

The thesis I defend here is that our contemporary ego-mania, together with our penchant for selflessness, is rooted in the typically modern self-understanding that emerged in seventeenth-century Western Europe. At this time, the perspective from which we related to the world

(including ourselves) shifted from God to our own free, independent ego. René Descartes's *cogito* is a significant and influential expression of this. The establishment of this self-assured Cartesian ego aroused all kinds of countermovements, however. One of the movements that profoundly questioned the Cartesian ego and analyzed it in a highly critical way was the mysticism that permeated seventeenth-century French spirituality.

This is why the first chapters deal directly with early modern Christian mysticism, and more specifically with the French *spiritualité* that became popular at that century, even far beyond the boundaries of the French kingdom. In the numerous texts that emerged from this *spiritualité* wave, the role played by a Cartesian kind of ego is often as hidden as it is decisive. Issues of a "spiritual" nature were not only dominant in discussions among mystical and theological authors but also in the important public debates of the time. The nature of "pure love" for God, for example, was hotly debated in France, not only among theologians at the Sorbonne, but also by people in the streets of Paris and, last but not least, at the courts of the Louvre and of Versailles.

Of course, these disputes in terms from centuries ago sound outdated to the contemporary ear. Yet, once one manages to overcome the historical threshold and fully enter into the variety of arguments of that time, it quickly becomes evident that the questions seventeenth-century *spiritualité* dealt with, in fact, remain surprisingly relevant today. To mention only one of them: What is love? What, within the act of love, are the precise parts played by the loving subject and the beloved? And how is the ego involved in the passion of love? Does it finally *find* itself, or does it *lose* itself there? Does the ego, in the act of loving, discover its ground or rather its abyss? More than three centuries ago, these kinds of questions were already addressed with unprecedented lucidity. As will be explained, such questions are ours still, persisting in texts by twentieth-century mystics (such as Simone Weil) and mystical theorists (such as Michel de Certeau).



Effacing the self: is it not what the first Christian communities tried to put into practice? Chapter 1, "Love's Intimate Violence," starts with a brief analysis of the Early Christian love ideal and shows how, contrary to popular opinion, it is not really free from violence. When, seventeen centuries later, the same kind of selfless love becomes the topic of heated

public debate in early modern France, a hidden violence is once again at play. This chapter compares two interpretations of selfless love: one by François de Fénelon and one by Nicolas Malebranche. Their discussion not only establishes—and brings into focus—what is at stake in the act of “pure love” (*pur amour*, their term for selfless love), it also reveals the incapacity of both authors to answer the question of the violence haunting the core of selfless love. The role of this kind of love, including its violence, appears to be far from played out in the post-Christian age. It reemerges, for instance, in the “love for revolution” that totalitarian regimes require from their citizens. It is by referring to this kind of love that Maximilien Robespierre spread his infamous terror and, more than a century later, Nikolai Bukharin became the victim of one of the Moscow show trials.

In Chapter 2, entitled “Selfless,” Meister Eckhart, the fourteenth-century mystic, and Fénelon, the seventeenth-century author on mysticism, are brought into discussion with one another. Both authors comment extensively on the link between love and the effacement of the self, and at first sight they seem to have quite similar opinions. However, where Eckhart still thinks within the framework of a medieval worldview, in Fénelon’s thinking, despite his claims to the contrary, modernity has sneaked in. This modern perspective is crucial to shed the correct light on the unseen harshness of “pure love.” A close reading of three of his *Lettres spirituelles* reveals the modern abyss that yawns beneath the pious ideal of *pur amour*.

Is *pur amour* a strictly individual matter? Does it only concern the intimate realm of the soul? Fénelon’s *Lettres spirituelles* seem to move toward such a conclusion. And yet, there is also a strong political dimension in Fénelon’s mystical thought. His novel *Les aventures de Télémaque* (*The Adventures of Telemachus*) is highly political, and his famous *Letter to Louis XIV* is one of the sharpest critiques addressed to the absolutistic monarch. The exploration of the political dimension of Fénelon’s mystical thought is the object of chapter 3, “Love Thy Neighbor Purely.”

What if the self has to efface itself in the very act that reports its effacement? This paradoxical procedure is a central issue in the oeuvre of Jeanne Guyon, the mystical lady who introduced Fénelon to the tradition of *spiritualité*. To Madame Guyon, the *unio mystica* is not so much located in the peak experience reached after having passed the several steps on the mystical path. It is, rather, the effacement of the self that takes place while going that path or, rather, while being lost

on it. This is why she realizes that, while reporting on her mystical life, it is not she who has to write. Rather “no one” or “nothing” must do this. Only the complete absence of a human author can allow God to be the hand that writes her mystical texts. Referring to the French literary critic Maurice Blanchot, chapter 4, entitled “Nothing Writes,” explains how this selfless condition of writing persists in the way in which a lot of modern twentieth-century literature understands itself.

Thus far the first section of the volume, entitled “Fénelonian Promenades.” It focuses on seventeenth-century French *spiritualité*, with an emphasis on the works and influence of Fénelon. The second section, “The Mystical (of the) Self,” deals with twentieth-century mysticism and mystical thought, and analyzes the way in which three different authors write about the mystical requirement of effacing the self.

The title of chapter 5, “The Power to Say I,” is a quotation from *Gravity and Grace*, the first posthumously published collection of aphorisms by the French mystic Simone Weil. She only turned to Christianity (without ever being baptized) rather late in her short life (she died at the age of thirty-four) and within only a few years, she wrote a remarkable number of “cahiers” combining mystical thoughts with, among other things, reflections on antique literature, Vedic texts and, even, mathematics. The chapter analyses Weil’s aphorisms on the ego and shows how, despite her attempts to annihilate it, the ego persists and ends up being the central problem in her “mystical theory.”

Chapter 6, “Contra-Religious Religion,” presents a close reading of an early work by Kornelis Heiko Miskotte, one of the most well-known Dutch Protestant theologians of the twentieth century. Notwithstanding his antimystical and antireligious Protestantism,⁶ the work explored here offers a gripping account of an experience that cannot be characterized, despite Miskotte’s own vehement protestations to the contrary, as anything but religious and mystical. So, what does it mean when a mystical experience does not even need the term *mystic* to be described correctly? Or when the account of a religious experience can omit the word *religious*? What if the terms *mystical* and *religious* could just as well be replaced by *philosophical*? What does this imply for “mysticism,” “religion,” and “philosophy”? A reflection on Miskotte’s Protestantism—and, more precisely, on his rediscovery of the monotheist axiom (“Not who you think God is, is God: only God is God”)—sheds some light on the core of his “experience” (and of the mystical, religious experience in general).

The title of chapter 7, “The Path of Mercy Means Simply that You Abandon Self,” is a quote from *Silence*, a novel by the Japanese author Shūsaku Endō, published in 1966.⁷ The novel brings us back into the seventeenth century, to Japan this time, where Christianity, after having flourished for a few decades, is now prohibited. Two Portuguese Jesuits illicitly enter the country in order to contact their old mentor, who is rumored to have renounced Christianity and converted to Buddhism, and now to live a quiet life in Osaka. Only one of the two Jesuits survives the journey past the few clandestine Christian communities, but is caught by the authorities. Confronted with his old mentor, he learns firsthand that the rumors are indeed true. The title of this chapter is taken from this moment in the story. If Christian love demands the effacement of the self, does this not mean that the confessional, religious “self” should also be renounced? Does the Jesuit missionary’s love for the persecuted Japanese Christians not require him to cast aside his own Christian self so that their persecution can end? The entire novel revolves around this abysmal question, which in the end remains unanswered.

The title of chapter 8, “As a Drop in the Ocean,” is a quote as well, this time taken from an essay by Michel de Certeau. This famous expert on the history of early modern Christian mysticism emphasizes the tendency toward effacing the self and toward selflessness within that tradition. The God for whom the mystic longs is preeminently the Other, which is why the mystic has to get rid of everything referring to him- or herself—including his or her very own “self”—in order to get to God. Certeau applies this argument to Christianity itself: confronted with a modern culture that opposes Christianity, the latter has to relate to the former as its “Other” and therefore abandon any fear to get lost in this Other. The chapter discusses the implications of Certeau’s radical thesis.

The third and last section of the volume, “Mysticism in a Modern Word,” covers the strange locus that mysticism as well as selflessness occupies in contemporary culture.

Chapter 9, “Down with Religion, Long Live Mysticism” approaches “mysticism” as a contemporary social and cultural phenomenon. Why is it that, from a social perspective, the idea of “mysticism”—or “spirituality,” which is often used synonymously—is on the rise, while “religion,” with which mysticism certainly has an affinity, has a negative connotation? Aiming to answer this question, the analysis focuses not on mysticism and spirituality as such but on the social, and more precisely on

the way in which the social has become *modern*. Here, too, the insight into what modernity is about sheds light on what is, in fact, one of its symptoms: the success story of spirituality and the decline of religion.

Is there a link between mysticism and politics? Does the ideal of effacing the self play a role in theories about political power? The relation between mysticism and politics—or, which amounts to the same thing, between selflessness and power—is much closer than commonly thought. Indeed, those who want to understand the underlying paradigm of political power in the West must read Dionysius the Areopagite, the “founding father” of negative theology and a decisive point of reference for the entire mystical tradition. This, at least, is the thesis of the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben. Chapter 10, “Selflessly Powerful,” discusses Agamben’s analysis. Inspired by the French philosopher Claude Lefort, this chapter also reflects upon the persistence of negative theology in the way political power is legitimized within modern democracy.

Is the problematic of selflessness limited to the domain of mysticism? Chapter 11, “Selflessness and Science,” discovers selflessness in a number of domains where it is least expected: the erotic libertine novels of the eighteenth century, and the materialism that inspired the paradigm for modern science and the human sciences to be put on the same footing during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Despite their diversity, these domains all share a formally similar selflessness with mysticism, yet draw different conclusions from it. Unlike in mysticism, selflessness does not emerge as a proper theme in any of the other domains, not even in the human sciences—except one: psychoanalysis, which can only do so by criticizing the paradigm of the ruling human sciences. The latter is why, notwithstanding its massive success in the twentieth century, psychoanalysis has lost most of its credibility in our age—mistakenly, as will be explained. For an understanding of selflessness and its inherent link with the modern self, psychoanalysis can broaden horizons.



Just to close the introduction, a few more words about mysticism, the theme of this volume.

When an age such as ours takes an interest in mysticism, it is not in the last instance because of the effacement of the self that it promotes. The selfish, ego-oriented age in which we live seems to find in this tradition a welcome counterbalance. But do we not, with mysticism,

introduce first and foremost its paradox? Is our fascination with it not a way of giving the ego back its typical, modern, self-assured position at the very moment we think we are losing it?

Because who else but the ego walks the path of effacing the self and fulfils the deed in which the ego relinquishes, surrenders, gives way, or destroys itself? Does the selflessness to which we surrender in our fascination with mysticism not secretly prove how strong our ego is? Does it not lay bare that our ego remains the master over our existence, whatever may occur, even the loss of our own “self”? Do we really understand what happens when the mystic leaves the “self” behind? Or do we use mysticism precisely to avoid any confrontation with what is really at stake here?

The modern paradigm, as becomes clear in this volume, makes the mystical experience, where selflessness is at issue, harsher and more abysmal. Today’s enthusiasm for mysticism can also serve to cover—or even deny—the harshness of this abyss. And it is precisely to this abyss that the modern ego must relate, as openly and clearly as possible. For this “mystical” abyss has everything to do with the ground on which modernity rests. If this volume turns to the mystical tradition, it is to discover in it reflections on the abyss that is at the base of ourselves. Mysticism’s selflessness is not what the modern ego *lacks*, something that is forgotten or lost; it is, on the contrary, what constitutes the core, the “ground” of our modern ego.

Mysticism might have the reputation of being of all times, yet it definitely does not escape history. Taking position against the idea that mysticism is a universal phenomenon transcending all kinds of historical and cultural contingencies, the diversity of chapters in this book defends the thesis that it is a thoroughly contingent and historical phenomenon. The reason why we should be interested in mysticism today, is not to transcend the limits of our Western point of view but rather to better realize how we are characterized by these limits—and how typically Western and modern it is to intend to escape the limits of our own perspective and to embrace the universal.



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