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The Colorful Depictions of God in Mystical Consciousness[1]

PAUL C. MARTIN

INTRODUCTION

In 1960 Walter T. Stace suggestively wrote that "[t]here are underground connections between the mystical and the aesthetic (whether in poetry or in other forms of art) which are at present obscure and unexplained."[2] Since that statement there has been tremendous work done by commentators and scholars on bringing these connections to the surface, and in this essay I want to make a brief contribution to this ongoing effort.[3] My basic contention is that there is a concordance, a harmony to be sure, between artistical consciousness and mystical consciousness, which is tantamount to a meeting of minds, and which is shown by the intersecting urge to depict what is felt, or thought, to be beautiful or sublime. The relationship between these two modes of apprehending reality—in the mundane and the spiritual—can be regarded as metaphorical, if it involves a transference of ideas or words. More specifically, the association is predicated on analogy, for both of these conscious endeavors are dependent on cognitive support for realization and recognition. An indirect comparison may be admitted by introducing the terms painting and consciousness, such that art is to mysticism as painting is to consciousness, with the mediating force as color. One consequence of this association is that it can be used to critique the notion of ineffability. I would argue that the encounter with the divine and its experiential concomitants are, as a general rule, descriptively available as a coloration, even where that awareness is designated as being beyond images.[4] If artistic consciousness can be situated as an intentional activity, then so too can mystical or spiritual consciousness, since we know that it is informed by linguistic, psychological, and theological conditions.[5] In whatever way it is determined, the ephemeral or persistent awareness of divinity involves an expressive and reflective act of being. I shall attempt to read mystical consciousness correlatively through an artistic lens, and to that end I shall illustratively appeal to ideas and terminology employed by art critics and historians, with their use of allusive and metaphorical language. Just as artists transfer their haptic and perceptual consciousness of the real or imaginary world onto a canvas, which can then be admired, so mystics fix their haptic

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Classroom, courtesy Émil Manfrini

and perceptual consciousness of divinity onto a canvas—a canvas of enunciation—which can then be appreciated (by themselves in the first instance).[6]

COLORING THE PICTURE OF DIVINITY

The influential Renaissance architect, artist, and writer Leon Battista Alberti (1404–72) asserted in his pioneering treatise *De pictura* that painting has a "divine power" as it can make "the absent be present."[7] He wrote that painters should perfect their art by depicting an *historia*, a narrative scene drawn from literary, mythological or religious themes, which ought to act as an ideal and virtual stimulus to the mind and senses of the spectator.[8] In theorizing the art of painting he initially proposed a three-fold division:[9] "Painting is realized therefore through the drawing of profiles, composition, and the reception of light."[10] The first is to do with "circumscrib[ing] the trace of the edges through lines,"[11] the second is to do with "that procedure of depicting according to which the parts are arranged in a work of painting,"[12] and the third is to do with how the use of colors enhances "the grace and beauty of a picture," though "the highest quality and mastery reside only in the distribution of black and white."[13] The influential French painter and writer Charles-Alphonse Dufresnoy (1611–68) in his didactic poem *De arte graphica* divided the art of painting into invention/disposition, design (that is, drawing), and color or chroma.[14] By analogy, if the art of painting is based on the experience of circumscribing, composing, and coloring a picture, then so does the art of mysticism involve an experience

of outlining, placing, and coloring a picture, which is the imaged or intellectual form of divine light. (All of this may relate to work upon an immaterial surface—the mind—or to work upon a material surface—the written text.) On further analogy, the mystical consciousness "invents" the *machine* of divinity as a pictorial rendition, where the mind draws and colors the figure of God in the tableau of the soul.[15] The academic prescriptions on formulating pictures were called into question by the advent of modernist art in the nineteenth century and subsequently by the turn to abstraction in the twentieth century, yet these outlooks are no less applicable to a pictorial reading of mystical consciousness as I shall demonstrate it here.

In what follows I want to focus on one of the constitutive pictorial elements, namely color, which serves to engender the gracious space of mystical consciousness. In medieval theology the idea of the Trinity as being akin to an equilateral triangle was propounded by the Franciscan friars Robert Grosseteste (approximately 1168–1253) and Roger Bacon (approximately 1214–94); although as a Manichean notion it had been condemned by Augustine.[16] The Christian theosopher Jakob Böhme (1575–1624) in his *Aurora oder Morgenröte im Aufgang (Morning Glow in the Ascendant)* adopted the divine triangle "as the all-pervasive principle of organisation in the universe, as in the 'Trinity' of colour primaries."[17] At one stage, the German Romantic painter and theorist Philipp Otto Runge (1777–1810) assigned blue to the Father, red to the Son, and yellow to the Holy Ghost.[18] His approach, although scientifically based, was also motivated by an "effusive" mysticism, derived especially from the writings of Böhme.[19] If the Trinity is representable as triangular and if this is corresponded with the triangular prism that can refract the light of the sun into rainbow colors then by analogy the human mind as *imago dei* is like a triangular prism that refracts the (white) light of God. The cognitive prism might have the vertices of imagination, reason, and understanding, to use the threefold demarcation given by Richard of St. Victor (d. 1173), who corresponded these faculties respectively to thinking, meditation, and contemplation.[20] However, for my purposes I shall favor a Kantian-like model of intuition, imagination, and understanding, in which the representation of objects that sensibly appear before us is made meaningful through the synthesizing activity of the mind, and which can be spiritually analogized. It follows that the majestic light of God is realized and recognized through a spectral display as determined by the mental faculties. Metaphorically, as the divine light strikes the atmosphere of the mind it is reflected and refracted by the water crystals of the beclouded imagination, and understood in colorful ways. The parameters of the mind are necessarily validated in mystical consciousness, even in the move to annulment. An anonymous fourteenth-century writer explained that the mental cloud as a cover for the world of creaturely being needs to be passed through, or "forgot-

ten," if the expanse of divine light is to be seen; equally, the mental cloud as a foggy space that quenches the divine light and leaves God "unknown" needs to be burnt off by the sun of love.[21]

When the French writer on art and amateur painter Roger de Piles (1635–1709) opined that color is what renders objects sensible to sight,[22] there is an analogy that God is sighted or understood through the imaginary placement of colors, and reified in the enunciation. This recognition is facilitated by the thoughtful constructs incurred in naming the divine. So, for example, the Benedictine nun Gertrude of Helfta (1256–approximately 1302) writes of being clothed with the merits that will prepare her for the reception of Christ at communion: the white gown of his Innocence, the violet tunic of his Humility, the green mantle of his Hope, and the golden cloak of his Love.[23] Although the human eye is capable of distinguishing between some two million colors, only a very few of these have ever been named;[24] correspondingly, although the spiritual eye is capable of making distinctions among the vast range of divine aspectual colors, only a very few of these have ever been named theologically. In metaphysical terms, if the concatenating light of God is perceived by the soul as three beams, then these correspond to the optical color primaries, red, green, and blue. The mind in its orientation to the world is mixing these lights in different proportions and screening the varied colors that make up phenomenal reality. The aim of the mystic is to recall the chromatic purity of triune awareness, to live again in the Trinitarian being. When the true state of contemplation is grasped, the blankness of God may be discerned, just as the three primaries when added together will appear as white light. It means climbing the ladder of love into the secret wisdom of divine light, above the form or image of sense and imagination.[25] In physical terms, if the myriad light of the world illuminates the scope of the threefold mind as a pigmentary functioning, then it corresponds to the material color primaries, red, yellow, and blue. The mind in its descriptive and interpretive applications is mixing the paints to produce the signal colors of phenomenal reality. The mystic aims to remember the pure monochromes that are diagrammatic of the Trinity; and by contemplating the poverty of learned ignorance the hidden nature of God shall be realized, just as the three primaries when put together will appear as dark. The Flemish canon John Ruusbroec (1293–1381) reflects on the holy union with God as reckoning "no way or path, no form, figure, or color," which indeed is a "modeless abyss of fathomless beatitude," and a "dark resplendence."[26] In his treatise *The Sparkling Stone* he advocates spiritual exercises that will lead to the attainment of an "imageless bareness," although in doing so he appeals to imagery such as the consuming fire of love and the river of immersion.[27] The knowledge acquired through a spiritual state of awareness is a combinatory one, and is like an amalgam of colorful representations. It is a light or dark

admixture of thought and words, which can be mystically utilized to announce divine consciousness.

In mystical theology God is the extraordinary blackness of the deep, a well of absolute light, which means that God is "invisible," either because of being opaque or blinding. The soul is pulled into this oblivion where it sees all and yet sees nothing. Thus, the Franciscan nun Angela of Foligno (1248–1309) wonders at the exalted state of immersion in the love of God and Jesus Christ crucified and exclaims: "When I am in that darkness I do not remember anything about anything human, or the God-man, or anything which has a form. Nevertheless, I see all and I see nothing."[28] In truth, God is at the same time a black white, or white black. At any rate, the domain of God's being is pervasive, and the divine light suffuses through the imaginal realm. It is as if white light is seen against the white light of awareness, or as if black light is seen against the black light of consciousness.[29] In artistic terms, the intuitive perception of God that is initially received in black and white is sketched with the pencil of imagination; after that, and working in conjunction with the understanding, the mystic is able to lay in the colors. This act of "filling in" the picture of divinity is to endow God with a series of appellations, such as love and beauty. Mystical realization and recognition in other words is a *coloring*, and it is the qualities imputed to the terminally unknowable God that will lend divine consciousness its chromaticity. The ascribed color of God, as exhibited in the divine presence, is dependent on the flourish of light made by the attentive mind. This sense of color trades in the enunciation. Dufresnoy proclaims that color is "the deceiving, but charming grace in pictures, and complement of drawing."[30] This could apply to the work of mystical thought in that it involves designing the imaginative encounter with God, and then coloring it understandingly—that is, aspectually—by utilizing light and shade (chiaroscuro); it is then rendered by the enunciation. The mystic can know the deceptive beauty as frustration since the communication of the experience may be like mixing the colors awkwardly in the mind such that it only produces a muddy, or brown, appearance, which becomes a designator of ineffability. When Roger de Piles defines painting as "[a]n art, which through its design and use of color imitates all visible objects on a flat surface,"[31] this can serve as an analogous definition of mystical consciousness, since the apperception of the divine realm in the soul is garnered by the attributive imposing of line and color, and reproduced on the flat (plane) surface of the enunciation.

From a Kantian standpoint it might be said that mystics are intuiting the sensible manifold of the light of God, where these representations are unified by the work of imagination and brought under concepts of the understanding, which then leads to a judgment of the state of consciousness through speech

and/or writing. In his book *The Rich Mines of Venetian Painting* the art critic and painter Marco Boschini (1613–1705) wrote:

> If one wants to draw a round ball, then one must, of course, use a compass to make a circle, but this is not sufficient, for without shadows, highlights and half-tones, this outline, round, or circle could never be said to be a globe or a ball. It would be simply a mathematical circle which requires the artifice of chiaroscuro to be rounded up in each of its parts. And this waits for the brush-stroke to represent nature with the artifice of colour, for without colour design remains imperfect.[32]

This can imply that the mystical imagination is like a compass that draws a circle around the perception of divinity, delineating it as the rounded light of God, so to speak; but, in order to make God *present*—that is spherical, or volumetric, the understanding highlights and shadows the form, which is rendered by the brushstrokes of the colorful enunciation (that color being imparted by the use of figurative language). Looking at this another way, the mystic apprehends the excellent light of God, and discerns in it the kaleidoscopic image of divine presence, which is accorded a defined value; but in trying to describe it the tonality is reduced: the spectacular light of divinity is made lacklustre by the enunciation. A relativity is at work here: the imaginary considered alone is a grayish color as compared with the intense light of God seen in the intuition; and likewise, the enunciation is a grayish color as compared with the lovely hues of the imaginary. At the perduring moment of the encounter with divinity the impression may be astonishing and marvelous; but, as mystics employ their reason and understanding it may become amenable to comprehension, when seen in the light of received tradition; yet still, the experience may be measured as ineffable. Also, by dint of the fact that the enunciatory reports of mystical consciousness are produced when the cognitive faculties are in operation, this is when critical reflection and judgment are brought into play. The Carmelite saint Teresa of Avila (1515–82) recalls the state of rapture experienced in the sixth dwelling, where the soul is held in suspension, while it is being shown imaginative and intellectual visions, and it is only with the restoration of the faculties that these unforgettable events can be spoken about. Although their content is indescribable, Teresa at least determines their pedagogical value for inspiring her sister nuns to model their lives on Christ.[33]

In the pictorial world of mystical consciousness the figural presence of God is set in high relief, inscribed through the use of black and white (or dark and light). Christ himself manifestly stands out against the foil of mental darkness.[34] Dufresnoy writes that there should be only one principal source of light in a painting: “Pure white can either advance into the foreground or retreat into the background; with black, it advances; alone, it retreats into the

***Light & Dark*, courtesy Girish Suryawanshi**

distance; pure black, on the other hand, advances to the very foreground."[35] As Roger de Piles remarks, black achieves this effect because it "is the heaviest of all Colours, the most earthly, and the most sensible," whereas white is "the lightest of all Colours."[36] If the mystical intention is to bring the splendor of God forward into consciousness, then it has to be shaded with noir awareness, an acknowledgment that images and words will not finally suffice. However, if the divine presence is advanced into propinquity by darkening the picture of the imaginary, then this very act will eventually obscure the memory, and thus the experience of God will fade into ineffability. This is the paradox of mysticism: the realization that God is nearby (close at hand) connotes an unknowing blackout, but at the same time the recognition of that nearness implies a knowing white. The Dominican preacher Henry Suso (approximately 1295–1366) maintains that God as simple being is completely present, but can only be known distantly by losing oneself in the dark inward stillness; it is to fall into the divine Nothing, which is the singularity of God, and which is adventured by a jubilant transport into the naked light.[37] In practice, the enunciation needs to use gradations of light and shadow in order to seal the recollection. From a different angle, it is as if God is being viewed in declining light, and so the color of understanding takes on a different hue. For the artist–mystic the faithfulness to God is a twilight consciousness, which progresses a sense of amazement that carries the mind up to the heights of contemplation, where it is illuminated by the sun of understanding.[38] Yet this exposure to the divine

light is a balm for the soul: "It is not a radiance which dazzles, but a soft whiteness and an infused radiance which, without wearying the eyes, causes them the greatest delight; nor are they wearied by the brightness which they see in seeing this Divine beauty."[39]

Phillip Ball points out that "[t]he idea that objects have an intrinsic color, independent of the lighting conditions, reflections, and so forth, has been a persistent fallacy in Western art," and among those who disputed the error was Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519),[40] who pointedly referred to the varying effects of looking through colored pieces of glass at a landscape.[41] Our view of the world is surely a tinted one, and this extends to the concept of divinity, for God exhibits a panoply of colors in accordance with one's religious and sociocultural background. Indeed, it is the imagination that selectively colorizes the light space of the superlative God, as it is bordered by the understanding. Leonardo was much concerned with the role of dark and light in creating the impression of three-dimensional relief, and the effect of shadows in the perception of objects.[42] He advised painters who might be confused by the unclear edges of shadows that they should resist trying to make them definite; rather, shadows are to be treated as merging with the light, and shown as "united without strokes or marks, in the manner of smoke."[43] This is the so-called technique of *sfumato*, which literally is the imperceptible diffusion of smoke in the atmosphere.[44] It was fundamental to Leonardo's method of finely working with paints so as to achieve delicate effects of translucency; ultimately, the layered refinements allow the picture to reveal its own internal depths (as such, it is counter to the idea of the picture as a window onto an external reality).[45] This method of production, known as "glazing," in which "the softened contours and eroded chroma of the darks" are set down on a brownish, virtually monochrome underpainting (the ground), results in a distinctive tonal unity.[46] The mystic may consider a similar problem when wanting to define the vaporous perception of God in the intuition, which is a confusion of the Holy Spirit wafting through the sensible altar of the mind.[47] However, through a meditative focus this spiritual awareness can be smoothly realized by the airy glazing of imagination on the dark ground of the understanding, to produce a tonal unity. The depths of the divine presence are pictured in the coherent enunciation. So the anchoress Julian of Norwich (approximately 1343–1416) can write that in order to behold the sovereign love, truth, and wisdom of God a contemplative intent is needed, which is "an high, unperceivable prayer" that springs from the divine ground. Her lucid exposition is meant to show how the work of God's mercy and grace through the Church leads the soul into oneness, or the "hye depnesse [exalted depth]," as she puts it.[48]

Normally, the mystical consciousness is captivated by the patterning of light in the soul. There is an affinity between what the mystic is trying to do

in the imaginary—so far at least as I am putting it in this essay—and that of Impressionist painters in the 1870s and 1880s. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, the Impressionists regularly painted in the open air (*en plein air*), which was unconventional for the time, since the accepted academic practice was to make sketches outdoors and then execute the painting indoors in the studio. As a consequence, Impressionist paintings with their bright coloring and vigorous brushwork were thought to have the appearance of being sketchy and incomplete, by comparison with the work of the Old Masters paintings with their muted or somber coloring and fine brushwork, finished with detail on a flawless (varnished) surface.[49] Secondly, Impressionists attempted to "paint the light" under shifting atmospheric conditions, and so they rapidly conveyed their sensory impressions to canvas.[50] As the French poet Jules Laforgue (1860–87) wrote in an essay for a show on French Impressionism that was held in Berlin during October 1883:

> In a landscape bathed in light in which living beings are modeled like colored monochromes, the academic sees only white light in its pure state, covering the entire scene. Instead of perceiving this scene bathed in a deathly whiteness, the Impressionist sees a multitude of vibrant oppositions, a breakdown of a wealth of prismatic tones. . . . The Impressionist sees and renders Nature such as it is, that is, solely in terms of colored vibrations."[51]

This effort of animatedly notating visual effects is described in the self-expressive handling of paint, which is characteristically seen in the *tache*, "the distinctive coloured touch or mark."[52] The Impressionists made particular use of scientific discoveries in the field of color theory in the nineteenth century, such as those by the French chemist Michel-Eugène Chevreul (1786–1889), with his studies on the contrasting effects obtained by juxtaposing complementary colors.[53] Ball writes that "[t]here is a sense in which all the Impressionists painted in white, for their works are typically spectrally inclusive, leaving out no primary or secondary, . . . Thus it has been said that a Monet painting, like the color wheels used by Maxwell to study additive mixing, would blur to a silvery gray if spun."[54] From their observations, the Impressionists saw shadows as being "infused with color," rather than as being wholly black; indeed, shadows have a violet color, which is complementary to the (supposed) yellow of sunlight.[55]

The status of mystical artists is on a par with that of Impressionist artists, since both are sensibly enhancing their contact with reality, divine and physical, through the aegis of light. Mystics are trying to paint the flickering presence of God as apprehended and located in the imaginary cityscape, landscape, or seascape, and to resolve it for future reference. The kind of mystical consciousness epitomized by heightened experience of the natural

world may be construed as an "outdoors" or "plain air" realization, while the kind of mystical consciousness epitomized by spiritual life in monastic orders may be construed as an "indoors" or "studio" realization. (Needless to say, in practice these are not mutually exclusive, but are rather converse ways of facing God, of paying the coin of divine charity as it were.) In the mode of nature mysticism the variegations of the colorful world play on the mind, and are in accordance with the presentation of divinity. Mystical consciousness ordains an impressive encounter with God, a fragrant conception of paradise that summons the garden of light wherein holiness dwells. The awareness is conveyed rapidly to the canvas of imagination, which is primed by the understanding, and stabilized in the enunciation. This means that the resonant light discerned in the soul as the fleeting movements of the divine presence is handily expressed by the chords of experiential knowledge. It is the occasion for a spirited fidelity to God accented by the intricate touches of color. Where the contemplative or ecstatic attunement to divine being is lyrically rendered it is no less than a graphic depiction of consciousness.[56] The more intimate the experience of divine presence the more spectrally inclusive is the consciousness. As a profound realization, it is substantiated in the Eucharist, that disk of deliverance for late medieval mystical piety. If the triad Father–Son–Holy Spirit equates to the primary colors blue, red, green then its revolutionary inculcation appears as white; and so the spinning mind that envisages God is able to see into the crystalline space of the Trinity.[57] This fortunate recognition is possible because in the radiant light of divine being the shadows of understanding are not black, but rather infused with the reflected colors of imagination.

The experiential flow of painterly consciousness shown by the Impressionists typifies the nature of mystical understanding (sight), but there are also correspondences that can be made with other artistic movements, such as Neo-Impressionism, as promoted by Georges Seurat (1859–91) and Paul Signac (1863–1935), who tended to adhere to scientific principles of color separation ("Divisionism"). Seurat employed a "pointillist" technique, where he sought to depict the brilliance of outdoor light by laboriously placing regular dabs of complementary colors next to each other on the canvas, which would produce an optical effect as colors blended in the eye—a process Seurat called *chromo-luminarisme* or *peinture optique*.[58] In Seurat's famous painting *Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* (1884–86) the spectator experiences different effects depending on viewing distance, "ranging from a point at which the dots, dashes and strokes are separately discernible, through an intermediate stage in which a kind of optical oscillation takes place, to a total fusion in which the juxtaposed complementaries largely neutralise each other."[59] A number of artists rebelled against the naturalistic style of the Impressionists, and notable among these so-called Post-Impressionists was Paul

Cézanne (1839–1906), who is regarded as the father of modern art. In his perception of the world he reduced objects to patches of color, which he set about arranging and assembling as a meaningful whole. This realization is achieved by ordering the sensible images as parallel to nature in a harmonious relationship;[60] moreover, the spatial configuration of these color entities shapes the visual impressions of reality. He often used a distinctive painterly technique of systematically applying broad diagonal strokes, a method of rhythmic brushwork that has been called "constructive stroke." On the paint-laden surface he coordinated light evenly rather than directionally, with colors that pronounce their own effulgence; or, he sometimes left the primed canvas exposed.[61] He stated: "Light is not a thing that can be reproduced, but must be represented by means of something else, by means of colour."[62] The lustrous work of Vincent van Gogh (1853–90) was driven by an endearing religious sentiment and responsiveness to the world, and he gave able expression to this feeling in his fetching still lifes of flowers.[63] The vivid colors and rich textures that are characteristic of van Gogh's late work are also evident in the brief avant-garde movement of Fauvism, a leading member of which was Henri Matisse (1869–1954). Over his long career Matisse favored a decorative art form suggestive of equilibrium and purity, which was balanced and organized by flat planes of color.[64] In his austere experimental period, he referred to black as a luminous color, and indeed said of his picture *Gourds* (1916): "In this work I began to use pure black as a color of light and not as a color of darkness."[65]

Human consciousness is a study in contrast, with mundane knowledge complemented by spiritual knowledge; actually, more than this, the human and divine are like complementary colors and shine next to each other. For the sake of argument let us say that the mind, as it were, places dabs of complementary colors as it paints the nature of reality, where these hues can be metaphorically correlated with affective states and mental concepts; in other words, dispositions and knowledges are matched with color. What does this mean for the analogy of the pointillist technique? From a viewing perspective, it could be that engaging with the world as a self-interested exercise is as if to see the separate "dots, dashes and strokes" of thought in the painterly idea of reality, and so not to recognize it as a coherent whole. As the mind moves away from egocentric concerns into contemplation of the eminent light of noble love it reaches a stage at which scintillation takes place in the soul, and the glory of God becomes apparent. By detaching altogether from selfish preoccupations of the mind, the soul attains perfect harmony with the Trinitarian state, or the "Far-Near" (*Loingprés*), as one writer has succinctly put it.[66] From an applied perspective, the natural sense of God as indwelling the world is structured by the mind to emerge as a colorful spatial presence, which is modulated by mystical consciousness and revealed as "a mosaic of prismatic facets."[67] It is

Mann's Chapel 1 © Stephen Jesse Taylor

the constructive work of imagination that builds a bridge between crimson earth and azure heaven, and allows the understanding to span the territories of divinity. This transitional *passage* is enjoined by following the way of Christ.[68] For the Dominican nun Catherine of Siena (1347–80) the teaching of Christ crucified is the stone bridge over which pilgrim travelers can cross to reach the gate of heaven, the key to which is the divine blood.[69] Although the accurate representation of the perceptual acuity of God may not be possible (or even necessary) it is still the catalyst for a transformative consciousness of love, which is declared by a profuse bouquet of light and a precious gift of wisdom. John Ruusbroec avers that the divine inspiration nurtured by the shining sun of Christ is what enables the flowers of virtue to blossom and bear fruit.[70] The startling perspicacity of the mystical realization of divinity is marked to luminescent effect in the enunciation, whether that is delivered in the manner of speech or writing, though the former is perhaps more fitted to communicating the dynamic possibilities of expression. The mystic can affirm or disaffirm what it is to see God in a decorative gaze upon the colored planes of mental space;[71] but that knowledge at least requires a participatory ground, as Meister Eckhart explains: "If I am to receive color, I have to have something about me that belongs to color. I will never perceive color unless I have the being of color in me. I shall never behold God except precisely in that in which God sees himself."[72] When the mural of the intellect as the image of God is painted black, then the spark of the soul will flash into life.[73]

The colorful expressive commitment or emotional entanglement of the artists of the Fauvist style at the beginning of the twentieth century was taken a step further in Germany, and found a home in the Expressionist movement, where it was championed by the Russian exile painter Vasily Kandinsky (1866–1944). His outlook was motivated by a spiritual awareness, in which art arises from intuition as an "inner necessity."[74] In his famous text of 1911/12, *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* he proclaimed: "Painting is an art, and art in general is not a mere purposeless creating of things that dissipate themselves in a void, but a power that has a purpose and must serve the development and refinement of the human soul—the movement of the triangle."[75] Kandinsky was intrigued by the psychological effects of color, and like many other painters he sought to correlate color and music.[76] He postulated that there are two great divisions of color, namely the opposite pairings of warm and cold, and light and dark. The first distinction, which I take to be relevant here, relates to approaching yellow or blue; in effect, the inclination to yellow is a movement toward the spectator, while the inclination to blue is a movement away from the spectator. Besides this horizontal movement, there is a circular movement, which is eccentric (centrifugal) in the case of yellow and concentric (centripetal) in the case of blue.[77] The spiritual ideas expounded by

Kandinsky were shared by the German–Swiss painter Paul Klee (1879–1940), who, in his surrealist trajectory, uncovered the symbolic imaginary of natural forms.[78] He begins his creative credo with the dictum: "Art does not reproduce the visible but makes visible."[79] Klee was adept at playing the chromatic keyboard.[80] In his series of watercolors painted while in Tunisia in 1914 he reveled in color, writing in his diary: "Color possesses me. I don't have to pursue it. It will possess me always, I know it. That is the meaning of this happy hour: Color and I are one. I am a painter."[81] The investment in abstraction made by modern artists in the early twentieth century was basically linked to the expression of feelings, moods, and states of mind; in addition, the flatness rather than illusiveness of the pictorial space came to be emphasized.[82] Indeed, the motif as parallel to the picture plane is conducive to presenting a frontal aspect and allows the evocation of the tactile materiality of the painting surface. This is nicely shown in the style of Abstract Expressionism (or New York School) during the 1940s and 1950s, where a characteristic feature was the sensual input of the artist engaged in an "all-over composition," with drenching or pulsing colors impacted through the use of oil or metallic paint.[83] The German–American painter Hans Hofmann, who has been described as "a catalyst and nexus of the [Abstract Expressionist] movement,"[84] astutely wrote in 1948: "In fact, the whole world, as we experience it visually, comes to us through the mystic realm of color. Our entire being is nourished by it. This mystic quality of color should likewise find expression in a work of art."[85]

As mystics let their eyes wander over the palette of the mind, which is laid out with the colors used for naming and qualifying God,[86] they are wondrously imbued with the need to depict divine consciousness. The cyclic relationship with God is variously registered in the mystical imaginary as consciousness of the divine presence approaching and receding, in a moody series of reflections. The movement generated by the incessant desire to be with God is a state frequently attested by mystics, and this predilection for knowing color is a spiraling realization, which is enforced by the power of love. The Cistercian nun Beatrice of Nazareth (1200–68) lived in the alternating consciousness of God, and her ardent longing to know Jesus Christ saw her rise to his supernal embrace and then fall back to her body and self-will; this process is vehemently established in the seven degrees of love.[87] It is a "warm" (sensate) depiction of the presence of God, where the mystic is saturated with desire for integration, and yearns to see the lavish light, to experience moreover the impasto of love. Artistically speaking, the hallmark of the mystical quest is the concern to make tangible and visible that which is intangible and invisible; it is commonly realized by mystical writers in terms of passionate and sacramental abstraction. The intent is to synchronize with the divine, to be in conformation with redemptive being. So Julian of Norwich assimilates herself to Christ's saying

that his suffering for humanity "is a joy, a blisse, an endlesse liking to me," which gives her to understand, through a token of divine courtesy, the recognition that the path to salvation lies in Trinitarian understanding.[88] In the case of "desire-laden" mysticism, as it might generally be called, the divine presence is an epiphany of joy, where the mind is possessed by color (images) in the communion or union with God. Standing transfixed in front of God, the mystic devotedly surrenders to the swirl of exciting color in the senses, and is swept up by the incandescent sound of blessedness. The English mystic Richard Rolle (1290/1300–1349) enthuses that the fervent contemplation of love in Christ makes the body and soul aflame with honey fire, while the topaz mind sings the praises of God with a sweet melody.[89]

CONCLUSION

In this essay I have tried to illustrate the concordance between art and mysticism, where this analogous relationship is metaphorically described in colorful ways. Both artists and mystics are motivated to render what is visible, or what is made to be visible, either to the eyes of the body or the eyes of the soul, and they are free to paint their perception of reality by dint of a sensible or supersensible reception of light. Spiritual realization can be depicted in a naturalistic or abstract way, and moreover the search for divinity is a paintable conceptualization, which is materialized by the articulation of consciousness. The painterly knowledge of God may be obtained in a threefold way: mystics first draw their intuition of the divine light into lines and shapes, then they compose it in their imagination by positioning the divine figures (usually including themselves), and then they color this apprehension through the manner of understanding. Alternatively, the mystical imagination may choose not to represent the intuited lines and shapes by reference to the world, but rather to engage with them for their own sake, and thereby lose itself in the expression of a colorful understanding. The attempt to display the multidimensional experience on a two-dimensional text involves the mystical writer having to resort to illusionary techniques, such as figurative language—the analogy of perspectival modes—in order to facilitate a vision into depth for discerning the eternal sublime beauty of God. Equally however, the flat surface available for rendering the multicolored space of mystical consciousness has its own integrity for recognizing the divine as brightly present or darkly absent. Put another way, mystical consciousness may execute the work of understanding God by showing how the divine reaches *through* the plane of words, or it may execute the work of understanding God by showing how the divine lies *in* the plane of words. The place of God is a depiction realized through the colorful illumination of the Word, or it is a depiction realized in the colorful embodiment of the Word. For the artist involved in the creative activity of painting there is often

a felt sense of wonder, and a satisfaction in seeing the work appreciated and enjoyed by others; likewise, for the mystic involved in contemplating the divine there is a wonder in seeing (in a broad sense) God, understanding its profundity, and then making the descriptive work available for the edification of others.

NOTES

1. I am grateful to the two anonymous reviewers for their careful reading and critical observations on the first manuscript of this essay, and also to Douglas E. Christie for prompting me to sharpen my argument.
2. Walter T. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy* (London: Macmillan, 1961), 81.
3. My analysis here is limited to European and North American art and (Christian) mysticism, but I believe that it can be extended to Jewish and Islamic art and mysticism, within their own contexts. For reasons of space, I have not been able to consider the schools of Netherlandish and Spanish painting, which otherwise have made such a vital contribution to Western art.
4. A comment by Phyllis Hodgson is apposite here, where she says that the anonymous author of the fourteenth-century treatise *The Clowde of Unknowyng* "promotes imageless worship by analogy and illustration, and in vivid, sensuous, often concrete imagery and emotive diction urges a total abstraction from all forms and shapes provided by reason, imagination or the sensory faculties" (Phyllis Hodgson, ed. *The Cloud of Unknowing and Related Treatises on Contemplative Prayer* (Exeter: Catholic Records Office, [1982], lvii). It is worth keeping in mind that historically painters have often counted black and white as colors, on the basis of the Aristotelian seven-color scale in which the "intermediate" colors of yellow, red, purple, green, and blue are only proportional mixtures of black and white (Martin Kemp, *The Science of Art: Optical Themes in Western Art from Brunelleschi to Seurat* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990], 264–74).
5. See William Harmless, S.J., *Mystics* (New York: Oxford, 2008), 225–69.
6. Throughout history artists have used a variety of supports for painting, including board, linen, paper and vellum, wood panels, walls, and so on. I shall generally use "canvas" as a catchall term.
7. Rocco Sinisgalli, ed. and trans., *On Painting: A New Translation and Critical Edition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 44, para. 25. Alberti produced Italian and Latin versions of his little book.
8. Alberti explains that the painted *historia* is observed as if through an open window (39, para. 19). Christian K. Kleinbub clarifies that Alberti did not intend this as "an actual window view," but rather "he desired painting's experience to be like that of looking *through* or *beyond* the flat picture plane" (*Vision and the Visionary in Raphael* [University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011], 55).
9. See Sinisgalli, *On Painting*, 49–73, paras. 30–50.
10. Sinisgalli, *On Painting*, 50, para. 31.
11. Sinisgalli, *On Painting*, 50, para. 31.
12. Sinisgalli, *On Painting*, 53, para. 33. The "parts" here refers to the arrangement of figures (bodies).
13. Sinisgalli, *On Painting*, 68, para. 46.
14. Thomas Puttfarken, *The Discovery of Pictorial Composition: Theories of Visual Order in Painting 1400–1800* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 264–71. Dufresnoy's poem was utilized as an authority for codifying rules of art in European academies of art in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. See Charles-Alphonse Dufresnoy, *De arte graphica* (Paris, 1668), ed., trans. and comm. Christopher Allen, Yasmin Haskell and Frances Muecke (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 2005).

15. Dufresnoy writes: "On the white canvas we must first lay out—conceived by the powerful mind—the machine of our picture, or what in our language is called the *invention*" (*De arte graphica*, 183).
16. John Gage, *Color and Meaning: Art, Science, and Symbolism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 124.
17. Kemp, *Science of Art*, 296.
18. Gage, *Color and Meaning*, 175.
19. Kemp, *Science of Art*, 296.
20. See his treatise Richard of St. Victor, *The Mystical Ark*, chaps. 3–4, in *The Twelve Patriarchs; The Mystical Ark; Book Three of the Trinity*, trans. Grover A. Zinn (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 155–58.
21. See James Walsh, S.J., ed., *The Cloud of Unknowing* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981).
22. He has his mouthpiece Pamphilus say: "la Couleur est ce qui rend les objets sensibles à la vûë" (Roger De Piles, *Dialogue sur le Coloris* [Paris, 1699], 4). Available at http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k111107n (accessed October 12, 2013).
23. Gertrude of Helfta, *The Herald of Divine Love*, trans. and ed. Margaret Winkworth (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 179.
24. Rolf G. Kuehni, *Color: An Introduction to Practice and Principles*, 3rd ed. (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2013), 79, 211.
25. See St. John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, trans. and ed. E. Allison Peers (New York: Image Books/Doubleday, 2005), esp. 2.17–20, 169–87.
26. See John Ruusbroec, *The Spiritual Espousals and Other Works*, trans. James A. Wiseman, O.S.B. (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), respectively 244, 265, 267.
27. *Spiritual Espousals and Other Works*, 155–84.
28. Angela of Foligno, *Complete Works*, trans. Paul Lachance, O.F.M. (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 205.
29. The Ukrainian born painter, theorist Kazimir Malevich (1878–1935), who founded the Suprematist style in pre-Revolutionary Russia, configured his art as the idealized geometric shapes of painterly being, and in his philosophical color system he gave special status to black and white, which are "above and beyond all color" (Andréi Nakov, *Malevich: Painting the Absolute* [Farnham: Lund Humphries, 2010], 2:46). He produced a series of *White on White* paintings, conceived in a mode of "absolute" or "pure" non-objectivity, which culminated in his *White Square on White* (1918), and which symbolized the accelerated flight into infinity (see Nakov, *Malevich*, esp. 2:305–39).
30. *De arte graphica*, 195; and commentary at 311–12.
31. "Un Art, qui par le moyen du dessin & de la couleur, imite sur une superficie plate tous les objets visibles" (*Abregé de la Vie des Peintres* [Paris, 1699], 3), quoted by Thomas Puttfarken, *Roger de Piles' Theory of Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 42, n. 10. I am grateful to Natalie Edwards for her translation.
32. Quoted in Charles Harrison, Paul Wood, and Jason Gaiger, eds., *Art in Theory, 1648–1815: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 172.
33. See Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D., and Otilio Rodriguez, O.C.D. (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 6; 4–11, 126–71.
34. On the notion of *relievo* (pictorial relief and volume) see Puttfarken, *Discovery of Pictorial Composition*, 119–20, 123–24. Compare especially his analysis of some altarpieces by the Spanish painter Caravaggio (1573–1610), 148–53.
35. *De arte graphica*, 199.
36. Quoted in Harrison, Wood, and Gaiger, *Art in Theory,* 169.
37. Henry Suso, "The Life of the Servant," in *The Exemplar, with Two German Sermons*, (chaps. 46–52) trans., ed., and intro. Frank Tobin (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 174–200. Suso makes a telling point about the value of images to the intellect—itself a "shining image" reflectively lit by divinity—in realizing the return of the spirit to God;

since, for example, "one should form the suffering of Christ crucified within oneself, his sweet teachings, his gentle conduct, and his pure life, which he led as an example for us to follow, and thus through him press farther within" (see "Life of the Servant," chap. 53, 200–4).

38. Richard of St. Victor writes of how the mind is carried away in ecstatic contemplation through three causes: "greatness of devotion," "greatness of wonder," and "greatness of exultation" (*Mystical Ark*, 5.5–19, 316–43). Specifically, the expansion of knowledge and wisdom that comes with the "wonder of a vision" is like the progression of the sun into the dawning light (9.9, 322–23).
39. Teresa of Avila, *The Complete Works of Saint Teresa of Jesus*, trans. and ed. E. Allison Peers (London and New York: Sheed & Ward, 1946), 1:180.
40. Phillip Ball, *Bright Earth: Art and the Invention of Color* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2001), 109.

41. Martin Kemp and Margaret Walker, eds., *Leonardo on Painting: An Anthology of Writings by Leonardo da Vinci with a Selection of Documents Relating to His Career as an Artist* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 70–71.
42. See Alexander Nagel, "Leonardo and *sfumato*," *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 24 (Autumn 1993): 7–20.
43. Quoted by Nagel, "Leonardo and *sfumato*," 11.
44. Nagel, "Leonardo and *sfumato*," 7.
45. Nagel, "Leonardo and *sfumato*," 16–17.
46. Luke Syson with Larry Keith, *Leonardo Da Vinci: Painter at the Court of Milan* (London: National Gallery Co.; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 69.
47. Nagel writes that for Leonardo "[p]ainting was the most exalted altar of the senses. Of all the arts, only painting could provide the perceptual conditions, the full richness of experience, in which truth can be known" ("Leonardo and *sfumato*," 14).
48. See *A Revelation of Love* chaps. 41–46, and chap. 56 (with editorial note to lines 23–25), in Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins, eds., *The Writings of Julian of Norwich: A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman and A Revelation of Love* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 247–63, and 301–303.
49. See Ann Dumas, ed., with Xavier Bray and others, *Inspiring Impressionism: The Impressionists and the Art of the Past* (Denver: Denver Art Museum; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).
50. See Iris Schaefer, Caroline von Saint-George, and Katja Lewerentz, eds., *Painting Light: the Hidden Techniques of the Impressionists* (Milan: Skira, 2008). In practice, having to contend with the several inconveniences of painting outside, including the need to transport equipment and deal with the vagaries of the weather, often meant that Impressionists painted in the vicinity of their house or studio (69–97).
51. Quoted in Richard R. Brettell, *Impression: Painting Quickly in France, 1860–1890* (New Haven: Yale University Press in association with the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, 2000), 233 and 234.
52. John House, *Impressionism: Paint and Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 145; and see overall his cogent observations in this chapter, on which I am dependent (145–85).
53. Ball, *Bright Earth*, 175–76; Kemp, *Science of Art*, 306–7.
54. Ball, *Bright Earth*, 182–83. The reference here is to the premier Impressionist painter Claude Monet (1840–1926) and the Scottish physicist James Clerk Maxwell (1831–79).
55. Ball, *Bright Earth*, 183–84.
56. A classic example can be found in the writing of the beguine Mechthild of Magdeburg (approximately 1208–82), in her book *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, trans. Frank Tobin (New York: Paulist Press, 1998).

57. The Flemish beguine Hadewijch of Brabant (flourished 1230s–1240s) has a vision through the cross of the crystalline space of divinity wherein God is seated on a radiant disk and his being swiftly rotates above a deep abyss. She contemplates his beautiful countenance as she rises to a state of unified consciousness (*The Complete Works*, trans. Mother Columba Hart [New York: Paulist Press, 1980], Visions 1 and 12, at 263–71 and 293–96).
58. Ball, *Bright Earth*, 187–88. See furthermore Christophe Flubacher and Deirdre Wandfluh-Colahan, eds., *Divisionism: Mastery of Color? Effusion of Color!* (Lens/Crans-Montana: Fondation Pierre Arnaud; Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2013).
59. Kemp, *Science of Art*, 318.
60. He writes: "To read nature is to see beneath the veil of interpretation, to see it by means of color patches, following upon each other according to a law of harmony. Nature's broad coloration is thus analyzed by modulations. To paint is to record the sensations of color" (quoted in Felix A. Baumann, Walter Feilchenfeldt, and Hubertus Gassner, eds., *Cézanne and the Dawn of Modern Art* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz; Essen: Museum Folkwang, 2004, 46).
61. See Felix Baumann, and others, eds., *Cézanne: Finished, Unfinished* (Wien: Kunstforum; Zürich: Kunsthaus Zürich; Ostfildern Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2000); and Mary Tompkins Lewis, *Cézanne* (London: Phaidon Press, 2000).
62. Baumann, and others, *Cézanne*, 270 and 333.
63. See Ingo F. Walther and Rainer Metzger, *Vincent van Gogh: The Complete Paintings* (Cologne: Taschen, 2012 [1990]).
64. Dorthe Aagesen and Rebecca Rabinow, eds., *Matisse: In Search of True Painting* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2012).
65. Quoted in Stephanie D'Alessandro and John Elderfield, *Matisse: Radical Invention, 1913–1917* (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 283.
66. See Margaret Porette, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, trans. Edmund Colledge, O.S.A., J.C. Marler, and Judith Grant (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), esp. chaps. 10, 16, 58–61, 69, 80, 98–99, 118, 131–32, and 134–36.
67. This phrase is used by Ball in his assessment of Cézanne's approach (*Bright Earth*, 191).
68. The Impressionist painter Camille Pissarro (1830–1903) theorized the term "passages" in a letter to his son in 1889. According to Paul Signac, Pissarro would "reduce the distance between two colours by introducing intermediary elements within both of them," which he called "passages." Richard Shiff provides the example: "if touches of red-violet were added to an area of red, while blue-violet was added to an adjacent area of blue, this would 'reduce the distance'" ("Mark, Motif, Materiality: The Cézanne Effect in the Twentieth Century," in Baumann and others, *Cézanne*, 99–123, at 115).
69. *Catherine of Siena: The Dialogue*, trans. Suzanne Noffke, O.P. (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 64–160.
70. *The Spiritual Espousals* II.2/3.A, in *Spiritual Espousals and Other Works*, 77–98. In like fashion, for Teresa of Avila the consummate state of mental prayer is one of utter rejoicing as the garden of the soul is watered by divine grace and the perfumed flowers of virtue are in full bloom (see her *Life*, chap. 18; in *Complete Works*, 105–11).
71. Rémi Labrusse in his analysis of Matisse's pair of paintings *Notre-Dame* (1914) compares the second "schematic, heavenly version" with the first "descriptive, earthly version," where "the setting in motion of a *decorative* gaze ceaselessly unweaves the fabric of a *contemplative* gaze, which however, ceaselessly re-forms itself" ("Notre-Dame between Heaven and Earth," in *Matisse*, 72–77, at 77).
72. Meister Eckhart, *Teacher and Preacher*, ed. Bernard McGinn with the collaboration of Frank Tobin and Elvira Borgstadt (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), Sermon 69, 314.
73. See Eckhart, *Teacher and Preacher*, sermon 76, 327–32.

74. See Jelena Hahl-Koch, *Kandinsky*, trans. Karin Brown, Ralph Harratz, and Katharine Harrison (London: Thames & Hudson, 1993).
75. Wassily Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual in Art and Painting in Particular*, 2nd ed., in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, ed. Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo (Boston, MA: G.K. Hall & Co.), 1:119–219, at 212.
76. Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual in Art*, 156–60.
77. Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual in Art*, 177–79.
78. See Christine Hopfengart and Michael Baumgartner, *Paul Klee: Life and Work*, trans. Alison Gallup, Melissa Thorson Hause, and Allison Moseley (Bern: Zentrum Paul Klee; Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2012).
79. Paul Klee, *The Thinking Eye: The Notebooks of Paul Klee*, ed. Jürg Spiller; trans. Ralph Manheim (London: Lund Humphries, 1961), 1:76.
80. The locution "chromatic keyboard" is used in Hopfengart and Baumgartner, *Paul Klee,* 76.
81. Hopfengart and Baumgartner, *Paul Klee*, 82. This remark by Klee may be more a revised literary allusion than an in-the-moment observation (105).
82. See Leah Dickerman, with contributions by Matthew Affron and others, *Inventing Abstraction, 1910–1925: How a Radical Idea Changed Modern Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2012).
83. See Katy Siegel, ed., *Abstract Expressionism* (London and New York: Phaidon Press, 2011).
84. Helmut Friedel and Tina Dickey, *Hans Hofmann* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1998), 81.
85. *Search for the Real and Other Essays*, rev. ed., ed. Sara T. Weeks and Bartlett H. Hayes, Jr. (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1967), 45. Hofmann, it should be noted, influenced the so-called Color Field painters, who simply presented expansive and intense fields of color for the delectation of the eye. See Karen Wilkin, *Color as Field: American Painting, 1950–1975*; with an essay by Carl Belz (New York: American Federation of Arts; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).
86. Here I have adapted remarks by Kandinsky (*On the Spiritual in Art*, 156).
87. Roger DeGanck, trans. *The Life of Beatrice of Nazareth, 1260–1268* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1991), esp. book 3.
88. *Writings of Julian of Norwich*, chaps. 22–23 (193–201).
89. See Richard Rolle, *The Fire of Love and the Mending of Life*, trans. M.L. del Mastro (Garden City: Image Books, 1981), esp. chaps. 2, 5, 14–15, 22, 31–32, 37, and 40–42.