Mysticism and the Playful Slippage of Symbols:

A Voegelinian Meditation on the Areopagite and his Heirs

Introduction

"The fact of revelation is its content."[1] [1]   This sentence, whose seeming terseness is rivaled only, perhaps, by the famous opening line of *Order and History*: "The order of history is the history of its order,"[2] [2] is a highly particularized symbolization of human participation in a divine Beyond. It is a symbolization whose differentiation is cloaked under the guise of an admirable degree of seeming succinctness, or compactness, for the noetically and pneumatically underinitiated.[3] [3]   Yet we should not be surprised if the mystic merely shakes his or her head in ready agreement upon hearing it, while not a few theologians and philosophers of religion pore over Eric Voegelin's later writings in order to wrest some degree of understanding from his statement's somewhat cryptic aura.

What is it that the mystic knows which eludes the rest of us? Or better, what has the mystic experienced that enables his or her ready agreement? The brief response, for Voegelin, is

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[1] [1] Eric Voegelin, "The Beginning and the Beyond: A Meditation on Truth," in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, v. 28, *What Is History? and Other Late Unpublished Writings*, Thomas A. Hollweck and Paul Caringella, eds. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 185.

[2] [2] Eric Voegelin, *Order and History*, v. 1, *Israel and Revelation* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974?), p.? get reference in CW

[3] [3] The terms "noetic" and "pneumatic" are Voegelin's: " . . . the problem of meditation moves into the center of our consideration. From the one side, namely, from the human, the search can be accentuated. I would call that the noetic posture. From the other side, the revelatory side, one can emphasize the motivational factor. I would call that the pneumatic position." Cf. "The Meditative Origin of the Philosophical Knowledge of Order," in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, v. 33, *The Drama of Humanity and Other Miscellaneous Papers 1939-1985*, William Petropulos and Gilbert Weiss, eds. (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2004), 389.

that the mystic has participated as fully as is humanly possible in a divine Beyond whose appeal

has exerted an irresistible pull. The mystic then responds by symbolizing the event of such

participation as his or her experience of this Beyond whose revelatory gesture pierces through

reality as conceptually intended, thus inviting the mystic's imaginatively luminous response.[4] [4]

As readers of mystical texts know, the symbols revelatory of divinity that are generated by these

experiences do not lessen the Beyond's mysteriousness, quite the contrary. Mystical writings

leave us with a fascinating depository of symbols whose exegetic possibilities seem to be just

about endless precisely because of the often enigmatic quality of the symbols encountered.

One of the central enigmas posed by mystical writings in the Christian apophatic tradition

as represented by Pseudo-Dionysius and his heirs, although certainly not limited to them, is what

we might characterize as a ceaselessly playful "slippage" of the symbolizations encountered in

such texts. What does this mean? For Voegelin, the mystic's luminous participation in the

divine Beyond enables him or her, given the requisite degree of reflective distance,[5] [5] to

articulate the experience imaginatively in symbols. While emanating from an It-reality revealing

itself luminously to the human consciousness which participates therein, such symbols are

expressed linguistically, as least in part, as intentionalist concepts referring to thing-reality.[6] [6]

A significant discrepancy is introduced between authentically luminous mystical experience and

its subsequent symbolization, as the mystic struggles to express his or her vision of the divine

Beyond in terms that are conceptually circumscribed by his or her embodied placement in

culture, tradition, and history. We touch here upon one of the central paradoxes of metaxic[7] [7]

existence. The It-reality revealing itself luminously in the consciousness of the mystic must find

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[4] [4] Cf. Eric Voegelin, *Order and History*, v. 5, *In Search of Order*, Ellis Sandoz, ed. (Columbia , MO : University of Missouri Press, 2000), 28-31.

[5] [5] Cf. Voegelin , OH 5, 54-56.

[6] [6] Cf. Voegelin , OH 5, 28-33. Elucidation of these realities follows.

[7] [7] The term "metaxic" is taken from Plato and is explained below.

a way to elude such circumscription symbolically, and we will show that the playful slippage of symbols in apophatic mystical texts functions both as an evasion of conceptual hypostatization and as a symbolization of the myriad paradoxes of metaxic existence itself in relation to a divinity experienced also as paradox.

Specifically, the essay will take up the following points. First, it will delineate the contours of the various paradoxes that govern metaxic existence in order to reveal the precise nature of the dilemma the mystic faces when attempting to symbolize his or her experience within the available conceptual possibilities. Then, after a brief discussion of the dangers attendant upon conceptual hypostatization, it will show that one of the classical apophatic gestures of evading conceptual reification consists in the ceaselessly playful oscillation of symbols that seem to bear within themselves the seeds of their own dissolution. It will also argue that the play of symbols at the heart of apophatic mystical texts functions as a symbolization of the paradox "consciousness-reality-language"[8] itself, the central complex of paradoxes that defines existence in the metaxy. The essay will argue, finally, that such play also functions as an actual invitation to the reader to enter into an experience of metaxic participation in the Beyond him or herself. The discussion will be illustrated with examples taken from the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius, the anonymous author of the *Cloud of Unknowing*, St. John of the Cross, Thomas Merton, Kallistos Ware, and Thomas Kelly.

The Paradoxes of Metaxic Existence

As is well known, Voegelin's use of the term "metaxy,"[9] a term developed by Plato to symbolize the "in-between" structure of human existence, is a key elaboration within his entire

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[8] Cf. Voegelin , OH 5, 31-33.

[9] Cf. Eric Voegelin, "Reason: The Classic Experience," in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, v. 12, *Published Essays: 1966-1985*, Ellis Sandoz, ed. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 279.

theory of consciousness.[10] [10] An examination of Voegelin's own development of the term reveals a myriad of paradoxes that inform it, each of which is important to an analysis of both the playful slippage of symbols that occurs in apophatic mystical writings and the symbolization of metaxy-as-paradox itself.

Any apophatic mystical writing, as text, exhibits what Voegelin considers to be a "paradoxic structure" of a narrative whose linguistically generated concepts "refer to reality intended in the mode of thing-ness."[11] [11] At the same time, however, such a narrative also articulates an actual event of participation in a divine Beyond; the text's linguistically generated concepts are simultaneously infused with luminously symbolic signification. A considerable tension arises immediately within the symbols/concepts themselves, as their luminous content strains against the conceptual bounds of intentionalist ideation. Luminosity wins the day in apophatic texts, however, as their symbols' evocative qualities far outstrip their informative ones as mere concepts.

This aforementioned tension is therefore the result of a fundamental paradox in human existence that Voegelin calls the "complex of consciousness-reality-language." Briefly, human consciousness as experientially operative is constituted, in part, by its capacity for the conceptual articulation of reality intended as object, or thing-reality. More important for our discussion, however, is the fact that human consciousness participates in an ultimate reality, or It-reality, a divine reality that is comprehensive of all else and whose Beginning and Beyond are shrouded in mystery.[12] [12] Most radical of all, perhaps, is Voegelin's contention that while intentionality is located in the human body, luminosity is to be found in the comprehending It-reality, situating

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[10] [10] Cf. Michael P. Morrissey, *Consciousness and Transcendence: The Theology of Eric Voegelin* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 82-88, for a very helpful discussion of Voegelin's use of the term.

[11] [11] Voegelin , OH 5, 40. Cf. 38-41 for Voegelin's fuller treatment of this paradox.

[12] [12] Cf. Voegelin , OH 5, 44.

human consciousness *in toto* somewhere "between" the two.[13] [13]   We see thus that this fundamental bifurcation in consciousness results in an equally fundamental bifurcation in the experiential potentialities we bring to reality itself. Voegelin's theory does not suggest any kind of schizophrenogenic structure to consciousness, however, as the two levels interpenetrate to a greater or lesser degree, depending upon the extent to which an experience calls forth intentional conceptualization and/or luminous symbolization. Such being the case, language and imagination also bear the weight of the paradox of consciousness in relation to reality. The consequences for imaginative linguistic articulation are obvious as intentional conceptualization and luminous symbolization co-exist--again to one degree or another--in most linguistic forms of expression that are not merely informative. From the perspective of imaginatively luminous language, the paradox achieves one of its greatest moments of clarity in apophatic symbols that attempt to express luminously a revelatory experience of divinity but that struggle against the limits of their relative encapsulation in intentionalist concepts.

The temporal structure of metaxic existence is also paradoxic. Humans exist, first of all, as an embodied and hence temporary phenomenon in the It-reality that comprehends them. We therefore have no access to either the beginning or end of this divine reality and remain caught, if you will, in the middle, as do all our attempts at luminous symbolization of this divine Beyond.[14] [14]   Remembering Voegelin's contention that luminous consciousness is located within the comprehending reality while intentionality is found in bodily existence, it follows that the temporal dimension of human consciousness is situated "somewhere in the in-between of"[15] [15] time and eternity.

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[13] [13] Cf. Voegelin, Oh 5, 30.

[14] [14] Cf. Voegelin , OH 5, 40.

[15] [15] Cf. Voegelin , OH 5, 42.

These paradoxical structures of metaxic existence, particularly as they are analyzed in Voegelin's complex "consciousness-reality-language," extend finally to the paradox of God. Metaxic existence "between" intentionality and luminosity, thing-reality and It-reality, informative concept and imaginatively luminous symbol, time and eternity, encounters a divinity experienced in "the tension between the divine reality experienced as formatively present at the ordering pole of the tensions and the divine reality experienced as a Beyond of its concrete manifestations in the process."[16] The Christian tradition typically identifies this final paradox as the tension between the kataphatic and apophatic symbolizations of God. Voegelin's point, which is well taken, is that this paradox of divinity is ultimate: "it cannot be out-experienced or out-symbolized by further experiences of reality."[17] The apophatic mystical writers do not attempt to do so, but rather introduce the playfully ceaseless "unsaying"[18] or dissolution, of their luminously inspired symbols in order to symbolize the paradox of both metaxic existence and the divine Beyond which cannot be "out-symbolized." This playful gesture articulates itself in at least two ways. It is expressed, first of all, in the conceptually paralyzing experience of the dissolution of symbols, leading to their successive replacements which are, in turn, dissolved as well. This play culminates in the inability of such symbols to "arrive" at any conceptual finality, thus expressing both the "in-betweenness" of metaxic existence which is unable to know either divine beginning or end and the paradoxic structure of a divinity whose revelatory gestures strain against the limits of conceptual ideation. Such play is also luminously articulated in the symbol "unknowing" as found, in Christian apophatic literature, in *The Mystical Theology* of Pseudo-

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[16] Voegelin , OH 5, 124.

[17] Voegelin , OH 5, 124.

[18] Cf. Michael A. Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) for a full treatment of the concept.

Dionysius[19] [19] and implied centuries later in the *Cloud of Unknowing*'s advice to "put beneath you a cloud of forgetting, between you and all the creatures that have ever been made."[20] [20] It is also quite strongly implied in the "*nada, nada, nada*" of St. John of the Cross's *Ascent of Mt. Carmel*.[21] [21] It has been symbolized more recently in Thomas Merton's enigmatic assertion that "[t]he contemplative is one who would rather not know than know."[22] [22]

The Refusal of Conceptual Hypostatization

The symbol of unknowing, together with the ceaseless dissolution and replacement of symbols in mystical treatises, articulate the strong refusal of conceptual hypostatization that is inscribed into authentically apophatic writing. Luminous symbolization is able to avoid conceptual hypostatization, at least initially, and Voegelin notes that "the symbols belong as much to the In-Between as do the experiences symbolized."[23] [23] However, Voegelin's animus toward conceptual reification is very real, not least because of its ability to destroy the very luminosity of the symbols that have been generated, turning them into "dead letters."[24] [24] This is so because conceptual hypostatization erases luminous symbols' ability to evoke the paradoxes of metaxic existence since these symbols become reduced to concepts now totalized as such by intentional consciousness. The way is therefore paved for the overall transmogrification of luminous accounts of participation in the divine Beyond into the conceptual basis for dogmatic

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[19] [19] Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works*, Colm Luibheid, trans. (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 138: "If only we lacked sight and knowledge so as to see, so as to know, unseeing and unknowing, that which lies beyond all vision and knowledge."

[20] [20] James Walsh, ed., *The Cloud of Unknowing* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1981), 128.

[21] [21] St. John of the Cross, *Collected Works*, Kieran Kavanaugh, trans. (Washington DC: ICS Publications, 1979), 66.

[22] [22] Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969), 89.

[23] [23] Eric Voegelin, "The Gospel and Culture," in CW 12, 187.

[24] [24] Cf. Voegelin, "The Gospel and Culture," in CW 12, 174.

formulations about the content of "right" belief. This has the further effect of laying the groundwork for the potential eschewal of metaxic participation altogether, as dogmatic formulations become rigidly enforced according to the parameters of their "correct" interpretation. Taken to the worst extreme, the rejection of metaxic participation invites its replacement by ideologically motivated "second realities" that exemplify the "untruth of existence as a revolt against the *condicio humana*"[25] [25] by creating a speculative conceptual universe that is quite estranged from the truth of the "*condicio humana*" as experienced in the tensions of metaxic existence. The lived consequences can be devastating, ranging from religious persecution of perceived "dissenters" from dogmatically formulated "truth"[26] [26] to the twentieth century's totalitarianisms of left and right, culminating in their most telling achievements: Auschwitz and the Gulag.

The mystic rejects conceptual hypostatization because he or she has experienced a divine Beyond whose revelatory gesture is precisely one that refuses to be "pinned down." It is this refusal itself which is luminously symbolized in the ceaseless oscillation of symbols in mystical writings. We may consider the play of symbols to be luminous consciousness's way of evading the danger of an increasingly hypostatized conceptualization of an It-reality now "captured" in dogma and thus transmogrified into thing-reality.   It is true, however, that the most appropriate symbolization of revelation's refusal to be caught is outright silence, as St. John of the Cross has observed: "The language of God has this trait: Since it is very spiritual and intimate to the soul, transcending everything sensory, it immediately silences the entire ability and harmonious composite of the exterior and interior senses."[27] [27] Inspired by this revered Carmelite mystic, Thomas Keating has suggested that "silence is God's first language and . . . all

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[25] [25] Eric Voegelin, "On Debate and Existence," in CW 12, 49.

[26] [26] It is not accidental, in this context, that mystics have often had to contend both with suspicions and outright accusations of heresy.

[27] [27] St. John of the Cross, CW, 369.

other languages are poor translations,"[28] thus highlighting the ultimate inadequacy of all

attempts, both noetic and pneumatic, to symbolize anything that would belie the refusal of

conceptual hypostatization. For Voegelin as well, the mystic experiences his or her

symbolizations of the Beyond as the "divine silence breaking creatively forth in the imaginative

word that will illuminate the [pneumatic or noetic] quest as the questioner's movement of return

to the ineffable silence."[29]

At play is the paradox of a divine revelation that is best communicated through silence.

Michael Sells identifies this paradox as "the *aporia*--the unresolvable dilemma--of

transcendence" [emphasis his].[30] Sells also notes that apophatic discourse is called "negative

theology" because it denies positive attributes to God--God cannot be named.[31] But the

statement "God cannot be named" is itself problematic because it names God as the one who

cannot be named--thus naming God. But if we then reply that God cannot be named God we are

still naming God as the one who cannot be named God, and so on, in an infinite regress. The

alternatives are threefold: silence, conceptual hypostatization, or a luminous symbolization that

bears within it the seeds of its own dissolution, thus leading to the conceptual paralysis of

intentional consciousness. The author of mystical texts obviously chooses the final alternative.

Such being the case, apophatic texts not only affirm the unnameability of God but also perform it

by constantly retracting, unsaying, that which has been affirmed, even if that which has been

affirmed is that God has no name.[32]

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[28] Thomas Keating, *Intimacy with God* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 55.

[29] Voegelin , OH 5, 120.

[30] Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying*, 2.

[31] Cf. Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying*, 2.

[32] Cf. Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying*, 3.

Sells is correct to point out that the apophatic penchant for "unsaying" relies on a prior kataphatic gesture of "saying"[33] [33] that for Voegelin would be constituted by the luminous symbolization of metaxic participation in the divine Beyond. It is for this reason that authentic mystical experience, no matter how apophatic as in the case of a Pseudo-Dionysius, for example, cannot avoid some small degree of intentional conceptualization in its of necessity kataphatic expression, as suggested earlier. Kataphatic symbolization conceptualizes, however slightly. The apophatic depends on the kataphatic for its symbolization, but finds no rest there because of the danger of conceptual reification. Although the mystic may encounter the Parousia of the Beyond, the Beyond itself continues to loom as "the unrevealed divine reality beyond its revelation."[34] [34] This is one of the ways, perhaps, that luminous participation eludes the onto-theological trap because it experiences and symbolizes, however inchoately, a divine Beyond that "is not a thing beyond the things" but remains paradoxically "not-experientiable."[35] [35] And so, "[t]he fact of revelation is its content."

Luminous Symbols and Their Dissolution

Thomas Merton was a twentieth century mystic whose writings are particularly fine symbolizations of the tensional paradoxes that permeate metaxic existence and strain the very limits of intentional conceptualization, as the following example illustrates.

> Perhaps the best way to become a contemplative would be to desire with all one's heart to be anything by a contemplative; who knows?
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> But, of course, this is not true either. In the contemplative life, it is neither desire nor the refusal of desire that counts, but only that "desire" which is a form of "emptiness," that is to say which acquiesces in the unknown and peacefully advances where it does not see the way. All the paradoxes about the contemplative way are reduced to this one: being without desire means being led by a desire so great that it is

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33 [33] Cf. Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying*, 3.

34 [34] Voegelin, OH5, 114. Cf. also 44-45, 83-84,113.

35 [35] Voegelin, OH5, 44, 84.

incomprehensible. It is too huge to be completely felt. It is a blind desire, which seems like a desire for "nothing" only because nothing can content it. And because it is able to rest in no-thing, then it rests, relatively speaking, in emptiness. But not in emptiness as such, emptiness for its own sake. Actually there is no such entity as pure emptiness, and the merely negative emptiness of the false contemplative is a "thing," not a "nothing." The "thing" that it is is simply the darkness of self, from which all other beings are deliberately and of set-purpose excluded.

But true emptiness is that which transcends all things, and yet is immanent in all. For what seems to be emptiness in this case is pure being. Or at least a philosopher might so describe it. But to the contemplative it is other than that. It is not this, not that. Whatever you say of it, it is other than what you say.[36] [36]

The luminous formulations in this passage "unsay" and "turn back"[37] [37] upon themselves in a serpentine fashion that symbolizes, by the very conceptual paralysis it evokes, the contemplative's participation in a divine Beyond that remains conceptually elusive. Merton's writing symbolizes an event of divine revelatory encounter whose very symbolization becomes part of the Beyond's Parousia in history. But it also symbolizes what Voegelin calls the "super-constant" of "the experience of the paradoxic tension in formative reality, . . . between the God who reveals himself in his presence in time and the God who remains the experienced but unknown reality beyond time."[38] [38]

The event of participation is expressed in the playful slippage of the symbol "desire," which undergoes the following dissolution, if our conceptually clumsy gloss be permitted in this context: maybe the true contemplative desires to be anything but a contemplative except that neither "desire" nor its refusal really matters. Only desire as "emptiness" matters (we could label this "desire$_1$"), which means that one is without desire because one is led by an incomprehensibly great desire ("desire$_2$") which is blind because it can be satisfied by no-thing. So what started out as mere "desire" is now held in tension between desire$_1$ and desire$_2$, ceaselessly oscillating

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[36] [36] Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, 94.

[37] [37] Cf. Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying*, 8.

[38] [38] Voegelin, OH5, 124.

between them, except that the text switches suddenly to an emphasis on the symbol "emptiness" while not doing so entirely because "emptiness" symbolizes desire₁. Yet some degree of shift is in evidence as all mention of desire is dropped from the rest of the passage and the symbol "emptiness" becomes the chief focus. This symbol also receives similar treatment. Emptiness paradoxically transcends all things, yet is immanent in all things as pure being, except that for the contemplative, this emptiness-that-is-pure-being is "not this, not that. Whatever you say of it, it is other than what you say." We cannot conclude, therefore, that the seeming desire for no-thing rests, equally paradoxically, in a pure being that would be virtually indistinguishable from an undiluted kataphaticism. The enigma only spirals vertiginously, and the reader is left in conceptual paralysis. One is reminded of *The Cloud of Unknowing*'s invocation of "something which you are at a loss to describe, which moves you to desire you know not what."[39]

The movement of symbolic dissolution extends to the undermining of the mystic's conceptually intended personhood as such. Merton notes:

> . . . the aim of meditation, in the context of Christian faith, is not to arrive at an objective and apparently "scientific" knowledge about God, but to come to know him through the realization that our very being is penetrated with his knowledge and love for us. Our knowledge of God is paradoxically a knowledge not of him as the object of our scrutiny, but of ourselves as utterly dependent on his saving and merciful knowledge of us.[40]

The resonance with Voegelin's location of luminous consciousness in the comprehending It-reality is palpable. The mystic's luminous awareness of participation in a divine Beyond positions him or her as the predicate of an It-reality that has now shifted into the position of subject.[41] We find similar expressions of the subversion of conceptually intended personhood in the Orthodox tradition, as Kallistos Ware asserts that "[p]rayer of the heart, then,

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[39] *The Cloud of Unknowing*, 185.

[40] Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, 83.

[41] Voegelin, OH5, 30-31.

designates the point where ◆my' action, ◆my' prayer, becomes explicitly identified with the continuous action of Another in me. It is no longer prayer *to* Jesus but the prayer *of* Jesus Himself [emphasis his]."[42] [42]   And Quaker mystic Thomas Kelly writes that "He works and prays and seeks His own through us, in exquisite, energizing life. Here the autonomy of the inner life becomes complete and we are joyfully *prayed through*, by a Seeking Life that flows through us into the world of men [emphasis his]."[43] [43]   Again, this is not to suggest some kind of false dichotomizing that compartmentalizes luminous consciousness in a comprehending It-reality that excludes a conceptualized expression in thing-reality at all. Voegelin notes that "[a]s far as consciousness is the site of participation, its reality partakes of both the divine and the human without being wholly the one or the other; as far as it is the sensorium of participation, it is definitely man's own, located in his body in spatiotemporal existence."[44] [44]   But what Sells calls the "transreferential"[45] [45] character of apophatic symbols is in clear evidence in these passages in support of Voegelin's contention that "the ontological status" of luminous symbolization "is both human and divine."[46] [46]   Symbols redolent of these poles of metaxic existence, such as "transcendent" and "immanent" as also invoked by Merton for example, are not hypostatizing concepts.[47] [47]   They are rather luminously generated linguistic indices that

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[42] [42] Kallistos Ware, "The Power of the Name: The Jesus Prayer in Orthodox Spirituality," in *Praying Home: The Contemplative Journey* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1987), 89.

[43] [43] Thomas R. Kelly, *A Testament of Devotion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1941), 45-46.

[44] [44] Eric Voegelin, "Immortality: Experience and Symbol," in CW 12, 90.

[45] [45] Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying*, 8.

[46] [46] Voegelin, "The Gospel and Culture," in CW 12, 187.

[47] [47] Voegelin, "The Beginning and the Beyond," in CW 28, 185.

reveal, from within the metaxy, the structure and dynamics of the comprehending It-reality and its tensional poles as the site where the playful slippage of symbols occurs.[48]

Voegelin highlights the role that reflective distance plays in explaining the discrepancy between luminous participation in a divine Beyond and its symbolic expression: "The reflective distance between the movements of the divine-human encounter and their articulation through symbols will bring itself forcefully to the thinker's attention when a differentiation of truth on the level of the participatory experience cannot be adequately articulated by the symbols available in the social and historical environment."[49] The dissatisfaction with currently available symbols will then motivate the thinker, or mystic, to devise new ones, with the aid of his or her luminously inspired imagination, and either revise or perhaps even reject previous, more compact symbolizations. But "reflective hesitations"[50] about new symbolizations can also arise and contribute to the playful slippage of symbols we find in apophatic texts. The playful slippage of symbols can thus occur in the context of reflective hesitation, but such play is more importantly a product of the reflectively generated awareness of the inadequacy of all symbolizations engendered in the metaxy; we recall Merton's "not this, not that" characterization. Pseudo-Dionysius might attempt to "solve" this problem by appending "hyper" to the philosophical symbols expressing the divine Beyond in *The Divine Names*, as Voegelin points out.[51] But perhaps the playful slippage of symbols that invites conceptual paralysis is a more adequate symbolization of the paradoxes of metaxic participation, including the paradox of

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[48] Cf. Eric Voegelin, "Wisdom and the Magic of the Extreme," in CW 12, 349; "Quo Deus Dicitur," in CW 12, 381-382; OH5, 93.

[49] Voegelin, "Wisdom and the Magic of the Extreme," in CW 12, 345.

[50] Voegelin, "Wisdom and the Magic of the Extreme," in CW 12, 345.

[51] Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works*, 47-131; Voegelin, "Wisdom and the Magic of the Extreme, in CW 12, 361.

attempting to symbolize a divine Beyond that is precisely "beyond" its Parousia in history. The playful dissolution of luminous symbols is itself a luminous symbolization.

The Play of Symbols as Event

We have sought to demonstrate that the ceaseless dissolution of symbols in apophatic mystical texts functions itself as a symbolization of the central paradox "consciousness-reality-language," with all the partipating paradoxes therein implied that have been described previously. This playful slippage of symbols is also an event. It qualifies as such, first of all, because its occurrence requires temporal duration that, while ceaseless, as could also be said of a hypostatized concept, also implies a sense of change or movement within time that the hypostatized concept does not share given the stasis that characterizes it as hypostatized. More specifically, the dissolution-of-symbols-as-symbol is an event in the sense that it is a movement whose symbolizing capacities come into their own just as much in the interstices between dissolving symbols as in the momentary luminous/conceptual articulation of these linguistic indices. Indeed, the movement of dissolution as such requires this ceaseless oscillation, which in its turn implies a temporality experienced precisely in the duration that constant change or shifting requires, as the temporality of an actual occurrence, for example. The dissolution-of-symbols-as-symbol can only be experienced, in other words, in the very movement of change which requires temporal duration in order to be experienced.

More important for our analysis, however, the playful slippage of symbols functions as an actual invitation, in the real time of reading apophatic texts, to experience an event of metaxic participation in the divine Beyond. The "meditative event" of such reading, as occurring in the "In-Between"[52] [52] and as entailing the ceaseless dissolution of symbols, invites the reader to what Sells characterizes as "the semantic analogue to the experience of mystical union. It does

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[52] [52] Voegelin, "The Meditative Origin of the Philosophical Knowledge of Order," in CW 33, 390.

not describe or refer to mystical union but effects a semantic union that re-creates or imitates the mystical union."[53] The playful slippage of imaginatively luminous symbols, as experienced in the actual event of reading apophatic texts, evokes conceptual paralysis, thus inviting the reader into an experience that is semantically analogous to mystical encounter with the divine Beyond. This has the potential to become an event of metaxic participation in the wake of such paralysis. Although Sells is correct to claim that "[r]ather than pointing to an object, apophatic language attempts to evoke in the reader an event that is--in its movements beyond structures of self and other, subject and object--structurally analogous to the event of mystical union,"[54] one suspects that Voegelin would identify such an event as an actual experience, however incipient, of metaxic participation. Apophatic texts invite us into that experience. One of the critically important challenges of metaxic existence is to allow such events "to be," without seeking to effectively destroy them by either hypostatizing them conceptually or by taking flight into a metastatic faith[55] that loses touch with the in-between nature of metaxic existence altogether.

The final question that confronts us is to identify the experiential matrix of the event since, as we already know, "[t]he fact of revelation is its content." Experientially considered, the matrix of metaxic participation is composed of faith, hope, and love[56] for Voegelin, because these constitute the actual, tensional nuances of metaxic existence. To live in the "In-Between," to experience oneself as pulled between the transcendent and immanent poles of the

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[53] Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying*, 9. Sells refers to this phenomenon as a "meaning event."

[54] Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying*, 10.

[55] Voegelin defines metastatic faith as "an attitude on the part of the person who believes that through an act of faith--or any other act--human nature will cease to be what it is and, in one way or another, will be replaced by a new, transfigured human nature, a new society, and a new, transfigured history." Cf. "The West and the Meaning of Industrial Society," in CW 33. 90.

[56] Cf. Voegelin, "In Search of the Ground," in CW 11, 229-230; and "Conversations with Eric Voegelin at the Thomas More Institute for Adult Education in Montreal ," in CW 33, 249-250.

comprehending It-reality and to live such positioning sincerely without succumbing to the temptation to take flight into either one or the other pole, requires an authentic openness to the divine Beyond that constitutes the ground of personal existence. Such openness is articulated as faith in and and loving attunement toward this It-reality, and hope that such attunement will lead to the "fulfillment"[57] [57] of one's personal existence in relation to the divine Beyond.

The mystic lives the nuances of this tension in the very core of his or her being. *The Cloud of Unknowing* describes the tensional nuance of love in terms that resonate with Dionysian overtones:

> But now you put me a question and say: "How might I think of him in himself, and what is he?" And to this I can only answer thus: "I have no idea." For with your question you have brought me into that same darkness, into that same cloud of unknowing where I would you were yourself. For a man may, by grace, have the fulness of knowledge of all other creatures and their works, yes, and of the works of God's own self, and he is well able to reflect on them. But no man can think of God himself. Therefore, it is my wish to leave everything that I can think of and choose for my love the thing I cannot think.[58] [58]

St. John of the Cross characterizes the tensional nuance of faith similarly:

> Insofar as he is capable, a person must void himself of all, so that, however many supernatural communications he receives, he will continually live as though denuded of them and in darkness. Like a blind man he must lean on dark faith, accept it for his guide and light, and rest on nothing of what he understands, tastes, feels, or imagines. All these perceptions are a darkness that will lead him astray. Faith lies beyond all this understanding, taste, feeling, and imagining.[59] [59]

Finally, Thomas Merton points out the indispensability of hope as that tensional nuance that also participates in the perseverance required for genuine metaxic participation:

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[57] [57] Voegelin, "In Search of the Ground, in CW 11, 230.

[58] [58] *The Cloud of Unknowing*, 130.

[59] [59] *Ascent of Mount Carmel* , 112-113.

. . . as we determine to face the hard realities of our inner life, as we recognize once again that we need to pray hard and humbly for faith, he draws us out of darkness and into light--he hears us, answers our prayer, recognizes our need, and grants us the help we require--if only by giving us more faith to believe that he can and will help us in his own time. This is already a sufficient answer.

This alternation of darkness and light can constitute a kind of dialogue between the Christian and God, a dialectic that brings us deeper and deeper into the conviction that God is our all. By such alternations we grow in detachment and in hope.[60]

Perhaps this is what the mystic ultimately knows: that union with God, no matter how transient and evanscent, is received in the faith-filled, hopeful, and loving attunement to the revelatory gesture of a Divinity beyond any articulation. The mystic also knows that his or her attempts to symbolize the experience require a ceaseless dissolution such that the one true symbol of the divine Beyond might emerge, from "the farthest, highest peak of mystic scripture,/where the mysteries of God's Word/lie simple, absolute and unchangeable/in the brilliant darkness of a hidden silence."[61]

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[60] *Contemplative Prayer*, 35.

[61] Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Mystical Theology*, 135.