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# KING'S

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# Theological Review

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## THE “CLASSICS OF WESTERN SPIRITUALITY”: ECKHART, TAULER, RUUSBROEC

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A review article of: *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises and Defense*, translated and introduced by Edmund Colledge, O.S.A. and Bernard McGinn, with a preface by Huston Smith. 366pp. The Classics of Western Spirituality. SPCK/Paulist Press, 1981.

*Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher*, edited and translated by Bernard McGinn, with the collaboration of Frank Tobin and Elvira Borgstädt, and a preface by Kenneth Northcott. 420pp. The Classics of Western Spirituality. SPCK/Paulist Press, 1986.

*Johannes Tauler: Sermons*, translated by Maria Shradly, introduced by Josef Schmidt, with a preface by Alois Haas. 183pp. The Classics of Western Spirituality. SPCK/Paulist Press, 1985.

*John Ruusbroec: The Spiritual Espousals and Other Words*, introduced and translated by James A. Wiseman, O.S.B., with a preface by Louis Dupré. 286pp. The Classics of Western Spirituality. SPCK/Paulist Press, 1986.

### I

The Classics of Western Spirituality series has been with us for about 10 years, and continues to publish new volumes at a respectable rate; there must be about 60 by now, with more to come. The series covers an extremely diverse range of historical periods and kinds of religious culture and writing: treatises, sermons, story-collections, scraps of legend and folklore, hymns, and visions, from Christian, Jewish, Moslem and native North American sources, some 1,800 years old, a few nearly contemporary – all published in new English translations, with introductory apparatus and a fairly unified format. This review, which looks at four volumes devoted to writings of three 14th-century German and Dutch writers, Eckhart, Tauler and Ruusbroec, is the first of several appraisals of parts of what has become the heart of the series: the writings of the medieval Christian mystics.<sup>1</sup>

First, some words about the Classics of Western Spirituality series itself are in order. The series enshrines the (questionable) belief that the spiritual experience of totally different cultures (those, say, of fifth-century Egypt, north-eastern American Indians and medieval Judaism) have enough in common to form parts of a single group of “Western classics”. Run from New York by the Paulist Press (SPCK are merely receiving publishers), with a large and impressive editorial board principally drawn from the theology departments of American universities, it attempts to combine academic respectability with contemporary relevance (and on some occasions Catholic orthodoxy with a proper deference to the breadth of the term “spirituality”). Each volume is elaborately presented, with a roster of the editorial board, biographies of each contributor, a preface by one of the board, and sometimes a translator’s foreword, all

preceding an introduction which can run (as it does in both the Eckhart volumes) to 50 pages of closely-written and interesting scholarly discussion. (The introductions are not all so good. Some of Wiseman’s account of Ruusbroec’s thought is too close to paraphrasing – instead of clarifying and contextualizing – the highly lucid treatises we are about to read; Schmidt’s exposition of the place of Tauler in 14th-century Rhenish religiosity is helpful but poorly organized and written.)<sup>2</sup> Sometimes the texts are accompanied by further scholarly discussion in footnotes, and the volumes usually end with bibliographies, often on a grand scale. The element of “relevance” in the presentation of each volume is provided by the didactic nature of most of the texts, by numerous assurances (especially in the prefaces, which would be far better left out) that these writers *are* relevant, and by bright, specially-designed cover illustrations. (These last are seemingly intended to offset the sense of dignity the volumes communicate by indicating that their contents are also powerful and interesting; although they seem a good idea in principle, I find them uniformly displeasing.) Taken in sum, the series displays very clearly the characteristic strengths and weaknesses of contemporary mystics scholarship. On the one hand, there is a fine sense of the importance of mystical experience and mystical writing, an engagement, both scholarly and personal, in the material, and an evangelistic desire to have it as widely read as possible. On the other, there is a perceptible insecurity about the respectability of mystics and mystics studies in church and university (hence the over-elaborate presentation), and a vagueness about wherein the relevance of so diverse a collection consists. Since the series’s ideal readers can not be intended to attempt to follow all the very different paths laid down for them by, for example, Archbishop William Laud, Rabbi Abraham Kook, St. Gregory of Nyssa, and the Florentine rabble-rouser Savanarola, it is difficult to see what these writers are supposed, taken together, to be relevant *to*.

Under these circumstances, it would not be difficult to dismiss the series as poorly-conceived, esoteric and faintly comic; but this would be a great pity. In the first place, it has made available a great range of religious writing, much of which was difficult or impossible to read in English before. This can only contribute to our developing understanding both of our own and of other religious cultures. Second, the scholarly presentation of these writings seems always to be up to date, even if it is not invariably as clear as it should be. Third, even in translation many of the works the series has made available are of great interest and beauty, spanning – as most kinds of mystical writing seem to – the gaps between theology, pastoral instruction, personal devotion, and poetry. It is thus worth taking each volume on its merits, and indeed worth taking each contributor on her or his merits.<sup>3</sup> Of the books reviewed in the present article, all seem to have fair or good translations, so far as I can judge.<sup>4</sup> The unostentatious Tauler and Ruusbroec volumes make a useful introduction to those writers,<sup>5</sup> and the two much more ambitious Eckhart volumes are clearly of considerable scholarly importance for the English-speaking world.<sup>6</sup> Eckhart is himself a more original and interesting – and undeniably a more difficult and dangerous – thinker than either his disciple Tauler, or Tauler’s contemporary and perhaps

acquaintance, Ruusbroec, and says almost everything that either of them say, without their restraint and careful orthodoxy. In making most of the following discussion of late-medieval Rhineland and Flemish mysticism revolve around Eckhart, I shall thus be focussing on the spiciest of the trio.

## II

“Meister Eckhart”, as he is always called, c.1260-1329, was one of the most brilliant products of that remarkable flowering of philosophy and theology, the 13th-century scholasticism of the University of Paris. Sent to Paris by his Dominican superiors in Cologne, first probably to study arts, then to acquire his Master’s degree (hence “Meister”), he arrived not long after the departure of Albertus Magnus and the death of his greater pupil Thomas Aquinas – both also Dominicans – and was perhaps there for the condemnation of the philosopher Siger of Brabant for Averroism in 1277, and for the burning of Marguerite Porcete in 1310, for preaching “liberty of the spirit”.<sup>7</sup> In spite of the repressive tendencies which these events portended, and which were to be manifested in Eckhart’s own posthumous condemnation for heresy in 1329, he was thus the inheritor of an academic tradition of great complexity and extraordinary boldness, which had, during the course of a century, built the syllogism and the principle of dialectic reasoning into the great *summae* of theology and philosophy, and achieved what can fairly be described as the first fully systematic theologies of Western Christendom. The same academic tradition also made available to Eckhart the learning of a variety of non-Christian cultures, past and present. Thirteenth-century European scholars could work with a long tradition of Christian neo-Platonism, which developed from some of the writings of Augustine, and from “Dionysius the Areopagite”; they had discovered the world of Arab learning, through Latin translations of Averroes and Avicenna; they had just regained access to more of classical Greek culture, through translations of Arabic versions of several of Aristotle’s works; and some knew of the world of Jewish philosophy and biblical scholarship, through translations of one of Eckhart’s favourite writers, Maimonides. At the same time, Parisian theology remained rooted in the Bible and the works of the Fathers, which together constituted the *auctoritates* who must be quoted in support of propositions in a scholastic “question”.<sup>8</sup>

In spite of the fact that much of Eckhart’s writing is in German and does not always have any obvious connection with this complex intellectual milieu, the editors of both Eckhart volumes insist, entirely convincingly, that it is only in terms of this milieu that his thought can be understood. His uncompleted life’s work, the Latin *Opus Tripartitum*, is the bare bones of a synthesis of all the intellectual traditions I have mentioned under the capacious umbrella of Christian neo-Platonism; his German works make a less systematic and academic use of these same traditions. McGinn indeed says, in effect, that it is out of ignorance of this milieu that readers of his German works (the more popular, poetic and approachable part of his output) have so often responded to Eckhart as proto-transcendentalist, pantheist, Buddhist or hippy. By translating Latin and German

works alongside one another, and by expatiating on Eckhart’s intellectual origins in their introductions, McGinn and his collaborators aim to redress the balance and place him back in his medieval Catholic context. It is a testimony both to their skill and to the correctness of their assumptions that Eckhart emerges from their ministrations a more focussed and less mystagogic figure than he has often seemed.

It is the neo-Platonic strain in Eckhart’s thought that has tended to cause most confusion, both in his day and ours; and it is this same Christian neo-Platonism that dominates his mystical thinking, and on which I must accordingly focus here. For him, all of creation is an emanation (*emanatio*, *generatio*, *ebullitio*, Middle High German *uzbruch* = “breakout”) from the divine source or ground (*principium*, MHG *grund*).<sup>9</sup> Mystical ascent, and the purpose of human life in general – no fundamental distinction is admitted between these two concepts by most medieval mystics<sup>10</sup> – can thus be defined as a return (*reditus*, MHG *durchbruch*, *durchbreken* = “breakthrough”) to the source of all. This model is thoroughly Christianized, by Eckhart as by Tauler (c.1300-61), Ruusbroec (1293-1381) and many earlier and later thinkers, through its development in Trinitarian terms. Thus Tauler’s Christmas sermon:

What then should we observe about the paternal generation, and how should we perceive it? Note that the Father, distinct as Father, turns inward to Himself with His divine Intellect and penetrates in clear self-beholding the essential abyss of His eternal Being. In this act of pure self-comprehension He utters Himself completely by a Word; and the Word is His Son. And the act whereby He knows Himself is the generation of the Son in eternity. Thus He rests within Himself in the unity of the essence, and He flows out in the distinction of the Persons.

And so He turns inward, comprehending Himself, and He flows outward in the generation of His Image (that of His Son), which He has known and comprehended. And again He returns to Himself in perfect self-delight. And this delight streams forth as ineffable love, and that ineffable love is the Holy Spirit. Thus God turns inward, goes outward, and returns to Himself again. And these Processions happen for the sake of their return.

(Tauler, pp. 36-7 – the heavy capitalization is less than helpful here.)

The “source” here is the Godhead considered as a unity. The same Godhead, considered now as the Fatherhood, turning inward, understands and “speaks” himself in the Son, who is thus the flowing out of the Godhead. The Son, loving the Father, returns to him, and the love that causes and is generated by this return in both the Father and the Son is the Holy Spirit. The creation is thus analogous to the begetting of the Son; Eckhart calls the processions within the Trinity “boiling” (*bullitio*), the creation “outboiling” (*ebullitio*) to make this relationship clear.

The relationship is most significant with respect to the creation of humankind in the image of God. All our

writers, like most medieval thinkers, follow Augustine in considering the *imago Dei* to be a specifically Trinitarian image that is “stamped” on the soul or mind; the structure of the human mind thus imitates that of the Trinity. Tauler’s sermon continues:

Now the specific character which the Heavenly Father possesses in this divine circulation should also be adopted by us if we are to attain spiritual motherhood in our soul . . . The soul has three faculties, and in these it is the true image of the Blessed Trinity – memory, understanding, and free will. With their aid the soul is able to grasp God and to partake of Him, so that it becomes capable of receiving all that God is and can bestow. They enable the soul to contemplate eternity, for the soul is created between time and eternity. With its higher part it touches eternity, whereas with its lower part – that of the sensible and animal powers – it is bound up with time. (Tauler, p.37.)

The “higher part” of the mind – the possession of which distinguishes humanity from the rest of the created world – is divided into Memory (*mens*), which is “akin” to the Father, Reason (*ratio, intellectus, aspectus*), akin to the Son, and Will (*affectus, voluntas*), akin to the Holy Spirit. The processes of soul that lead to perfection consist of the achievement of a proper relationship between these three faculties, and between them and their equivalents in the “lower” souls, the “sensible” and “animal” souls (none of the editors seem to me to explain this properly). This leads as it were to a focussing of the energies of the individual in her or his higher part, to the gradual achievement of the virtues, and finally to the radical identification of the soul with that of which it is a copy, as the memory is directed at God, the reason is enlightened by God, and the will is conformed to God.

All these processes are the major subject of Ruusbroec’s most detailed account of the mystical life, *The Spiritual Espousals*, which is a prolonged exposition of Matthew 25.6: “See, the bridegroom is coming. Go out to meet him.”<sup>11</sup> As the soul reattains the image of God which has been effaced by sin, so Christ comes to her as a bridegroom to a bride (“soul” = *anima*, a feminine noun in Latin as in most vernaculars); the soul’s gradual ascent to perfection is indeed a product of Christ’s gracious descent to her (“the bridegroom is coming”), as well as of her own activity (“go out to meet him”).<sup>12</sup> This nuptial imagery is drawn (like so much medieval mystical thought) from spiritual exegesis of the Song of Songs, and Ruusbroec’s blending of this tradition with Augustinian psychological theory and Christian neo-Platonism is extremely deft and intricate. But at the very height of mystical experience, and at the very end of *The Spiritual Espousals*, both nuptial imagery and Trinitarian psychology and theology give way before the negative language of pseudo-Dionysian Platonism, as the soul, which has discovered her essential unity or ground, above or beneath or beyond all its faculties, is united with the Godhead, in that place where the Godhead has no Trinitarian distinctions of persons, and where all the names that might be applied to it are swallowed up in a kind of essential simplicity.<sup>13</sup> As God comprehends himself, so the soul comprehends herself, and can thus receive, “in the abyss of this darkness in which the loving

spirit has died to itself”, an “incomprehensible light”, that of the love and knowledge of God; and, returning that love and knowledge, “the spirit ceaselessly becomes the very resplendence which it receives” (Ruusbroec p.147). The language strains here, partly because of the difficulty of the subject-matter, partly I think because of the conflicting directions which Ruusbroec is being pulled in by the different traditions of mystical thought in which he is working. (Neither Wiseman nor Colledge would probably agree with me here; but it is worth noting that Ruusbroec too was to be attacked for supposedly heretical statements by that mystical scourge of the mystics, the Chancellor of the University of Paris, Jean Gerson (1363-1429). Nonetheless, the last words of the work are a magnificent fusion both of poetry with theology and of the different demands made by an extremely sophisticated theological position. They describe the “active meeting” of the persons of the Trinity with one another and the soul:

Now this active meeting and this loving embrace are in their ground blissful and devoid of particular form, for the fathomless, modeless being of God is so dark and devoid of particular form that it encompasses within itself all the divine modes and the activity and properties of the Persons in the rich embrace of the essential Unity; it therefore produces a divine state of blissful enjoyment in this abyss of the ineffable. Here there is a blissful crossing over and a self-transcending immersion into a state of essential bareness, where all the divine names and modes and all the living ideas which are reflected in the mirror of divine truth all pass away into simple ineffability, without mode and without reason. In this fathomless abyss of simplicity all things are encompassed in a state of blissful blessedness, while the ground itself remains completely uncomprehended, unless it be through the essential Unity. Before this the Persons must give way, together with all the lives in God, for here there is nothing other than an eternal state of rest in a blissful embrace of loving immersion.

This is that modeless being which all fervent interior spirits have chosen above all things, that dark stillness in which all lovers lose their way. But if we could prepare ourselves through virtue in the ways I have shown, we would at once strip ourselves of our bodies and flow into the wild waves of the Sea, from which no creature could ever draw us back.

That we might blissfully possess the essential Unity and clearly contemplate the Unity in the Trinity – may the divine love grant us this, for it turns no beggar away. Amen. (Ruusbroec p.152 – this is fine translating.)

A hundred pages of treatise have prepared this conclusion, and Ruusbroec was to spend much of the rest of his writing career explaining himself, but this is still as lucid a description of mystical union from within this particular nexus of theological traditions as we have.

To a modern reader, the descriptions of spiritual union given by Eckhart and his more cautious disciple Tauler may not seem to differ in important ways from Ruusbroec’s. Yet Eckhart was condemned by a papal

commission at Avignon, whereas Ruusbroec, in spite of Gerson's attack, remained and remains highly respected. There may be more than theological reasons for this discrepancy between two careers. Ruusbroec's treatises were initially written for small numbers of people, while Eckhart's German works are largely sermons, given publicly, some to large audiences; he was a natural candidate for suspicious scrutiny by local ecclesiastical officials. Eckhart made a dangerous attempt to expound in popular form, and in the vernacular, doctrines that are part of a daring theological system that he had not fully worked out in Latin. Having breathed some of the headier airs of Paris, he did not share Ruusbroec's political and spiritual fear of error and sweeping statement (there is something of Peter Abelard in him). Moreover, he seems not to have handled his own defence with the skill it needed. Colledge (in his fine account of the historical background to Eckhart's writing in the 1981 volume) seems a little contemptuous of his ineptitude, and suggests that his popularity had weakened his intellectual powers. My own equally vague but kinder speculation is that the attacks on Eckhart focussed the tension between his emphasis on the freedom of the individual soul and his desire to be an orthodox, obedient, and hence very much *not* "free", member of the Catholic church, and that this tension proved intolerable. For Ruusbroec, the tension is much less, since orthodoxy, or at least the will to orthodoxy, is an integral part of his mysticism, and he is not much interested in the metaphor of freedom.

Nonetheless, there are important theological differences between Eckhart and Ruusbroec, which are products partly of Eckhart's more complex intellectual background,<sup>14</sup> partly of a different balance between the various traditions of mystical thought in which he is working. Where Ruusbroec writes of the marriage of Christ and the soul, Eckhart (and after him, always more cautiously, Tauler) speaks of the birth of Christ in the soul, and means by it something more than mere metaphor. McGinn explains this better than I can:

Since the Father gives birth to the Son in eternity, and since there can be no temporal dimension in God, he is always giving birth to the Son; and since God's ground is one with the soul's ground [i.e. the soul's source is the ground of the Godhead, the place from where the Father "utters" the Son], the eternal Father must always be giving birth to the Son within the ground of the soul. Yet more, "He gives me birth, me, his Son and the same Son" [i.e. I am begotten of God both like and *as* the Son] . . . Given the identity of the soul's ground and God's ground, the just man must take part in the inner life of the Trinity, the divine *bullitio* itself . . . As *Sermon 22* says, "He everlastingly bore me, his only-born Son, into that same image of his eternal Fatherhood, that I may be Father and give birth to him of whom I am born . . . And as he gives birth to his Only-Begotten Son into me, so I give him birth again into the Father." (McGinn in Eckhart 1981, p.51.)

This may sound bizarre. The basic metaphor has its origin in tropological (moral) exegesis of the Nativity, in which an obvious homiletic ploy (so Tauler in *Sermon 1*, following a long tradition) is to expound the narrative of the Incarnation along the lines of "cast out our sin and

enter in, be born in us this night". But Eckhart perceives this commonplace in neo-Platonic terms, and argues that our return to God must be accomplished by the recognition of our radical identity with the Godhead, and hence by the repetition of the birth of the Son and the procession of the Spirit in our souls. Indeed, "repetition" here is less than accurate. Since God exists in eternity, his creation, although temporal in itself, "has always" existed in eternity as well, as has every moment that passes in the created universe. God creates the universe perpetually, just as the Father begets the Son perpetually, and these eternal activities are both expressions of the same divine simplicity, just as the soul's ground is the same as God's ground. Thus the soul is a part of the ground in which the Father begets the Son actually and "now", that is, in eternity; the soul "is" the Son, in that she is an expression of the creativity within the Godhead that is begotten as the Son; while in realizing these facts radically in herself by "emptying herself" of the created world, she herself begets the Son, achieving what Tauler called "motherhood" in *Sermon 1* quoted above, and what Eckhart more radically calls fatherhood, i.e. identity with the Father. The soul does not merely resemble God in consisting of "powers" which correspond statically to the Trinity; she contains an activity of "boiling" (*bullitio*) which actually intermingles with the eternal "boiling" of the Godhead.

By stressing the soul's source in the ground of the Godhead where Ruusbroec concentrates much more on the traditional themes of the alienation from God caused by the Fall, Eckhart seems to commit himself to a more Dionysian, less Augustinian, version of Christian neo-Platonism. This affects the whole of his account of humanity and the return of the soul to God. Where Ruusbroec speaks of the gradual adornment of the soul as she acquires the requisite virtues, Eckhart tends to use the apophatic language of stripping, so that the soul empties herself of the created world, and ultimately even of her desire for God (see note 8 above); a key concept for him is detachment (MHG *abegescheidenheit*). Where for Ruusbroec evil is a constant danger, so that the soul must fear for her own safety every step of the way – herein is a source of his anxious balancing both of concepts and of counsels – Eckhart perceives evil merely as "nothing" or non-being. This is part of the ground of the confidence with which the souls he describes seem to reascend to God, and enables him to make statements that were perceived as heretical by the Avignon commissioners, but which would seem to form a logical part of Christian theodicy, however little regard they have for the temporal realities of evil: for example, that God is glorified as much by an evil action as by a good one. Again, whereas union with the Godhead "beyond" the Trinity is still a profoundly Trinitarian event for Ruusbroec, involving all the powers of the soul and all the Persons "embraced" – not annihilated – in God's essential Unity, in Eckhart's writing the final union with God takes place on a ground where both the soul's and God's tripartite natures have become irrelevant:

That is why I say that if a man will turn away from himself and from all created things, by so much will you be made one and blessed in the spark of the soul, which has never touched either time or place. This spark rejects all created things, and wants nothing but

its naked God, as he is in himself. It is not content with the Father or the Son or the Holy Spirit, or with the three Persons so far as each of them persists in his properties. I say truly that this light is not content with the divine nature's generative or fruitful qualities. I will say more, surprising though this is. I speak in all truth, truth that is eternal and enduring, that this same light is not content with the simple divine essence in its repose, as it neither gives nor receives; but it wants to know the source of this essence, it wants to go into the simple ground, into the quiet desert, into which distinction never gazed, not the Father, nor the Son, nor the Holy Spirit. In the innermost part, where no one dwells, there is contentment for that light, and there it is more inward than it can be to itself, for this ground is a simple silence, in itself immovable, and by this immovability all things are moved, all life is received by those who in themselves have rational being. (*German Sermons* 48, Eckhart 1981 p.198.)

The *scintilla* which is the "highest part" of the soul (MHG *vunkelin* etc.) seeks its home beyond the Persons, beyond even the Unity of the Persons, in the "simple silence" of God.

Eckhart's mysticism is more Platonic and more dangerous than Ruusbroec's largely because he takes a tradition of thought shared by both further and in more literal directions. Other writers stress the unity of God without undermining Christian Trinitarianism; other Christian writers share Eckhart's Platonic view that everything created has its exemplar in the divine essence, without arguing, as Eckhart does, that part of the soul is so closely enmeshed with God that it can be spoken of as uncreated; other writers are more cautious about pressing the analogy between the birth of the Word and the process whereby Christ enters the soul. It is not, perhaps, surprising that Eckhart was condemned. Late medieval thought was juggling many kinds of intellectual tradition, and was being made forcibly aware of the centrifugal tendencies in all of them, as heresy followed heresy, and as competing systems of thought and feeling within the Church strove to identify one another as heretical.<sup>15</sup> The intellectual space in which doctrinal positions could be enunciated was becoming rapidly smaller. In such a situation intellectual balance and the ability to subordinate ideas to a coherent and orthodox system (qualities possessed by Ruusbroec and Tauler, and to an outstanding degree by Aquinas) were inevitably becoming more favoured and less dangerous qualities than flair and theological originality. (At least, these qualities were more favoured from an institutional perspective. Readers and writers continued to favour Eckhart in spite of his official condemnation, and, for the next 200 years and more, German mystical theology was to remain deeply imbued with Eckhartian thought. His imagination, his dazzling performances on the brink of meaninglessness and heresy, fulfilled a real and important need.)

Must we regard Eckhart as in some sense a Christian heretic? This question is taken deeply seriously in the 1981 volume, whose editors seem to want to rehabilitate Eckhart, but are profoundly uneasy about his lack of caution.<sup>16</sup> Roman Catholic medievalists such as Colledge

and McGinn, who rightly perceive their ecclesiastical institutions and doctrinal structures to be closely related to medieval ones, are likely to be more concerned about this question than others. Still, it has general interest for the study of a period in which the concepts of orthodoxy and heresy were so rapidly realigning themselves around the Church's institutions, and becoming coercive metaphors directed at ensuring political and ideological obedience. On this level, Eckhart probably *is* heretical, like any other writer who relies heavily on the language of freedom, and who gives ecclesiastical institutions so small a place in the reunion between God and the soul's divine *scintilla*.

But I think we might also regard Eckhart as heretical in a more sophisticated sense, having the vested interest we all have in another kind of institution, that of language; for it seems to me that his most "dangerous" quality does not reside in any of his formulations themselves, but in his manner of making formulations, and in the assumptions about language that underlie that manner. These are deeply self-contradictory. In some contexts he seems to regard words as spiritual, rather than mundane, entities, and invests them with a high degree of significance. For example, his biblical commentaries make much play with the metaphysical meanings of grammatical structures, interpreting "I am who I am" with the aid of the grammarian Priscian: "Note that the term 'am' is here the predicate of the proposition where God says 'I am', and it is in the second position. As often as it occurs, it signifies that pure naked existence is the subject . . ." (1986, p.45). Here the structure of the signifier (taking this as the whole statement) is so similar to that which is signified (the nature of God) that a whole set of metaphysical, and apparently "exact" correspondences can be adduced. In other contexts, such as the German sermon quoted above, he seems to invest his own words as a preacher with a comparable absoluteness; "I speak in all truth, truth that is eternal and enduring" at least suggests, even if it does not actually state ("I speak *in* truth" not "I speak *the* truth"), that Eckhart's formulation of truth is also "eternal and enduring" and can be described as "truth".

But if we look further we find that this apophatic mystic also has a profound and very "Dionysian" distrust of language: holding, for example, that all propositions we can make about God are false (1986 p.19 etc.). If all such propositions are indeed false, it does not matter what we say about God – or rather, our primary responsibility in talking about God ceases to be that our words be true, and becomes that they be effective in raising ourselves and our audience up to the unspeakable Godhead. Language becomes a strategic medium; theology becomes rhetoric. This happens after a fashion every time a sermon is preached; but in Eckhart's preaching and writing it is taken so far that all his theological pronouncements can from one perspective be seen as relative, made for the purpose of achieving a particular and momentary effect, not because they are part of any consistent system. In the passage quoted above, for example, Eckhart states that the soul is not content even with "the simple divine essence in its repose", but desires to go "into the simple ground, into the quiet desert". This is wonderfully beautiful, but what does it mean? McGinn suggests that the theme of "going

beyond the essence of God” is to be understood in connection with passages of Eckhart’s Latin *Parisian Questions*, in which he claims that “intelligence” is a more “essential” property of God than being itself (1981 p.32). Thus in this passage the soul rises beyond the proposition *Esse Deus est* to the proposition *Intelligere Deus est*. Yet elsewhere Eckhart assumes the primacy of being, and does not distinguish the “divine essence” from “the quiet desert”. It seems to me that the reason that he does so here is not primarily theological (in spite of McGinn’s useful gloss) but rhetorical, even fictional. Eckhart wants to stress the radical distinction between the Trinity and the simplicity of God, and to have the soul he is describing travel upwards for as long as possible; it is a good way of conveying God’s immutability and simplicity to claim that even the term “being” is too active and differentiated to express the divine nature. But if what we are reading here is fiction not theology, is this not also the case when Eckhart describes the soul giving birth to the Son and becoming the Trinity? I stated above that his thinking here is literal rather than metaphorical, for he frequently states that this birth categorically *is* the Incarnation, and no mere enactment of it. However, what is the meaning of the word “literal”, and what force does the verb “to be” have in a language which is incapable of making true statement about God? Eckhart’s assertions that things are “literally”, “actually”, “essentially” true, must in the context of his apophatic thought be taken as no more than metaphoric flourishes, for all language is reduced to metaphor. The combination in Eckhart’s writing of bold, authoritative theorizing about the nature of God, claims that words (including his words) can describe God, and contradictory claims that they cannot, seems to me to be distinctly “dangerous” – whether or not we would want to call it heretical in any sense. It frees the speaker, for whom language can be an instrument of speculation and manipulation; but it thoroughly enslaves the hearer or reader, who is supposed to take the words as authoritatively true. For the moment – until someone shows me that this train of thought is invalid – I share Colledge’s distrust of Eckhart.

Eckhart, Ruusbroec and Tauler are representatives of one of the most intriguing moments in the development of mystical theology, whose writings can focus for us a number of fundamental issues: the nature of religious language, the nature of religious orthodoxy, the relationship between theological models and mystical experience. As 14th-century writers, they belong to what is still, for most educated people, a Dark Age (originally so-called by an era which had christened itself the “Enlightenment”) lost to contemporary culture. These four volumes should go a small part of the way to reclaiming that age for readers who live in an era with which it has much in common.

#### NOTES

1. In future reviews I hope to discuss some of the theological works of medieval and 16th-century women (Hildegard of Bingen, Hadewijch, Catherine of Siena, Catherine of Genoa and Teresa of Avila), the writings of the medieval English mystics, and some of the major works in the Victorine and Franciscan traditions, using the Classics of Western Spirituality as starting-points.
2. Academics writing for non-specialist readers need to be carefully controlled, as they have not been by the general editors of this series. The introductions and apparatus consequently display a good deal of bad, obfuscatory writing, much confusion as to what knowledge can truly be called “common”, and uncertainty as to who the reader is supposed to be.
3. For example one would never guess from Huston Smith’s rambling and silly preface to the 1981 Eckhart volume – all about the corrupting powers of scientific thinking – how much better everything else in the book was going to be. The facts (as his biographical blurb has them) that he has written a best seller, made films about Eastern mysticism, and discovered that Tibetan lamas

can sing chords, can hardly be considered to qualify him to introduce a volume of difficult mystical writing from a *Western* spiritual tradition. In presenting one of the major volumes in their series with this kind of stuff, it seems to me that the Paulists demean themselves, their editors, and their readers.

4. I am not in a position to comment on the accuracy of translations from Middle High German and Dutch, except in so far as the results seem convincing, and I have not had access to the Latin works of Eckhart in the edition from which Colledge and McGinn translate. These are very decided limitations in dealing with mystical writing, in which details of wording are so often all-important.
5. The Tauler volume translates 23 of about 80 sermons printed in *Die Predigten Taulers*, edited by Ferdinand Vetter (Deutsche Texte des Mittelalters XI: Berlin, 1910) – I assume this to have been the text chosen for the translations, although this is nowhere stated. (The recent *Johannes Tauler Opera Omnia* – Olms, Hildesheim, 1985 – a reprint of Laurentius Surius’s 1548 Latin translation of Tauler – may also be of interest; it prints a number of Tauler treatises, now considered inauthentic but still worth reading.) The Ruusbroec volume translates four treatises – *The Spiritual Espousals*, *The Sparking Stone*, *A Mirror of Eternal Blessedness* and *The Little Book of Clarification*, about half of everything he wrote – from the 1944-48 edition of the *Werken*, edited by the Ruusbroecgenootschap (four volumes, Leiden: E. J. Brill). This edition, and the present Ruusbroec volume, will eventually be superseded by the Ruusbroecgenootschap’s new and definitive *Opera Omnia*, to be published in 10 volumes (there are two so far), containing the Middle Dutch texts, good modern English traditions, and a 16th-century Latin translation – a model publishing venture, which will be of fundamental importance for medievalists and religious historians as well as for those interested in Ruusbroec’s work for its own sake.
6. The two Eckhart volumes translate Latin commentaries (1981 and 1986), Latin sermons (1986), German treatises (1981) and sermons (1981 and 1986); the 1981 volume also presents a number of documents relating to Eckhart’s examination for heresy, while the 1986 volume contains the first English translation (I think) of a pseudo-Eckhartian treatise, *Sister Catherine*. Generally speaking, translations are from the yet-incomplete definitive edition of Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart: Die deutschen und lateinischen Werke*, edited by J. Quint and J. Koch, *et al.*, under the direction of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (Stuttgart and Berlin, 1936-).
7. Siger is rehabilitated by Dante in *Paradiso*, canto 10, where Aquinas, one of his chief persecutors in life, introduces him to Dante in the fiery rings of theologians and philosophers in the sphere of the sun. Marguerite Porete’s witty and very heretical *Le Miroir des simples ames* survived the Middle Ages, and even flourished, mainly by becoming attached to the name of a different Margaret, the saint-queen of Hungary, whose orthodoxy was unquestionable. (Wiseman’s introduction has a fairly useful introduction to the “free spirit” heresy.) Eckhart was not in Paris continuously from the 1270’s on, but seems to have returned to Cologne from some time before 1280 to about 1294, before pursuing the long master’s degree in theology in his 30s and 40s.
8. A typical “question” (*quaestio*) might go like this. Question: whether God is a Spirit? 1) It seems that God is a Spirit. Syllogistic “objections” to this proposition, with an authoritative saying (*auctoritas*) as one of the terms of the syllogism. Conclusion: it seems God is not a Spirit. 2) On the other hand (*contra*) there are reasons for saying that he is; a syllogism proving the proposition that God is a Spirit, and contradicting the “objections”. 3) I reply (*respondeo dicendum*), usually by making a distinction (*distinctio*) which reconciles proposition and objections. 4) Further replies to each objection. In Aquinas’ *Summa Theologica*, a *quaestio* may consist of several such questions, each of which is termed an “article”. Eckhart makes much use of this method of argument in his commentaries and other Latin works. The method partly grew out of Abelard’s controversial treatise *Sic et Non*, in which he showed that the Fathers contradict one another at every point by juxtaposing contradictory patristic *sententiae* on a large array of subjects – thus focussing the need for a more contextualized and sophisticated treatment of the *auctoritates*. The *quaestio* thus caters both for the medieval respect of authority and for the growing late-medieval desire to build large logical structures and to admit a degree of scepticism into academic discussions.
9. The 1986 Eckhart volume has a useful glossary of Eckhart’s Latin and German technical terms; one hopes that future editors of translations from the mystics will follow suit. The fact that *principium* can mean “ground” or “source” enables Eckhart, following a tradition that goes back to Ambrose, to expound the first verse of Genesis as “Is the principle God created heaven and earth” (the Vulgate has “In principio”), thus making the verse describe the Platonic doctrine of ideal forms (Eckhart 1981 p.83 etc.).
10. Mystics merely do in a systematic way in this life what other elect souls do more dispersedly and only complete in eternity, that is, unite themselves with God. Because mystical activity is thought of as “normal” in the Middle Ages, it is frequently in works on mysticism that the most serious discussions of the human psyche take place; this is true, for example, of Richard of St. Victor’s *Benjamin* treatises, which profoundly influenced Ruusbroec and many others. In reading Ruusbroec (and to a lesser extent Eckhart and Tauler), we are thus reading a medieval psychologist for whom the delineation of the way the mind works is crucial, since on its correctness depends the usefulness of what he writes in helping the reader achieve union with God. In spite of the numerous and confusing distinctions Ruusbroec draws – no merely triadic *id, ego and super ego* for him – this is a decided bonus for the modern reader.
11. The exegesis divides the verse into four clauses, and then expounds the verse, clause by clause, three times: with respect to the Active Life in Book 1, to the Interior Life in Book 2, and to the Contemplative Life in the brief Book 3. The verse is thus made to cover the whole of the ascent to God. The “division” of the verse in this way is a method of exposition used in scholastic preaching – an important point Wiseman should have made, since it suggests that Ruusbroec thought of his treatise as a kind of sermon. (Compare Ruusbroec’s method with those used in Eckhart’s commentaries, which will interest, and probably puzzle, modern exegetes.)

12. i.e. The ascent to God is a product both of grace and of works, both of activity and of passivity. The extent to which the mystic acted and the extent to which she or he was acted upon was fiercely argued over. Ruusbroec insists, against a loosely-defined group of mystics now known as "the Brethren of the Free Spirit" (ancestors of the Quietist movement), the most important of whom was Marguerite Porete, that *action* characterizes the whole process of ascent. Eckhart was condemned in 1329 partly because his own doctrine too much resembled the Free Spirit heresy; he held that to achieve the summit of felicity, the soul must give up all her own desires, including the desire to be saved and the desire not to have sinned. As Colledge points out (Eckhart 1981, pp.13-14), this is entirely orthodox as it stands, in spite of the papal condemnation.
13. One must use Dionysian language in describing the final stage of mystical ascent. To grasp the concepts which underlie these metaphors, it is useful to know that pseudo-Dionysius wrote a treatise called *The Divine Names*, in which he describes the names that might legitimately be applied to God, and another treatise, *The Mystical Theology*, in which he describes an ascent to God which consists of recognizing that God does *not* consist of any of the names that are applied to him, but is more than all of them. In *The Mystical Theology* – the first and most influential account of apophatic mysticism (the *via negativa*) – God is as it were stripped of his names, until at the end of the work the reader is left in a wordless state which can alone truly capture something of God's nature. Ruusbroec in effect imitates this ending at the end of *The Spiritual Espousals*, quoted below. Eckhart was condemned in 1329 for too literal an understanding of the idea that God "is not" all the names that are applied to him. Whereas Aquinas believed that God's names are "real", in that they are true expressions of parts of his infinitely rich and various nature, Eckhart (influenced by Maimonides) held that it is only the human intellect that perceives distinctions in the essential simplicity of God – a stance that does not necessarily sit easily with his Trinitarianism. (See Eckhart 1986, pp.18ff. for McGinn's comments, which I partly follow.)
14. Ruusbroec seems to have trained for the priesthood in Brussels until his ordination at the age of 24, but thereafter to have had no formal education.
15. For example Pope John XXII, under whose supervision the investigation and condemnation of Eckhart took place, was also responsible for the destruction of the ideological heart of the Franciscan movement. His 1317 Bull *Sancta Romana et Universalis Ecclesia* condemned the radical Franciscan interpretation of Francis's doctrine of poverty – the doctrine which above all made the order distinctive and essentially uninstitutionalized – and thereby virtually created the heresy of the Spiritual Franciscan "Fratricelli".
16. In the 1986 volume, in which Colledge has no part, McGinn seems somewhat less anxious about Eckhart's orthodoxy, and indeed prints a very obviously heretical treatise called *Sister Catherine*, often ascribed to Eckhart but not by him, as evidence of his continuing importance in German mystical writing. Admittedly he does try to show that *Sister Catherine* can be seen as orthodox, but this in itself entails a substantial stretching of the idea of orthodoxy from that assumed in the 1981 volume.