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A HAND THAT MYSTICALLY WRITES

On Madame Guyon

SUMMARY – This article explores the way Guyon considers mystical selflessness. More precisely, it reads and comments upon some pages in her oeuvre in which she situates the annihilation of her ‘self’ not so much in the ecstatic mystical moments, as in the very act of writing about her mystical path. There, Guyon’s selflessness is incarnated in the pen that writes her texts. In her spiritual texts, it is ‘her hand’ that writes in a mystical way. This kind of scribal self-annihilation makes Guyon’s texts anticipate the literary writings of three centuries later. Many twentieth-century avant-garde authors would do everything to free their texts from any intervention of the writing ‘I’ or ‘self’. Speaking or writing without an ‘I’: that was what Guyon wanted to do in the seventeenth century, and that is what so many literary authors of the previous century also explicitly intended to do.

Seventeenth-century mysticism in France is characterized by the ideal of *pur amour*, pure love.¹ The ultimate love for God, it says, is cleansed of the last shred of *amour propre*, (love for self) and, even, cleansed of any ‘self’. In this essay I focus on Madam Guyon (1648–1717) who, together with François de Fénelon (1651–1715), is determinative for the *pur amour* spirituality in late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century France. I focus on the way Guyon considers mystical selflessness. More precisely, I read and comment upon some pages in her oeuvre in which she situates the annihilation of her ‘self’ not so much in the ecstatic mystical moments, as in the very act of writing about her mystical path. There, Guyon’s selflessness is incarnated in the pen that writes her texts. In her spiritual texts, it is ‘her hand’ that writes.

¹ For an interesting overview, see Chapter 2, ‘The Challenge of Mysticism’ and Chapter 3, ‘The Curse of Quietism’, in: Charly Coleman, *The Virtues of Abandon: An Anti-Individualist History of the French Enlightenment*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014, 53-121. For a detailed study, see: Michel Terestchenko, *Amour et désespoir: De François de Sales à Fénelon*, Paris: Seuil, 2000.

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1. RECTIFYING FÉNELON

In the abundant correspondence we have between Madame Guyon and François de Fénelon, we also find spiritual poems – poems addressed to the other who reacts by means of poems in response. Here is a poem by Fénelon to Guyon where he evokes the annihilation of his self in the *pur amour* for God:

O pur amour, achève de détruire
Ce qu'à tes yeux il reste encore de moi.
Divin vouloir, daigne de me conduire;
Je m'abandonne à ton obscure foi.
En quelque état que cet ordre me mette,
Les yeux fermés, pleinement j'y consens:
C'est pour lui seul que mon âme fut faite,
C'est à lui seul que j'offre mon encens.
Je ne suis plus désormais à moi-même;
Dieu me possède et je ne sens que lui;
L'éternel en mon cœur vit et s'aime,

Il en arrache et bannit tout appui.²

O pure love, finish destroying
What you think is still left of me.
Divine will, deign to lead me;
I surrender to your obscure faith.
In whatever condition this order puts me,
With my eyes closed, I fully agree:
It was for Him alone that my soul was made,
It is to Him alone that I offer my incense.
I no longer belong to myself;
God possesses me and I feel only Him;
The Eternal One lives in my heart and
loves Himself,
He snatches and banishes from it all support.

In his 'pure love', Fénelon surrenders to God's 'obscure faith'. He is deprived of all that is left of himself and is fully possessed by God. It is in the empty mirror he has become after the destruction of his 'self', that God now loves Himself. Fénelon has disappeared in his love for God. A purer love is unthinkable.

² Madame Guyon & François Fénelon, *La correspondance secrète, avec un choix de poésies spirituelles*, ed. Benjamin Sahler, introd. Étienne Perrot, Paris: Dervy-Livres, 1982, 311.

Except to Madame Guyon. Here is the poem by which she responds to that by Fénelon:

<p>Vous vous croyez sans soutien, sans défense: Vous êtes loin du parfait dénûment. Que vous avez d'appui et d'assurance! N'avez-vous plus ni goût, ni sentiment? Celui qui sent et voit encore qu'il aime, O qu'il est loin de ce terrible RIEN, Où l'on n'ose se regarder soi-même, Tant on se voit éloigné de tout bien. Mais suivons Dieu, ne cherchons point de route, Contentons-nous de marcher sur ses pas, S'il veut de nous une entière déroute, Il le fera: nous ne le saurons pas. Amour, Amour, si l'on croyait te suivre, On marcherait sans cesse et sûrement. Mais, lorsqu' Amour à l'ennemi nous livre, Si l'on se perd, c'est éternellement. Du moins on croit qu'il en va de la sorte: On n'en connaît plus ni sentier, ni lieu; Et cependant l'âme alors se transporte Bien loin de soi, s'abîmant en son Dieu.³</p>	<p>You believe yourself to be without help, without defense: You are far from total emptiness. What support and confidence you have! Do you no longer have taste or feeling? He who still feels and sees that he loves, Oh, he is far from this terrible NOTHING, Where one does not dare to look at oneself, So far does one see oneself distanced from everything. But let us follow God, let us not look for away, Let us just walk in his footsteps. If He wants a completely erratic journey for us, He will make it so: we will not know. Love, Love, if we believed we follow You, We would walk relentlessly and surely. But when Love delivers us to the enemy, If we get lost, it is forever. At least we think it is like this: We no longer know either path or place; And yet the soul is transported then Far from herself, sinking into her God.</p>
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The first lines already rectify Fénelon, but not by saying something different. Guyon says the same as Fénelon, albeit somewhat more uncompromisingly, more bluntly. What Fénelon writes is in itself correct for her, but the mere fact that he writes it, reveals a mistake. That he is able to say he is 'without support' reveals too much support and shows that he is still far from a state of 'total emptiness'. 'What support and confidence you have!', she reproaches Fénelon. Whoever still *feels* that he loves – and therefore can write about it – is still infinitely distant from what he really loves, that is to say 'this terrible NOTHING'. This 'NOTHING', in capitals, is the God who deserves only to be loved with 'pure love'.

³ Guyon & Fénelon, *Correspondance secrète*, 312. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine (MDK).

This is not to say that God is ‘NOTHING’. He is only so from the point of view of our *amour-propre*. We must love God to the extent that He no longer means anything for our self-love; it is in this sense that this kind of ‘NOTHING’ is ‘terrible’. Besides, it is also what we ourselves must be if we aspire to pure love. The slightest kind of our self-love and even our ‘self’ must be annihilated. To love purely, we have to be ‘NOTHING’. It is the only way to coincide with the place reserved exclusively for God, where without hindrance He can love Himself and enjoy his glory. Only if we have such empty, purified place, God can be at the same time both the subject and the object of our love. Here, our ‘I’ is destroyed. In the ‘holocaust’ of our love, we are finally lost in the One who is nothing but Love.⁴

In fact, this ‘holocaust’ no longer allows such love to be pronounced or written. The very act of saying or writing still supposes too much an ‘I’ and a ‘self’. However, this does not mean that, for this reason, Guyon herself stops writing. What she objects to in Fénelon is just as true for herself, but that is not the conclusion she draws. In the rest of her poem she does what Fénelon also does: she talks about her abandonment of self in pure love, she describes her evaporation into ‘NOTHING’. In doing so, she leaves out the ‘terrible’ consequence of her act of speaking and writing.

In Fénelon’s poem, Guyon sees the paradox of mystical love revealed. It shows how, while proclaiming the annihilation of the ‘self’, he installs that very ‘self’. She, however, does not recognize the paradox in her own poem. There, she leaves it unnoticed.

This is not the case in all of her work. In what follows, I analyze a few pages of *Les torrents*, one of her first books.⁵ In these pages, she unambiguously runs up against the paradox of her own writing: how can someone, having lost herself in God and become ‘NOTHING’, still *write* about this state of being NOTHING?

2. ‘I AM NOT ALLOWED TO CONTINUE HERE’

The title *Les torrents* (The Torrents) tellingly illustrates the core of Guyon’s mysticism. To walk the spiritual path, you just have to surrender to God as to the flow of a wild torrent. The spiritual life comes down to the act of pouring

⁴ ‘Holocaust’ is a term regularly used in seventeenth century *spiritualité*. It refers to the radical kind of sacrifice in which the sacrificial animal is entirely burned – an image for the God-loving ego that is totally destroyed in its loving act.

⁵ Madame Guyon, *Cœuvres mystiques*. Ed & introd. D. Trone; introd. M. Huot de Longchamp, Paris: Honoré Champion, 2008, 139-263; Idem, *Les Torrents et Commentaire au Cantique des cantiques de Salomon, 1683-1684*, ed. C. Morali, Grenoble: Jérôme Millon, 1992, 69-190.

oneself out into God – a perpetual act in which every form of ‘self’ keeps getting lost in the ocean of divine infinity. The metaphor of the torrent suggests already that the mystical path is not the steep and difficult path that we know. This path is – on the contrary – radically simple: that of perpetual self-loss.

True, Guyonian mysticism, too, describes stages in the mystical development, but in each stage the accent is put on simplicity, that is to say, on the fact that what we are seeking is always already there. Someone who is too focused on the path to God and is too consciously worrying about the correct method to reach his goal, is too preoccupied with himself rather than with God. The path that leads beyond oneself must itself already be without ‘self’; so Guyon repeats in various ways.

But can this be said or written? Does not the act of saying or writing immediately destroy what it expresses? It was the paradox that Guyon discerned in her reply to one of Fénelon’s poems. In *Les torrents*, there is a page where Guyon explicitly discerns the same paradox, this time in her own text. She has just explained the last of the mystical steps and here she is, who, without warning, resorts to her confessor, that is to say, to the one for whom she is writing this book:⁶

I am not allowed to continue here; all is missing. I think I made too much of my own natural lights. [*Je crois avoir trop pris sur mes lumières naturelles*] You will easily discern it. I made reflections; perhaps it was more by nature than by grace that I had the instinct to write; and I am willing to confess it here and to admit frankly that I even made some mistakes at the end, having, instead of losing them, retained in my mind certain lights [*certaines lumières*] which had come to me in prayer in this state. Furthermore, in the state in which I am, I have not distinguished at all between what is natural and what is divine, what is God and what is mine. I pray to God to let you know.

I did not read the page after I had written it and I was interrupted a lot. After I had left the argument halfway, I reread a line or two, or a few words, in order to continue. I do not know if I acted against your intention. It happened to me sometimes, but I have not reread anything since. I did not consider if I had said everything about each thing [I intended to say] or if I repeated myself. I leave all this to your lights [*à vos lumières*], praying Our Lord to enlighten you to make you discern the false from the true, and what my *amour-propre* would have wanted to mix with his [God’s] lights [*avec ses lumières*].⁷

The lines preceding this long quote suggest that Guyon has reached the end of what she had to say and is about to finish her book. She has just explained the final mystical stage, which in the edition published by Dominique Tronc

⁶ Guyon, *Œuvres mystiques*, 150; *Torrents et Commentaires*, 71.

⁷ Guyon, *Œuvres mystiques*, 239-240; *Torrents et Commentaires*, 141-142.

has the title 'Fourth degree of the passive way in faith. Divine life'.⁸ And, then, suddenly it turns out that Guyon remembers what 'to write' means to her: it is to present, not what she herself is thinking about, but what God makes her write. For her, writing as such is meant to be a form of passivity, to let oneself be guided by what comes like that – like the flow of a torrent. In writing, she only wants to be the wild, impulsive yet hyper-obedient spokesperson for God.

At least, such was her intention. But now, as she is writing the 'last' pages of her book, she realizes that things did not go exactly as she wanted them to go. This is why she again addresses her confessor, at whose request she has taken the initiative to write her book.⁹ It is up to him to judge whether, in the pages she has written, her *ego* is not too present. And immediately she confesses: yes, I made mistakes in that sense, everything is still too much 'me', too much 'nature' and therefore not entirely 'grace'. It was 'my natural lights' that disturbed my prayer and that I let enter into what I wrote here. So she confesses to her confessor, and asks him explicitly to read what she has written and in it to separate what is the result of her 'natural lights' and what was written down by God's 'grace'.

Re-reading what she wrote is what she purposely refused to do, even at times when she was often interrupted. She hardly reread more than a few words or lines before continuing, she confesses. It is not surprising, then, that her texts are so impulsive, capricious and often difficult to follow. And here she is now, unequivocally declaring that she does not know whether she said everything she intended to say, or has been lost in useless repetition.

It is hardly surprising she did not want to reread anything, since she does not suppose herself to be the author of what she writes. What appears on her pages is the result of a state of 'passive prayer' – a state of praying during which all form of 'self' is erased and absorbed by the 'torrent' ceaselessly pouring into God. And now she confesses that she must stop writing because she suddenly realizes she might be too present in what she has written. If this is the case, she prevented God from speaking in the book He wanted to write by means of her humble human hand.

⁸ Guyon, *Œuvres mystiques*, 227.

⁹ 'Long live Jesus, Mary, Joseph! It is in their name and to obey Your Reverence, that I will begin to write what I do not know myself, trying as much as I can to let my mind and my pen lead to the movement of God, making no other movement than the one of my hand'. Guyon, *Œuvres mystiques*, 150; *Torrents et Commentaires*, 71. The confessor who asked Guyon to write her book is François Lacombe; see Madame Guyon, *La Vie par elle-même et autres écrits biographiques*. Vol. I, ed. & introd. D. Tronc; introd. Andrée Villard, Paris: Honoré Champion, 2014, 517-518.

3. WRITING SCRIPTURE

‘Nothing’ writes. There are other passages in her works where Guyon directly thematizes the ‘self-absence’ that writes the texts bearing her signature. In *La vie par elle-même*, for example, her extensive autobiography written at the request of her spiritual director ‘to defend herself against Bossuet’,¹⁰ she informs us of the way in which she wrote on the Bible. This work, immense in itself, commenting on each verse of each of the biblical books, was written over a remarkably short period of time: between April 1684 and March 1685. One of the eighteenth-century editions had twenty volumes. But it was not ‘she’ who wrote those comments, as she admits in chapter XXI of the second part. It is even too much to say that she *read* the biblical text, let alone has *reflected* on the commented verses:

As soon as I would begin to read the Holy Scriptures, I was led to write down the passage that I was reading, and soon after, to write an explanation of it. In writing down the passage, I did not have the least thought about the explanation, and as soon as it was written, I was led to explain it, writing with inconceivable speed. Before starting to write, I didn’t know what I was going to say. While writing, I saw that I was writing things that I had never known, and light was given to me. At the time of this manifestation, I saw that I had treasures of erudition and knowledge within me that I did not know I had. After writing, I would not remember anything at all of what I had written, and neither forms nor images were left in me. I could not have used what I had written to help other souls, but when that moment came, Our Lord gave me what I would say to them and all that was necessary for them, without my trying at all.¹¹

First she ‘writes down’ the Scripture, in the sense that, verse by verse, she copies it. And then this copying act, performed by someone who is ‘nothing’, shows that this ‘nothing’ is abundantly fertile, and continues writing by commenting on what has been copied. In this activity, Guyon herself is but a witness: she sees herself writing; or more exactly: she sees a hand and a pen writing, and the question to whom this hand and this pen belong has lost all importance. The act of writing is in complete union with what is written: it is the Guyonian version of the *unio mystica*. This is the consequence of the state of ‘permanent prayer’ she is in.

¹⁰ François Trémolières, ‘Donner à lire Mme Guyon’, in: *Dix-septième Siècle* 3 (2013) no. 248, 549.

¹¹ Madame Guyon, *Selected Writings*, transl., ed. & introd. Dianne Guenin-Lelle & Ronney Mourad, New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2012, 248-249; *La Vie par elle-même*, 602-603.

In this chapter of her autobiography, Guyon continues to explain the circumstances of her mystical writing. She had only the Bible and no other book to consult; she was sick and had no time to write except at night ('I only slept one or two hours every night, and along with that I had a fever nearly every day').¹² And, what is more, God was doing everything to make her lose her concentration (read: to prevent her from being herself the agent of her writing).

You made me write with such purity that it was necessary for me to stop and start again. (...) When I was writing during the day, I was consistently interrupted, and I often left my words half written, and You would give me what You wanted immediately afterward. What I wrote was not at all in my head, such that I had a head so free that it was in a complete void. I was so disengaged from what I was writing that it was like a stranger to me. It took me one moment of reflection to be punished; I was punished, my writing slowed down immediately, and I remained like an idiot until I was inspired from above. The least joy from the graces that You accorded me was very rigorously punished. All my faults that are in my writings come from (...) not being used to God's operation (...).¹³

Is there suffering in Madame Guyon's 'automatic writing'? Absolutely. In chapter XI of the same second part, she describes one of the first moments in her life when

there was such a strong movement in my writing that I could not resist. (...) It was a simple instinct, with a fullness that I could not bear. I was like those mothers who are too full of milk, who suffer a lot.¹⁴

Why does she suffer? Because she is 'too full of milk', though having no milk herself and not even having the right to have it herself. She has an instinctual ambition to write and at the same time she knows that she has nothing to write because she has nothing to say:

I do not know, I do not want anything, and I have no idea, and I would even think it very unfaithful to give myself one, or to think for a moment about what I could write.¹⁵

And does the *grace* that makes her write anyway deliver her from this suffering? Not at all. This 'automatic writing', deprived of its instinctual ease and replaced by an obligation on the part of God, is experienced only as a 'test', a 'trial'.

¹² Guyon, *Selected Writings*, 249; *La Vie par elle-même*, 603.

¹³ Guyon, *Selected Writings*, 249-250; *La Vie par elle-même*, 604.

¹⁴ Guyon, *La Vie par elle-même*, 517. In this passage, Guyon describes how she came to write *Les torrents*.

¹⁵ Guyon, *La Vie par elle-même*, 517-518.

A few lines later in the passage quoted from chapter XXI, she writes, addressing God:

Did You not take a hundred different forms for me in order to see if I was yours without reserve in every trial, and if I still had some little interest in myself? You always found this soul flexible and pliable to your desires. What have You not made me suffer? Into what humiliation have You not thrown me to counter-balance your graces? To what, my God, have You not delivered me, and through what painful straits have You not made me pass? (...) But I had no pain at all from what You did to me. I saw with pleasure and compliance, not taking any more interest in myself than in a dead dog, I truly saw your divine games with compliance. You raised me to the sky and right away threw me in the mud, then with the same hand, You picked me up from where You had thrown me. I saw that I was the game played by your love and by your will, the victim of your divine justice; and it was all the same to me. It seems to me, oh my God, that You treat your dearest friends as the sea treats its waves.¹⁶

We have read how Guyon opposes the idea of 'holy indifference'. What she writes here, however, does not really illustrate this opposition. On the contrary, it is rather difficult not to interpret this 'compliance' in the terrible 'trials' imposed by God as an indifference on the part of Guyon. Of course, she does not use the word. She uses words that express non-indifference: the feeling of 'compliance', or, expressed negatively, not having 'pain at all from what You did to me'.

In any case, she does not conclude that being the 'wave' constantly broken by the sea-which-is-God puts her in a position where it is her will which is the ultimate basis of her love for God. Guyon coincides with a 'compliance' without will and, therefore, without subject. She is but a broken 'wave' or, more exactly, she coincides with the very breaking of that wave: the nothingness that is the real substance of this fragile and ephemeral phenomenon that is a breaking 'wave'.

Here, we touch the importance of writing – both as a metaphor and as an act – in Madame Guyon's mystical thought. To express the 'nothingness' that she is and affirms to be in her *pure love* for God, she seeks metaphors that all end up being more or less invalid. What most aptly expresses this 'nothingness' is the act of expressing as such, that is to say, an act of expression showing that, in full act, it fails in expressing the 'nothingness' it intends to express – which, precisely, is its most adequate expression. Hence the endless – because endlessly repeated – writing of Guyon. It is a writing which functions on the basis of its very failure, of its 'stopping'. As soon as she realizes that she is the one writing, she stops writing and at the same time starts again to leave the act of her writing to this 'nothingness', realizing that it is only 'nothing' that expresses itself in the text which, despite herself, is signed with her own name.

¹⁶ Guyon, *Selected Writings*, 250; *La Vie par elle-même*, 605.

4. NOTHING THAT LIBERATES

In Madame Guyon's texts, 'nothingness' (i.e., the annihilation of the 'I') is both object and subject. This is her *formal* way of effectively articulating this 'nothingness'. But what does this 'nothingness' imply *in substance*? What is it to live as 'nothingness' that addresses God in *pure love*?

Let us return to *Les torrents*, the text in the middle of which Guyon writes that she has to cease writing. In the lines immediately following our last quote from this text, she writes that she 'forgot' something. With what she 'forgot', she will fill dozens of new pages – that is to say, the second half of the little book. What had she forgotten? Nothing in fact, as we will see, because what she discusses in the following pages is not really new. She talks about the same state she explained just before the break in her writing process, that is to say, about the last step on the mystical path: the step in which mystical desire has reached its goal and the soul feels herself absorbed in God.

In the following lines, she approaches this theme by analyzing the state in which humans will find themselves after having risen from the dead. This state is heavenly. Surely it will be so in heaven. But is this state possible under earthly conditions as well? When, for instance, the mystic experiences the grace of being lost in God? To explain this, Guyon takes as many pages as she has written so far.

This celestial state of 'the risen', experienced under earthly conditions, is that of 'freedom'. Immediately after the passage quoted, we read:

I forgot to say that this is where real freedom is given: not a freedom, as some imagine, that deprives or exempts from doing things (...). The freedom of which I speak is not of this nature: it facilitated all things which are in the order of God and of his state (...).¹⁷

This freedom, she continues, characterizes the state of 'a risen man', which according to her is equal to the state in which someone in 'perpetual prayer' is. That 'resurrected' state is not beyond life, but is to be situated within the fullness of life:

The actions of a risen man are actions of life; if the soul after the resurrection remains lifeless, I say that she is dead or buried, but not risen. To be resurrected, the soul must do the same actions as she did before all her losses, and without any difficulty; but now she does them in God. Did not Lazarus, after his resurrection, perform all the functions of life as before? And Jesus Christ, after his resurrection, even wanted to eat and converse with people. This is an example. Of those who believe in God and are impeded, who cannot pray, I say also that they are not risen.¹⁸

¹⁷ Guyon, *La Vie par elle-même*, 240-241; *Torrents et Commentaires*, 142-143.

¹⁸ Guyon, *La Vie par elle-même*, 241; *Torrents et Commentaires*, 143.

To support her arguments, Guyon refers to the Book of Job. Job too experienced the phenomenon of 'loss' in all its intensity: God deprived him of everything. He made him 'rot'.¹⁹ But none other than God gave him everything back. And what He gave back was life, a life similar to the one he had before. Guyon continues:

It is the same after the resurrection: everything is given back, with an admirable ease of making use of it without getting soiled, without getting attached to it, without appropriating it as in the past. We do everything in God, in a divine way, using things as if we were not using them. And that is where true freedom and true life are: If you have been similar to Jesus Christ in his death, you will also be similar to Him in his resurrection.²⁰ Are you free when you have inabilities, restrictions? No. If the Son sets you free, you will be truly free,²¹ but in his freedom.²²

What Guyon describes as the final phase of spiritual life is not a moment of ecstasy; it is not the limit-experience in which during an instant the mystic feels united with God. The goal of spiritual life is a 'state' in which one finds oneself for a whole period – or even forever. It is the state of 'risen men', of those who died with Christ and who are – and remain – risen with Him. This state is not ecstatic in the sense that it is not different from an ordinary state: life just goes on, even the life of the mystic. Of course he is 'in God', but he keeps on praying to Him just as before. What has changed is the state in which – or, more precisely, the point from which – he does so. What he does now, he does in complete freedom.

What, then, is freedom? It is not just doing what you prefer to do. Freedom breaks all attachment and radically detaches. Then, you do what you do, but the reason why you do it is free from any constraint, any need or necessity, any causal logic. You do something, not because you need it, but precisely because you do *not*. You use things as if you do not use them, as if you do not depend on them. In other words, you have detached yourself from all things around you; if you make use of them, it is to show that you are no longer attached to them.

You do what you do, but there is no longer an 'I' who does it. You are liberated even from your 'self'. You are free because you have become 'NOTHING', because there is no longer any kind of 'self' to intervene in what you do. In other words, you now live by the only sovereign freedom which is God.

¹⁹ Guyon, *La Vie par elle-même*, 241; *Torrents et Commentaires*, 143.

²⁰ Guyon quotes Romans 6:5.

²¹ Guyon quotes John 8:36.

²² Guyon, *La Vie par elle-même*, 241-142; *Torrents et Commentaires*, 143-144.

Like *love (agape)*, *freedom (eleutheria)* is one of the basic ideas of Christianity.²³ Christians live in *agape* and, therefore, are ‘free’ from the old Mosaic Law. And since Christ had conquered sin and death, they are even free from the laws of mortality and finitude. At least *in principle*. The *real* liberation of sin and finitude will only take place at the end of times, when Christ will return to render the Last Judgment. In the meantime, Christians can only *testify* to that ‘freedom’ to come.

The *agape*-communities of the early Christians were the first form of such a testimony. Soon, it were the ‘martyrs’ who, in the midst of the apotheosis of finitude – i.e., the Roman circuses and their public cruelties – bore witness to a Life freed from finitude, mortality, and sin. After the fall of the Roman Empire, Christianity fulfilled the role of this testimony by establishing centers of evangelical life: the abbeys. At the beginning of the modern era, with the decline of Christian cultural hegemony, this testimony of Christian freedom became more and more the responsibility of the private individual. It was in the interior of his soul that the Christian found the messianic state where one is free from sin, death, and finitude. The mystical experience became the place par excellence to live this. The intimacy of each person’s love for God became the most proper place where such radical ‘freedom’ could be experienced: a freedom released from all that is finite, including the human ego.

This, then, is why that kind of love required the becoming ‘NOTHING’ of the soul. It is ‘NOTHING’ that can testify perfectly to God. As Guyon says, it is only as ‘NOTHING’ that one can love God *purely*.

6. NOTHINGNESS AS PLACE

By affirming that ‘NOTHING’ conditions the radicality of Christian ‘freedom’, Guyon touches on an idea that has always been rejected by Christian doctrine, but which, logically, nonetheless goes in the direction of the Christian idea of God as established in all rigor in Guyon’s line of reasoning. If one lives in true freedom, that is to say, absorbed by the freedom of God, one is detached from all that exists, including evil. A few pages further on from the last quoted passage in *Les torrents*, we read:

(...) this soul participates in the purity of God; or rather: any self-purity [*pureté propre*] (...) having been destroyed, only the purity of God in Himself subsists in

²³ Galatians 5:1: ‘It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery’; 5:13: ‘You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love’ (New International Version). See also Romans 8:21.

this nothingness, but in a way so real that the soul is completely ignorant of evil and powerless to commit it. This does not prevent that we can always fall, but that hardly happens here because of the deep annihilation in which the soul is deprived of any selfhood [*où est l'âme qui ne lui laisse aucune propriété*]; and only selfhood [*et la seule propriété*] can cause sin; so what no longer exists, cannot sin.²⁴

'What no longer exists, cannot sin'. Being in state of perfection (as is Guyon) delivers us from sins, even from the possibility of committing them. Even if we actually do commit sins. In the fifth century, Shenoute, one of the Egyptian Desert Fathers, once said: 'There are no crimes for those who have Christ'. It is not without reason that Michael Gaddis took this sentence as the title for his book on 'religious violence in the Christian Roman Empire'.²⁵ Whoever considers himself released from sin easily considers himself above it, and therefore allows himself to commit sins. Christianity has never approved of this attitude, but the history of violence committed by Christians in the fourth and fifth centuries throughout the Roman Empire shows that it was widespread at the time. And it has not been completely absent either in the subsequent history of Christianity.

Guyon does not go so far as to justify sin, certainly not. But one can understand that passages like the one just quoted aroused suspicion on the part of Bossuet and other ecclesiastical authorities. And even if Guyon does not justify sin, she nonetheless problematizes the confessional practice for 'souls' who live as 'risen' in 'pure love' for God. Directly after the passage quoted, she writes:

And this is so true that the souls I am talking about have much trouble when going to confession because, when they want to accuse themselves, they do not know what to accuse (...), being unable to find anything in them alive, [anything] that may have wanted to offend God, since their will is completely lost in God. And since God cannot want sin, neither can they want it. If they are told to confess, they do it because they are very submissive, but they say with their mouths what they are made to say, like a little child to whom one would say: 'You must confess this'; he says it without knowing what he says, without knowing whether it is true or is not, without reproach or remorse. For, here, the soul is no longer to be aware of it, and everything about her is so lost in God that there is no longer an accuser in her: she remains happy, without seeking to be. But when we say to her: 'You made this mistake', she finds nothing in her that made it; and if we say, Say you did it', she will say it with the lips, without pain or repentance.²⁶

²⁴ Guyon, *La Vie par elle-même*, 247.

²⁵ Michael Gaddis, *There Is No Crime for Those Who Have Christ: Religious Violence in the Christian Roman Empire*, Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005.

²⁶ Guyon, *La Vie par elle-même*, 247-248.

Contrary to what Shenoute says, for Guyon, the one who lives in Christ – the ‘risen one’ – would confess the sins of which he is accused, but he would only do it ‘with the lips’ and would not be ‘aware of it’.

Christian freedom, in its perfect state, is delivered from all ‘awareness’ and ‘conscience’. And, paradoxically, it is also delivered from the pretension of being above or beyond all conscience. It is neither touched nor touchable by sin, albeit without changing the behavior of the one who is in this state. Such a one acts as if he is guided by his conscience; he confesses when asked, without doing it consciously, without knowing what he is saying. We recognize the way in which Guyon writes her spiritual texts. Like her writing, such confession is without ‘I’. It is a confession of ‘NOTHING’, by ‘NOTHING’: a ‘nothing’ that is both subject and object.

In fact, this ‘NOTHING’ can only be approached and defined as a place. It is the locus where the difference takes place between the world of sin and that of the deliverance from all sin, between the terrestrial life marked by finitude and the Eternal Life, between the mortal state and the risen state. It is an ‘active’ place: the locus of an activity produced by someone’s being without ‘I’ and actively occupying this place as an absolute ‘NOTHING’, a nothing not even attached to itself, to its own nullity, and therefore ready to confess sins that it never committed and of which it is not conscious.

That ‘NOTHING’ operates under the condition of the ‘as if’. It is the ‘as if’ of a risen man who, in the world of mortals, acts as if he is not, and who, conversely, for those who would already hold him to be in the world of immortals, continues to live as a mortal. In the world of sin, death, and finitude, he pretends to be sinful, mortal, finite. The ‘as if’-mode is the only possible way of being perfect and of carrying out the witness which is the main mission of Christian life, that is to say, to bear witness, in full human condition, to Eternal Life, which is the true condition of man and the world.

The most existential form of freedom for this holy ‘as if’ is that of suffering. Suffering shows the reality and the truth of the ‘as if’. Those who live as ‘risen’ live in God, that is, in absolute peace. But how does this peace show itself? In full suffering – a suffering that one experiences *as if* one is suffering. The ‘peace’ of the ‘risen ones’, we read in the sentences that follow,

is so invariable and unalterable that nothing in the world or in all of hell can alter it for a moment. The senses are always susceptible to suffering; and when a person is overwhelmed and cries like a child, if one asks her, and she searches in herself, she will find nothing in herself that is suffering: in the midst of inconceivable pains, she says: ‘I do not suffer anything’, without being able to say or admit that she suffers, because of the divine state and the bliss that she carries (...).²⁷

²⁷ Guyon, *La Vie par elle-même*, 248.

It is only *as if* such persons are suffering. In reality, 'NOTHING' suffers. Or, more accurately, those 'saints' who suffer stand, precisely by the practice of suffering, in the midst of 'NOTHING', in the abyss of nothingness. What is crucial, here, is that this nothingness is only possible thanks to an 'abyss', thanks to the contours of a chasm in which the 'NOTHING' can be given a place. Only its contours make the abyss possible. And so does the suffering to the holy nothingness. It is the suffering that, for the 'risen' one living under earthly condition, makes possible the holy 'as if'; it provides the 'as if' with its reality, with its truth. Only thanks to suffering, the 'risen' one can live as if he does not suffer, as if he is no longer subjected to the mortal condition and is already enjoying Eternal Life. Having only the 'as if' to live his 'peace' and his 'resurrection', this 'as if' cannot stand without the raw reality of suffering.

6. NOTHING WRITES

With Guyon, writing fulfills a role similar to that of suffering in the earthly life of the 'risen'. Guyon acts *as if* she is the one who writes, and this can only be experienced in scribal suffering. From time to time she explicitly realizes this, and at these moments she admits that, from her perspective, an absence, an abyss, a nothingness must be the agent of her act of writing. It is obvious to her that at the locus of this nothingness, God is doing the job, but she realizes that it is her job to keep this locus empty. That locus is not with God in the sky, but here on earth. It is down here that God must be prepared a place, a place which is none other than the place where we humans are. *Our* place must be emptied and left entirely to God. Without us to occupy it, this place has no substance, but we must empty it to return it to our true substance, which is God. This is why emptying this place requires an act, the only true act that man is capable of – an interminable act of self-effacing that coincides with the truth of his act of living.

Here we touch on the beating heart of Guyon's writing. She writes from her own absence, but it is only through her writing that she can give a place to this absence. It is only by the 'torrent' of her writing that she is able to make this writing empty and show that it is God who writes through the pen her hand is holding.

An absence that makes you write; an absence which at the same time needs writing to be the absence that it is. To the French literary critic Maurice Blanchot, this is exactly the kind of experience which is at the origin of modern literature. Time and space are lacking here to explore this Blanchotian thesis in light of the literary texts of the twentieth century.²⁸ Let us simply refer to the

²⁸ The author himself provides such an overview in, for instance, his collection of essays, entitled *Le livre à venir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1959), translated as *The Book to Come* (transl. Charlotte Mandell), Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003.

opening chapter of Blanchot's *The Space of Literature* (*L'espace littéraire*, 1955), in which he extensively develops this theme – a theme that permeates his entire work.

In this introductory chapter, Blanchot puts forward the idea of an 'essential solitude' (the title of the chapter) that he believes characterizes modern literary works. This solitude, he explains, is not 'existential', but 'essential', which for Blanchot means that the author is *structurally* alone vis-à-vis his own work. It is *his* work, of course, but that work inevitably puts its author on leave. 'He who writes the work is set aside; he who has written it is dismissed', Blanchot writes.²⁹

The author was 'fired' (*congédié*) from the very start, he adds. This is precisely the cause of his work: being at the origin of the work, he nonetheless was never there. His work is only the 'substitute' of his impossible presence. Blanchot applies this thesis to the writing – as simple as it is basic – of the word 'to be', or more precisely 'it is'.

The writer writes a book, but the book is not yet the work [*oeuvre*]. There is a work only when, through it, and with the violence of a beginning which is proper to it, the word *being* is pronounced. This event occurs when the work becomes the intimacy between someone who writes it and someone who reads it. One might, then, wonder: if solitude is the writer's risk, does it not express the fact that he is turned, oriented toward the open violence of the work, of which he never grasps anything but the substitute – the approach and the illusion in the form of the book?³⁰

The origin of the work, the moment when a work changes from 'non-being' into 'being': this is where the author has a decisive role, but as absentee in this moment of origin. This is what makes him alone, 'essentially'.³¹ This is also why the author can but assume that his work is not yet finished and that he must continue to work on it; which will force him to work on it endlessly. Blanchot continues:

The writer belongs to the work, but what belongs to him is only a book, a mute collection of sterile words, the most insignificant thing in the world. The writer who experiences this void believes only that the work is unfinished, and he thinks

²⁹ Maurice Blanchot, *The Literary Space*, transl. & introd. Ann Smock, Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1989, 20; *L'espace littéraire*, Paris: Gallimard 1955, 10.

³⁰ Blanchot, *The Literary Space*, 21-22; *L'espace littéraire*, 11-12.

³¹ In the same context, Blanchot writes: 'He whose life depends upon the work, either because he is a writer or because he is a reader, belongs to the solitude of that which expresses nothing except the word being: the word which language shelters by hiding it, or causes to appear when language itself disappears into the silent void of the work (...) whoever reads it enters into the affirmation of the work's solitude, just as he who writes it belongs to the risk of this solitude' (Blanchot, *The Literary Space*, 21; *L'espace littéraire*, 11).

that a little more effort, along with some propitious moments, will permit him and him alone to finish it. So he goes back to work. But what he wants to finish by himself remains interminable; it involves him in an illusory task. And the work, finally, knows him not. It closes in around his absence as the impersonal, anonymous affirmation that it is – and nothing more.³²

The work of literary writing fails on principle. It lives from its failure, from its powerlessness to be present at its inaugural act, and from its desire to be there. To be present at what? At the origin of saying something; the origin of the act that says ‘This is it’; the origin that links language to the world, words to things. This connection assumes a distance between two realities that are not evidently linked – two realities that are basically separated from each other. And these two are, precisely, words and things, language and reality. What makes people talk, what is the origin of saying ‘This is that’, is the absence of a connection between ‘this’ and ‘that’, between the word and the thing. The intention to touch this origin is the intention to touch the word or language as such, the intention to touch the being of language, that is to say, of language as it is without connection with things.

Here is the emptiness of language encountered by the writer: emptiness, not as the absence of words, but as an endless stream of words all empty in the sense that they say nothing, that they have no connection with things and nevertheless speak, *only* speak – an endless stream of words that ‘are’; words that show, in a sovereign manner, only their ‘being there’, their mere existence. What speaks through literature is speaking as such, words in their sovereign power to be – not being grounded in their meaning, that is to say, in their connection with things. A language that whispers, endlessly, regardless of what the words say, regardless of who has them on his lips or makes them flow from his pen. Language in its ‘impersonal, anonymous affirmation’, as the quote says. Literature is by definition a language without ‘I’:

To write is to break the bond that unites the word with myself. (...) To write is to break this bond. To write is, moreover, to withdraw language from the world, to detach it from what makes it a power according to which, when I speak, it is the world that declares itself (...). (...) Where he [the writer] is, only being speaks – which means that language doesn’t speak any more, but is. It devotes itself to the pure passivity of being. If to write is to surrender to the interminable, the writer who consents to sustain writing’s essence loses the power to say ‘I’.³³

³² Blanchot, *The Literary Space*, 22; *L’espace littéraire*, 12.

³³ Blanchot, *The Literary Space*, 25-26; *L’espace littéraire*, 17.

Writing without 'I' and without knowing what is being written: this is, as we have seen, the condition of writing in Madame Guyon's spiritual oeuvre. With her, all the paradoxes that this writing implies, lead to God. Through the absence of Guyon's 'I', her writing writes down what God tells her. Rather than being the solution to all of these paradoxes, God above all provides a context allowing Guyon to develop and formulate them in an accurate way.

In Blanchot, we read nowhere that it is God who organizes the paradoxes of writing. For him, God would just be an imagined, literary idea. But in his view, the effects of this imagination do not differ very much formally from what Guyon describes as effects of God. For Blanchot, too, it is not the 'I' that writes. What is written cannot be traced back to an instance of self-awareness or self-control.

In Blanchot's eyes, it is not God, but the imagination that writes: an imagination that does not have its source in the inventiveness of the subject, but in the 'image character' of language. Language is 'image' before being the image *of* something, and it is this 'pure being' of language that speaks and writes in literary texts.

In Guyonian spirituality, it is God who takes up the pen; in literary writing as Blanchot conceives it, it is the imaginary (in the 'materialist' sense of the term: the 'mere being' of the image). Here is not the place to explore this parallel further, either in Blanchot's work or in modern literature in general, but it is clear that in both cases it is 'nothing' that writes.

And this writing by 'nothing' invades the existential being of humans, even their 'pain of being', their 'pain of existence'. There is, to cite just one example, this famous poem by Fernando Pessoa, 'Autopsychography', the first stanza of which says:

The poet is a faker
 Who's so good at his act
 He even fakes the pain
 Of pain he feels in fact.³⁴

To compare the way in which Guyon experiences suffering as 'not living' it, with the way in which the suffering imagined in this poem is experienced 'as real', would require a new essay. But by now, it is at least clear that the formal dispositives of modern literature can be found in seventeenth-century spiritual writings, as evidenced by Madame Guyon's texts.

³⁴ Fernando Pessoa, *A Little Larger than the Entire Universe: Selected Poems*, ed. & transl. R. Zenith, London: Penguin Books, 2006, 314.

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