

CHAPTER 4

QUIETISM AND DYNAMIC PASSIVITY: THE DIFFERENCE

‘Illuminating insight’ does not stop at mere contemplation. It is integrated with the deliverance of all beings in time from the universal suffering of the world.

Keiji Nishitani (1900-1990)

Under no circumstances should you dwell upon the effects that contemplation produces within you ...because to do so will hinder God’s activity that enriches you. You should only wish to be indifferent to your condition and remain resigned and oblivious, without awareness of God who will then prepare you for the practice of virtue and a true love of the Cross.

Miguel de Molinos (1628-1696)

The practice of the Buddha Dharma [‘teaching’, ‘truth’] is not done for one’s own sake . . . the *zazen* [‘sitting meditation’] of buddhas and patriarchs is a prayer to gather and appropriate the entire Buddha Dharma. . . . Accordingly, their *zazen* does not forget or reject living beings; their compassionate thought always extends even to insects, and their earnest desire is to save them.

Dogen (1200-1253)

We infer from the description of the ‘Perfect Man’ that although he displays ‘a passivity in which he confides himself and everything else to God’s disposal’, he is nevertheless possessed of a ‘tremendous spiritual power’, i.e. a combination of both power *and* passivity. Quietism leaves ‘power’ out of the equation, emphasizing that the supremacy of our spiritual nature is to be attained not through ascetic struggle but through a total passivity, for only such a passivity allows us direct contact with the Deity. Having attained this union in passivity, usually after protracted prayer, the ethical and rational faculties are held to be superfluous, making it possible, for instance, to permit ourselves any kind of licentious behaviour.

Authentic spirituality, however, is the interplay of both the active and passive principles and implies an *ascesis* leading to the reintegration of these principles into the higher ordering of 'dynamic passivity', as exemplified by 'Perfect Man', who demonstrates a paradoxical state of relaxation together with a boundless love and morally purposeful energy. It is not a question, then, of a choice between activity and passivity in the spiritual life, as Quietism would suggest, but of the interaction between these two fundamental principles, whose harmonization allows a creative passivity to emerge within us. The attainment of this harmony has traditionally been the function of mystical prayer, such as that advocated by Miguel de Molinos.

The descriptions we have of union with this Supreme Identity embrace life-enhancing feelings of peace, power and joy: 'The peace that passes all understanding and the pulsating energy of creation...are one in the centre in the midst of conditions where all opposites are reconciled'.¹ Similarly, 'Those who have possessed the calm within can perceive always welling out from its silence the perennial supply of the energies which work in the universe'.² This dynamic passivity of mystical union is given superb poetic expression; in *Tintern Abbey* Wordsworth describes:

that serene and blessed mood,
In which . . . the breath of this corporeal frame,
and even the motion of our human blood,
almost suspended, we are laid asleep
in body, and become a living soul:
while with an eye made quiet by the power
of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
we see into the life of things.

Although Wordsworth describes here a state of passivity, there is an undoubted dynamic content to 'become a living soul'. In *Excursion*, Wordsworth clearly describes an experience of 'central peace' that also has a strong dynamic content to it:

Authentic tidings of invisible things;
Of ebb and flow, and ever-enduring power;
And central peace, subsisting at the heart
Of endless agitation.

One of the main reasons for the phenomenal success of the *Spiritual Guide* as a devotional work lies precisely at this emotional and poetic level, where in magnificent prose Molinos conveys his experience of God as a harmony of both power *and* passivity, a harmony he designates as 'the rich treasure of interior peace'. Molinos' experience of God as power and passivity is highlighted where he describes 'the Void'. In the presentation of this paradoxical concept, we understand his conception of God as an amalgam of power and passivity: 'Oh what a treasure you will discover', he says, 'if you make your dwelling place in the Void. . . . If you are enclosed

in the Void, where the blows of adversity cannot reach you, nothing will harm you, nothing will make you anxious. It is here that you attain mastery of yourself, for only in the Void reigns true and perfect power’.

In *Mysticism East and West*, Rudolf Otto provides a luminous description of Meister Eckhart’s own dynamic conception of the Void of the Godhead:

Eckhart is . . . first and foremost, the teacher of a magnificent quietism. The soul is to leave all objects, resolve itself from all attachment, lose all that is creaturely, enter into unity out of multiplicity, into stillness out of all busyness, into gatherdness out of all unrest, and is to stand again in the first silence and void of the eternal Godhead. It is to be without differentiation, in the eternal Sabbath of its unmoved, united, gathered God-nature, which it had before all time, as it was ‘in principio’. . . . It is to be as it was even before this, when it was yet enclosed within the still and void Godhead without difference or distinction. But at the moment when the soul passes from all works into complete devotion and composure, it achieves the real ‘inward work’: the one, whole, true, undivided and indivisible. Where this work is performed in the ground and the stillness of the soul, above space and time, it breaks forth in temporal works, without ceasing, without seeking reward, without secondary purpose, in the free-outpouring of a new and truly liberated will; and it is as incapable of resting as is the creating God. Thus Eckhart becomes the panegyrist of the strong and active will, and the powerful act – of a voluntarism which alone truly deserves the name. To speak in paradox: his quietism *is* creative activity. That is why this mystic upsets all ordinary mystical practice: not the quiet contemplative Mary but the active Martha is his ideal. For Martha with her never-wearied doing and acting proves that she has already found what Mary still desires and seeks: the deep unmoved repose at the center, in unshakable unity and security. It is this inward calm which lying below the play of ‘forces’, gives them power and is the ground for ceaseless living activity. Here also unity is itself the manifold, repose the eternal mobility, the systole the diastole, the Sabbath the day of labor, the outgoing is the incoming, the departure the return, and the most inward, most mysterious gatherdness of the soul is the mighty tension of the will in concentrated force.³

This conception provides the ideal template for my analysis of the meaning and value of the dynamic passivity of the Void in relation to Molinos’ *Guide*.

Like Eckhart, nowhere in his *Spiritual Guide* does Molinos commit the solecism of suggesting an interior peace divorced from the matrix of spiritual qualities that gives his conception of the Void its viability, recognizing that statements about a metaphysical reality must be paradoxical to enshrine their

experience. We have no grounds for believing that the terms used to express union – negative on the one hand ('annihilation', 'obliviousness', and so on.) and positive on the other ('interior peace', 'light', etc.) – are not literally meant. Both sets of terms belong to the *vacuum-plenum* of mystical experience, the expression of which is as evident in the *Spiritual Guide* as it is in the works of mystics the world over.

According to the *Guide*, the mind must seek to empty itself of all empirical contents to enter the undifferentiated *vacuum*, or Void, of the Divine Ground; the soul must strive for complete detachment to enter the silence and nakedness of the Godhead. Unity, once experienced, may be expressed in glowingly positive terms as a *plenum*, as light, joy and love. I equate this *vacuum-plenum* paradox with my own paradoxical concept of dynamic passivity. It is this that the mystic perceives as the primal quality of the Godhead, and in which he participates in the unitive experience.

In a way, the *vacuum-plenum* paradox defies logical analysis, a metaphysical reality attested by mystics in both East and West. D.T. Suzuki describes his own experience of dynamic passivity, termed *sunyata* in Buddhist philosophy, as:

It is not in the nature of *prajna* [mystical intuition] to remain in a state of *sunyata* [the void] absolutely motionless. It demands of itself that it differentiates itself unlimitedly, and at the same time it desires to remain in itself. This is why *sunyata* is said to be a reservoir of infinite possibilities and not just a state of mere emptiness. Differentiating itself and yet remaining in itself undifferentiated, and to go on eternally in the work of creation . . . we can say of it that it is creation out of nothing. *Sunyata* is not to be conceived statically but dynamically, or better, as at once static and dynamic.⁴

In the West, Ruysbroeck also describes the dynamic passivity characteristic of what he calls the man who enjoys the unitive life: 'The most inward man lives his life in these two ways; namely, in work and in rest. And in each he is wholly in God because he rests in fruition, and he is wholly in himself because he loves in activity'. Similarly, in *Ladder of Perfection*, the English mystic Walter Hilton describes the dynamic passivity of the soul in union, which he says is 'at rest from the pressure of worldly affairs . . . but is free to engage in the activity of love. And the greater its activity in love, the more complete its rest. It is called a holy inactivity and a most active rest'. Most telling of all in her anti-quietist stance is St Teresa of Ávila:

When I see people very anxious to know what sort of prayer they practise, covering their faces and afraid to move or think, lest they should lose any slight tenderness and devotion they feel, I know now how little they understand how to obtain union with God, since they think it consists in such things as these. . . . No, sisters, no; our Lord expects *works* of

us. . . . If you possess fraternal charity, I assure you that you will certainly obtain the union I have described. If you are conscious that you are wanting in charity, although you may feel devotion and sweetness and a short absorption in the prayer of quiet – which makes you think you have attained the union with God – believe me you have not yet reached it. Beg our Lord to grant you perfect love for your neighbour, and leave the rest to Him. He will give you more than you know how to desire.⁵

The self indulgence of ‘tenderness and devotion’ referred to here by Teresa is called ‘spiritual gluttony’ by her friend and colleague, St John of the Cross. Such spiritual gluttony is one of the defining characteristics of Quietism, which Molinos considers a hindrance to true peace; ‘and the more so’, he says, ‘the more the soul is dogged by an inordinate desire for sublime gifts, by the wish for spiritual consolations, by adhering to infused graces, entertaining herself with them, and desiring more of them to enjoy them’. ‘It is a common error’, he says elsewhere, ‘that in interior recollection the faculties don’t operate. This is an obvious fallacy and belongs to those who have little experience’. On the contrary, the passivity of union is essentially dynamic and voluntarist in nature: ‘At this point [spiritual union] the divine Bridegroom, suspending the powers of the soul, lulls it into the softest . . . sleep; exalted and sublimated in this passive state it is united with the highest good . . . and awakened from this divine embrace the soul is filled with an awareness of the divine grandeur and its own abjectness, transformed and enabled . . . to practise the most perfect virtue’.

It is no part of Christian mysticism to indulge in quietistic spiritual gluttony; rather, experience gained in the heights of the soul must be shared with all, for the mission of mysticism is twofold, both passive and active, a taking and a giving:

Hostile criticism of the mystics almost invariably includes the charge that their great experiences are in the nature of merely personal satisfactions. It is said that they stand apart from the ruck of humanity, claiming a special knowledge of the supersensual, a special privilege of communion with it; yet do not pass on to others, in any real and genuine sense, the illumination, the intuition of Reality, which they declare that they have received. . . . It is true that these hints concerning a solitary and ineffable encounter do tally with one side of the mystic; do describe one aspect of his richly various, many-angled spiritual universe. . . . But that which is here told, is only half the truth. There is another side, a ‘completing opposite’. . . . The great mystic’s loneliness is a consecrated loneliness. When he ascends to that encounter with Divine Reality which is his peculiar privilege, he is not a spiritual individualist. He goes as the ambassador of the race. . . . This, it seems to me, is the function of the mystic

consciousness. . . . It receives, in order that it may give . . . he must turn back to pass on the revelation he has received: must mediate between the transcendent and his fellow men. He is, in fact called to be a creative artist of the highest kind.⁶

Miguel de Molinos did not abrogate this responsibility. Not only did he mediate his experience as a preacher, adviser and confessor, his *Spiritual Guide* provided a contemplative spirituality throughout Europe. He was also a 'creative artist of the highest kind', as Evelyn Underhill puts it, whose remarkable guide to the interior life still has a resonance for us today, over three centuries after its publication.

Of all modern commentators on spirituality, the American contemplative and Trappist monk, Thomas Merton (1915-1968), is perhaps most relevant to my reflections on the meaning and value of the *Spiritual Guide*. Merton advocates everything that is best in the Christian contemplative tradition, especially the primary value of *this* world, of the *here* and *now*, and rejects outright any interior life that smacks of Quietism, as shown by these prescient remarks in his *Climate of Monastic Prayer*:

The supposed 'inner life' may actually be nothing but a brave and absurd attempt to evade reality altogether. Under the pretext that what is 'within' is in fact real, spiritual, supernatural, etc., one cultivates neglect and contempt for the 'external' as worldly, sensual, material and opposed to grace. This is bad theology and bad asceticism. In fact it is bad in every respect, because instead of accepting reality as it is, we reject it in order to explore some perfect realm of abstract ideals which in fact has no reality at all. Very often, the inertia and repugnance which characterize the so-called 'spiritual life' of many Christians could perhaps be cured by a simple respect for the concrete realities of everyday life, for nature, for the body, for one's work, one's surroundings, etc. A false supernaturalism which imagines that 'the supernatural' is a kind of Platonic realm of abstract essences totally apart from and opposed to the concrete world of nature, offers no real support to a genuine life of meditation and prayer. Meditation has no point and no reality unless it is firmly rooted in life.⁷

Merton's thoughts contain the essence of my discussions of the spiritual life and its perversion in Quietism. In fact, the criticism usually levelled at the spirituality of Molinos is the same as that levelled at the 'Free Spirit' of the fourteenth century, which I shall consider in the next chapter. For now, here is an extract from one of the orthodox mystics of the period, John Tauler, inveighing against the spurious notion they had of spiritual freedom, the notion with which Molinos himself was eventually to become tainted:

They stand exempt from all subjection, without any activity . . . just as a tool is passive and waits until its master wishes to use it, for it seems to them that if they do anything then God will be hindered in His work; therefore they count themselves above all virtues. They wish to be so free that they do not think, nor have anything. . . . And they also think that they are poor in spirit because they are without any will of their own. . . . They wish to be free of everything with which the Church has to do. . . . They consider themselves . . . above the stage of human merit and human faith, so that they cannot increase in virtue nor yet commit sin.⁸

This sort of depraved spirituality derives from the misapplication of the negative, apophatic theology to which all mystics are inevitably drawn, Molinos included. The misapprehension that often attends this method of mystical theology is summarized neatly by Rufus Jones:

‘The fatal weakness of this entire mystical movement [that of the ‘Free Spirit’] . . . is the negative and abstract feature of it. God, the Divine Reality, is reached by a process of negation. He is everything that finite things are *not*. He is Absolute – but without any qualities or characteristics by which we can *know* Him. He is an *indeterminate* Absolute. He is an abstract Universal in which all finite particulars are swallowed up and lost, not a self-revealing Spirit who explains all finite particulars. All roads lead to Him, but no one comes back with any light which explains the finite, or which gives illumination for the daily tasks of a concret life.’⁹

However, Miguel de Molinos, unlike many of the Free Spirit, speaks to us not only of the ‘indeterminate’ nature of the Absolute – the ‘Void’ – but also of its plenitude, for his is a spirituality that undeniably ‘gives illumination for the daily tasks of a concrete life’.

To put forward an all-encompassing mission statement for the mysticism of Miguel de Molinos that suggests the spiritual and social harmony we have been discussing, we could do no better than these ringing words of Sisirkumar Ghose in his excellent article in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, titled *Mysticism as a Social Factor*:

Because of its other-worldly bias, the belief still persists that the solitary mystic, absorbed in a vertical relation with God or reality, owes no social responsibility. Altogether an outsider, he has deliberately undergone a civil death. This is not an ideal or wholly accurate picture. A mystic who is not of supreme service to society is not a mystic at all. . . . The less extravagant forms of mysticism represent attitudes and principles of charity, detachment and dedication, which should guide the relation of the individual to the group. The mystics have fought the inner battle and won, creating

themselves and their world. 'Revolution' is a word too often profaned. The change suggested is mainly, if not wholly, from without. In such contrived salvation by compulsion, the inner core is hardly touched. . . . Mystics insist on a change of consciousness, a slower and more difficult process. . . . Holiness does not mean a retreat from or a rejection of the world. To be a mystic or a seer is not the same thing as being a spectator on the fence. . . . According to mystics, here may be the outline of a revolution whose message has reached but a few. The hope of a Kingdom of Heaven within man and a city of God without remains one of mysticism's gifts to what many mystics view as an evolving humanity.

It is the peace and harmony implied by the words 'the hope of a Kingdom of Heaven within man and a city of God without' that is Molinos' supreme gift to our spiritually impoverished times, and in which the true meaning and value of his *Spiritual Guide* reside. Most importantly, then, his conception of passivity will not admit of any quietistic interpretation. On the contrary, its expression is in accordance with the general principles of mystical passivity to be found in the works of all authentic mystics, and thus the very reverse of the simplistic interpretations that commentators have so often preferred to put upon it.