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## MYSTICISM AND THE COINCIDENCE OF OPPOSITES IN SIXTEENTH- AND SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY FRANCE

BY KENT EMERY, JR.

The seventeenth century in France was *le grand siècle* for what contemporaries defined precisely as "mystical theology." Ever since the writings of pseudo-Dionysius had been introduced into the Latin west, and especially after the twelfth century, the term *mystica theologia* had become part of the common vocabulary of theological discourse. By the beginning of the modern period, the term had come to designate a specialized genre of theology, treating the soul's intimate union with God, which was usually contrasted with the scholastic theology of the universities.<sup>1</sup>

For many in the late Middle Ages, the distinction between mystical and scholastic theology signified a sharp difference between a wholly affective union with God, and an attempt to understand God and his works according to the laws of human reason. In an oft-quoted text of his *De mystica theologia*, from which the genre took its name, pseudo-Dionysius urged his disciple to abandon every act of the senses and of the intellect in order to rise in an unknowing manner above all sensible and intelligible things to the one who is above all essence and knowledge.<sup>2</sup> Medieval commentators customarily construed this text to mean that one must finally abandon all intellectual speculation for a purely affective movement of the will towards God.<sup>3</sup> Most medieval theologians, like Bonaventure, gave intellectual speculation an important place in preparation for this final affective act; others, however, excluded speculation from mystical theology. The influential Carthusian writer Hugh of Balma (fl. 1300), whose *Mystica theologia* circulated under the name of Bonaventure, completely divorced scholastic and mystical theology, and taught that affective union with God required neither a preceding nor concomitant act of the intellect. Such an act, indeed, would hinder union.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Michel de Certeau, "'Mystique' au XVIIe siècle: Le Problème du langage 'mystique'," in *L'Homme devant Dieu: Mélanges offerts au père Henri de Lubac* (Paris, 1964), 267-91.

<sup>2</sup> *De mystica theologia*, 1, in *Dionysiaca: Recueil donnant l'ensemble des traductions latines des ouvrages attribués au Denys de l'Aréopagite*, I (Paris, 1937), 567-68.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Gallus (Vercellensis †1246) seems to have fixed this affective interpretation in the Middle Ages. See Robert Javelet, "Thomas Gallus ou les écritures dans une dialectique mystique," in *L'Homme devant Dieu*, 99-110. The authoritative study of Thomas remains James Walsh, "Sapientia christianorum: The Doctrine of Thomas Gallus, Abbot of Vercelli, on Contemplation" (Ph.D. Diss., Gregorian University, Rome, 1957).

<sup>4</sup> Hugh of Balma, *Mystica theologia*, in *Opera omnia sancti Bonaventurae VII* (Rome, 1586-96), 699-730. See especially the *Questio unica*, 726-30. See also, Anselme Stoelen, "Hugues de Balma," *Dictionnaire de spiritualité*, VII (Paris, 1969), 859-73; Kent Emery, Jr., "Benet of Canfield: Counter-Reformation Spirituality and its Mediaeval Origins" (Ph.D. Diss., University of Toronto, 1976), 213-21.

Hugh's interpretation of pseudo-Dionysius gave rise to a widespread anti-scholastic, anti-intellectual prejudice among monks and other spiritual persons. In the fifteenth century, Nicholas of Cusa needed to confront this attitude directly, and to assert the role of speculation within mystical theology itself. Cusanus did so by stressing the intellectual character of the negative dialectic found in pseudo-Dionysius' mystical theology.<sup>5</sup> Within the context of mystical theology, of the ascent to the infinite God, Cusanus developed his famous principle of the coincidence of opposites.

As modern studies have shown, the French *humanistae theologizantes*<sup>6</sup> Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples (1460-1563), Josse Clichtove (1472-1543), and Charles de Bovelles (1479-1553) admired the medieval mystics in general and Nicholas of Cusa in particular.<sup>7</sup> The encyclopaedic programs of learning which these erudites put forward were directed to contemplation and mystical theology. Lefèvre's prefatory epistles to Richard of St. Victor's *De superdivina Trinitate* (1510) and Nicholas of Cusa's *Opera* (1514) indicate that his order of studies was organized according to a hierarchical, threefold division of sensible, rational, and mystical theology corresponding to a hierarchy of powers in the soul: imaginative, rational, and intellectual. The pattern of a threefold division of theology, suggested in the writings of pseudo-Dionysius, was fully developed by a long line of medieval writers before Lefèvre.<sup>8</sup> In one text, Lefèvre recommends the

<sup>5</sup> E. Vansteenbergh, *Autour de la Docte Ignorance. Une controverse sur la théologie mystique au XVe siècle*. Beiträge zur Geschichte der Philosophie des Mittelalters, XV (1915). On Cusanus' role in the recovery of the paradoxical dialectic of Plato's *Parmenides*, and consequent reinterpretation of pseudo-Dionysius, see R. Klibansky, "Plato's Parmenides in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance," *Mediaeval and Renaissance Studies*, 1 (1941-43), 281-330. On Cusanus as mystical theologian, and his teaching on the role of speculation in mystical theology, see M.L. Führer, "Purgation, Illumination and Perfection in Nicholas of Cusa," *Downside Review*, 98 (1980), 169-89.

<sup>6</sup> This was a term of opprobrium coined by Noël Beda for Erasmus and Lefèvre. See Eugene F. Rice, Jr., "The Humanist Idea of Christian Antiquity: Lefèvre d'Étaples and his Circle," in *French Humanism, 1470-1600*, ed. Werner L. Gundersheimer (New York, 1966), 174.

<sup>7</sup> Eugene F. Rice, Jr., "Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples and the Medieval Christian Mystics," in *Florilegium Historiale: Essays Presented to Wallace K. Ferguson* (Toronto, 1971), 88-124. For Bovelles, see Joseph M. Victor, *Charles de Bovelles, 1479-1553: An Intellectual Biography* (Geneva, 1978), 13-25, 57-71 (Lull and Cusanus), 167-78, *et passim*.

<sup>8</sup> See Lefèvre's prefatory epistle to Richard of St. Victor's *De Trinitate* in *The Prefatory Epistles of Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples*, ed. Eugene F. Rice, Jr. (New York, 1972), 224-27, esp. 224. See also the prefatory epistle to the *Opera* of Cusanus, 343-47, esp. 346. For the tradition of the three modes of theology, initiated by pseudo-Dionysius (for example, *De mys. theo.*, 3: 584-93) and developed by a long line of medieval authors, see Emery, "Benet of Canfield," (*op. cit.*, n.4 above), 148-249. Neat *loci* of the tradition are found in Bonaventure, *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* in *Opera omnia*, 10 vols (1882-1902), V (Quaracchi, 1891), I, 7, 298, and *De reductione artium ad theologiam* in *Opera omnia* V, 5, 321. Many writers related mystical theology to a purely affective *apex mentis*. The source of Lefèvre's threefold division (imagination, reason, intellect), which denotes the role of speculation in the highest, mystical mode of theology, is Richard of St. Victor,

content of such a threefold order of studies. One should begin, he says, with a study of the natural philosophy and metaphysics of Aristotle, proceed to a reading of Scripture and the fathers, and finally strive for the heights of contemplation. In contemplation one should be instructed by Dionysius, Nicholas of Cusa, and "others like them."<sup>9</sup>

The typological relation between Aristotle and Cusanus, expressed in the text above, is revealing. Elsewhere in his writings Lefèvre distinguishes two philosophies, one "rational" and the other "intellectual."<sup>10</sup> As the terms imply, this twofold division of philosophy is related to the threefold division of theology, the two highest modes of which are rational and intellectual. The relation of the two divisions is clear in Lefèvre's preface to Charles de Bovelles' *In artem oppositorum introductio* (1501). Here Lefèvre associates rational philosophy with Aristotle, the higher intellectual philosophy with Cusanus and other mystics. Lefèvre says that the Aristotelian disciplines should not be scorned; they are necessary for one who wishes to rise from the sensible world and imagination to the "second degree of rational philosophy." But if Aristotle represents the life of studies, Pythagoras, the exemplar of a higher philosophy, represents the death of them. One experiences death in intellectual philosophy because there he discovers silence instead of words. Thus, whereas in rational philosophy, typified by Aristotle, one finds many words, in intellectual philosophy, typified by Paul, Dionysius, and Nicholas of Cusa, silence is act and speech is privation.<sup>11</sup>

There is much to remark in this text. First, it is worth observing that the medieval theologian Hugh of St. Victor likewise praised Pythagoras, because his definition of philosophy acknowledged that wisdom lies deeply hidden from the human mind.<sup>12</sup> Secondly, in his preface to the *Opera* of Cusanus, Lefèvre states that the highest, intellectual mode of theology *in silentio docet*, the second, rational mode *in sermonis modestia*, and the lowest, imaginative mode *in multiloquio perstrepat*.<sup>13</sup> Since his terms for the modes of philosophy and the modes of theology are convertible, it appears that Lefèvre did not sharply distinguish them, and that the former provided the means for the latter. Indeed, Lefèvre's distinction between intellectual and rational philosophy echoes one made by pseudo-

*Benjamin major (De arca mystica)* I, 3, PL 196.66-67. (Richard uses the term *intelligentia*.) On the significance of the three modes in the thought of Lefèvre, see Augustin Renaudet, *Préréforme et humanisme à Paris pendant les premières guerres d'Italie (1494-1517)*. 2nd ed. (Paris, 1953), 376-77, 521, 597-99, 663-64, *et passim*. On the scheme *sensus, imaginatio, ratio, intellectus, intelligentia*, originating in Proclus, see E. von Ivanka, *Platonismus in der Philosophie des Mittelalters* (Darmstadt, 1969), 147-60.

<sup>9</sup> E.F. Rice, Jr., "The Humanist Idea of Christian Antiquity," 163-64.

<sup>10</sup> Renaudet, 410-12.

<sup>11</sup> *Prefatory Epistles*, 96.

<sup>12</sup> *Didascalicon*, I, 3, PL 176.742-43.

<sup>13</sup> *Prefatory Epistles*, 346.

Dionysius between a mystical theology of a few words and a symbolic theology of many.<sup>14</sup> Hugh of Balma characteristically develops the same contrast; for him the words of mystical theology are few because when one rises to the *apex* of the affections all discourse ceases.<sup>15</sup> After Lefèvre, the seventeenth-century Capuchin mystic Joseph du Tremblay (1577-1638) distinguishes between a contracted mystical theology and a verbally expanded scholastic theology.<sup>16</sup>

In Lefèvre's program of studies, the natural philosophy of Aristotle, whereby one might discern in sensible nature secret signs pointing to the intelligible world and divine things,<sup>17</sup> occupied an intermediate place in the ascent towards God, and supplied the logic for a rational theology that conducts man from sensible to intelligible realities. In his prefaces to Lefèvre's paraphrases of Aristotle, urging the spiritual importance of studying Aristotle, Josse Clichtove adopts the terms of the old commonplace of the book of nature used by the Victorines, Bonaventure, and other medieval mystics. The whole world, Clichtove says, is a mirror in which one may contemplate *vestigia* of the divine majesty. By contemplating these sensible images, one may ascend, as if by a ladder, to a knowledge of heavenly things.<sup>18</sup> As a modern scholar observes, for Lefèvre and Clichtove Aristotle's philosophy, and the logic upon which it was founded, served as an instrument of *askesis* preparatory to mysticism, and the study of physics was a step in an *itinerarium mentis in Deum*.<sup>19</sup>

But even if purified of the distortions of medieval commentators, Aristotelian logic and philosophy were inadequate for conducting man to the highest contemplative wisdom. The *ars oppositorum* of Cusanus served this purpose in Lefèvre's mind.<sup>20</sup> Cusanus' logic of the coincidence of opposites, rooted in the divine infinity, is a fit instrument for contemplative silence. In terms of the usual operations of reason the principle is privative, since it deprives the mind of its rational concepts (called

<sup>14</sup> *De mys. theo.*, 1, 572-74.

<sup>15</sup> Hugh of Balma, *Mys. theo.*, 1, 1, 700; 2, 2, 704.

<sup>16</sup> See *Le Resserré et l'étendu: Introduction à Joseph du Tremblay l'éminence grise*, I. *Herméneutique et logique, Etudes Franciscaines*, 19 (suppl. ann. 1969), 26, *et passim*.

<sup>17</sup> See Lefèvre's preface to Aristotle's *Physics*, *Prefatory Epistles*, 5-7. See Renaudet, 145-48.

<sup>18</sup> Josse Clichtove to Etienne Poncher, *Prefatory Epistles*, 97-100, esp. 98. See also Clichtove's commentary on Lefèvre's preface, *Prefatory Epistles*, 7-8, and Renaudet's remarks, 412. In Bonaventure's *Itin.*, self-knowledge, that is, knowledge of the "intelligible" reality of the human soul, stands between knowledge of the sensible world (below the soul) and God (above the soul). For the classification pertinent to Clichtove's text, see *Itin.* 1, 296-99.

<sup>19</sup> Jean-Pierre Massaut, *Josse Clichtove: L'Humanisme et la réforme du clergé*, I (Paris, 1968), 189,272; 180-94, 270-74. Throughout his study, Massaut notes the remarkable revival of twelfth-century themes by Lefèvre and Clichtove.

<sup>20</sup> Renaudet, 134-35, 378-80, 417-20, 506, 661-64, *et passim*. These pages also note the influence of Ramón Lull.

*verba mentis* by Cusanus).<sup>21</sup> Lefèvre performed the humanist task of editing the texts of Cusanus; his younger colleague Charles de Bovelles composed philosophic and theological works which applied and developed the principles found in them. Like Lefèvre, Bovelles related a twofold rational and intellectual philosophy to a threefold theology.<sup>22</sup> In his works of mystical theology, for which his other works were propaedeutic, Bovelles employed the *ars oppositorum* which he had gathered from Cusanus, and from Cusanus' predecessor in the matter, Ramón Lull. Such a logic allowed for speculation within mystical theology and at the same time respected the incomprehensibility of God's infinite nature.<sup>23</sup> In conclusion, it would seem that within Lefèvre's circle, the logics of Lull and Cusanus supplied the means whereby to account for the mystical experience above reason, and to interpret the writings of medieval mystics, many of whose works Lefèvre edited, and many of whom were *illiterati*, or in the paradoxical sense, *idiotae*.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, we should note that according to Lefèvre's hierarchical disposition of knowledge, Cusanus' intellectual philosophy does not contradict but rather transcends Aristotle's rational philosophy, in the same way that mystical theology transcends scholastic theology.

There is evidence, we shall see, that despite a drastically changed religious climate provoked by the Reformation, the thought of Lefèvre and Bovelles exerted an influence among mystical writers in late sixteenth and early seventeenth-century France. By then the Counter-Reformation

<sup>21</sup> Cusanus gives a variation on the threefold modes, an ascent from *vox* to *verbum mentis* to *Verbum*. *De docta ignorantia*, ed. E. Hoffman and R. Klibansky, *Opera omnia*, I (Leipzig, 1932), III, 11, 152-54.

<sup>22</sup> Victor, *Charles de Bovelles*, 71, 125-26, *et passim*.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 145, 167-78. Victor corrects the early opinion of Eugene F. Rice, Jr., *The Renaissance Idea of Wisdom* (Cambridge, Mass. 1958), 196-223, that Bovelles moralized and secularized Cusanus' mystical notion of wisdom. Lefèvre appreciated Lull, and edited several of his mystical works. See notes 19 and 23. Charles de Bovelles was interested in Lull's art, which he associated with Cusanus', as a method for philosophy and theology: see Joseph M. Victor, "The Revival of Lullism at Paris, 1499-1516," *Renaissance Quarterly*, 28 (1975), 504-34, esp. 519-30. This association was well founded, since it is clear that Lull's writings directly influenced Cusanus. See P.E.W. Platzeck, "El lulismo en las obras del Cardinal N. Krebs de Cusa," *Revista Espanola de Teologia* (1940-41), 731-65; (1942), 257-324; M. Honecker, "Lullus-Handschriften aus dem Besitz des Kardinals Nicolaus von Cues," *Spanische Forschungen des Görres-Gesellschaft*, 6 (1937), 252-309; E. Colomer, *Nikolaus von Kues und Raimund Lull* (Berlin, 1961).

<sup>24</sup> Renaudet, 521, 597-600, 621-23, 635-37. Renaudet says that in his famous commentary, Lefèvre used the teachings of the mystics as aids for interpreting Paul. For the mystical texts Lefèvre edited, see Rice, "Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples and the Medieval Christian Mystics," *op. cit.* Lefèvre uses the terms *illiteratus* and *idiotae* in his prefaces to Lull's *Liber de laudibus beatissime virginis Marie, Philosophia amoris*, and *Contemplationes idiotae* (the second part of which Lefèvre translated into French), and in his preface to Jordaen's Latin translation of Ruysbroeck, *De ornatu spiritualium nuptiarum*. See *Prefatory Epistles*, 77, 277, 375, 412.

was well under way. New spiritual doctrines which accompanied that international movement had passed into France. Among the many spiritual currents of the times, however, modern historians recognize an indigenous French school of spirituality, which one authority calls "l'école abstraite."<sup>25</sup> Ironically, the founder of this "French school" was an English exile and Catholic convert, the Capuchin Benet of Canfield (1562-1610).<sup>26</sup> Benet's most important work, the *Règle de perfection*, inspired Cardinal de Bérulle, Madame Acarie, Joseph du Tremblay, and other leading figures of the Catholic revival in seventeenth-century France. Perhaps because the activities of the Jesuits were severely restricted there, the Capuchins (Benet's order) were pre-eminent among the new religious orders in France.<sup>27</sup> The Capuchins were a reform of an old order, the Franciscans, and they strove to continue and revive medieval traditions of thought and practice. The teaching of Benet of Canfield, and of his like-minded confrère Laurent de Paris (1563?-1631), provides an interesting example of the way in which newer ideas were assimilated to older, medieval ones.

Even though, in accordance with Franciscan tradition, Benet and Laurent teach that mystical theology is essentially affective, the one propounding a doctrine of "conformity to the will of God," the other a doctrine of "pure love," their doctrines have strong, speculative elements. For both, the principle of the coincidence of opposites is central. Although Benet never refers to the principle by name, its exercise is ubiquitous in the *Règle de perfection*. Laurent names the principle and cites its author.

Benet of Canfield composed the *Règle* around 1593; it circulated in manuscript until it was printed in English, French, and Latin versions in 1609-1610.<sup>28</sup> Benet wrote the work in French, translated the first two

<sup>25</sup> Louis Cognet, *La Spiritualité moderne: I. L'Essor, 1500-1650* (Paris, 1966), 233-73.

<sup>26</sup> Henri Bremond, *A Literary History of Religious Thought in France: II. The Coming of Mysticism (1590-1620)*, trans. K. L. Montgomery (London, 1930), 111-25; Aldous Huxley, *Grey Eminence: A Study in Religion and Politics* (New York, 1941), 62-66, 91-104; Optat de Veghel, *Benoît de Canfield (1562-1610): Sa vie, sa doctrine et son influence* (Rome, 1949); Paul Mommaers, "Benoît de Canfield; Sa terminologie 'essentielle,'" *Revue d'histoire de la spiritualité*, 47 (1971), 421-54, 48 (1972), 27-68; "Benoît de Canfield et ses sources flamandes," *ibid.*, 48 (1972), 401-434, 49 (1973), 37-66; Cognet, 242-58, 262-72; Emery, "Benet of Canfield".

<sup>27</sup> Godefroy de Paris, *Les Frères mineurs capucins en France: Histoire de la province de Paris*, 2 vols (Paris, 1937-39, 1950); P. Raoul, *Histoire des frères mineurs capucins de la province de Paris (1601-1660)* (Blois, 1965). For the Capuchins' associations with neo-Platonizing circles at the French court, see Frances A. Yates, "Religious Processions in Paris, 1583-4," in *Astraea: The Imperial Theme in the Sixteenth Century* (London, 1975), 173-207; Emery, 251-315.

<sup>28</sup> Optat de Veghel, 400-422. The English version of *The Rule* contains only the first two books. See William Fitch (Benet of Canfield), *The Rule of Perfection* (Rouen, 1609), repr. English Recusant Literature 1558-1640, selected and edited by D.M. Rogers, vol. 10 (Scholar Press, 1970). Citations from Books I and II in the body of the paper are from this edition.

books into English, and the whole (comprising three books) into Latin. The 1610 French edition, printed at Paris, is the authorized form of the text, upon which the many subsequent reprintings were based.<sup>29</sup>

The principle of the coincidence of opposites is implicit in Benet's formal intention to "reduce" and "abridge" the "whole spirituall life" to one "only point": the "will of God," which is God's essence (I, 1, 1). Benet's *reductio* is akin to the reductions of Eriugena, Ramón Lull, and Bonaventure. He applies the method of reduction to the spiritual and moral life, leading each spiritual and corporal act into immediate union with God. Benet's upward movement of reduction has a corresponding downward movement of division.<sup>30</sup> Benet divides the will of God as it descends to man into three stages of the spiritual life: supereminent or superessential, interior, and exterior. In speaking of this division of God's will, Benet carefully eschews "scholasticall divisions" which are merely conceptions of the human mind. Benet's division is "mysticall," for although the will of God appears differently to souls in different stages of the spiritual life, nevertheless, the three manifestations of God's will (exterior, interior, and essential) "are one and the same will in God" (I, 4, 28-29). Benet's method of division and reduction, like that of Eriugena and Ramón Lull, is grounded on the essential identity of God's attributes in the divine unity, in this instance, the identity between the will of God and the divine essence.<sup>31</sup> God's will, one with his very essence, manifests itself variously in the multiple, created world in which the soul operates during this life.

Benet's reduction of the "whole spirituall life" to one "only point" has another, more practical aim. In the sixteenth century the Christian enjoying the fruit of spiritual thought in the Middle Ages was offered a multitude of spiritual doctrines, many of which appeared to conflict. In order to avoid confusion and to simplify, Benet proposes a spiritual method which "contains" and "comprehends" all the others (I, 2, 10-20). The *Règle de perfection*, in other words, is a *complicatio* of all Catholic traditions of contemplation.

The principle of the coincidence of opposites is most evident in Book III, controverted among Benet's contemporaries as it is today among modern scholars. In Book III, Benet treats the supereminent, or superessential life wherein the soul is united immediately to the divine will.

<sup>29</sup> *Reigle [sic] de perfection* (1610; repr. Lyons, 1653). My citations and translations from Book III in the body of the paper are from this edition.

<sup>30</sup> Guy-H. Allard, "La Technique de la *reductio* chez Bonaventure," in *S. Bonaventura, 1274-1974*, II (Grottaferrata, 1974), 395-416.

<sup>31</sup> Frances Yates, "Ramon Lull and John Scotus Erigena," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 23 (1960), 1-44; Louis Sala-Molins, *La Philosophie de l'amour chez Raymond Lulle* (Paris, 1974), 50-95; and esp. E. Colomer, *De la edad media al renacimiento (Ramón Lull-Nicholás de Cusa-Juan Pico della Mirandola)* (Barcelona, 1975), 109-112, 159-66, 185-89, 219-23, *et passim*.



This highest form of spiritual life entails an amazing series of reconciliations. In the supereminent life the active and contemplative lives are united, as are the traditional mystic contemplation without images and contemplation of the Passion. This latter, apparent contradiction has led Jean Orcibal to conclude that the chapters in the *Règle* concerning the Passion are a subsequent addition requested by Benet's superiors and reflecting an "evolution" of his spirituality.<sup>32</sup> Whether Orcibal's hypothesis be wholly correct, and there is reason to doubt that it is,<sup>33</sup> Benet's reconciliation between contemplation with and without images is but one of a series of the coincidence of opposites, all of which are founded on yet another, that between the "All" of the creator and the "nothing" of the creature. This coincidence, in turn, is rooted in the identity of the will of God with the divine essence.

Benet's identification of the will of God with the divine essence recalls the principle, crucial in the thought of Nicholas of Cusa, that theology is circular, that is, that all of God's attributes are inseparable in the divine unity. Interestingly, in *De docta ignorantia* Cusanus states the principle in a text where he identifies God's will and omnipotence, and suggests that the creature is "utterly nothing," having less being in relation to the infinity of God than an accident in relation to substance.<sup>34</sup> From the identity of attributes in God, Benet of Canfield draws the same two conclusions. Furthermore, Eusebio Colomer contends that Nicholas derives the principle of the coincidence of opposites from the identity of divine attributes.<sup>35</sup> Benet of Canfield will follow Nicholas in this too.

Benet establishes the identity of the will of God with God's essence in Book III, chapter 1 of the *Règle*. In contrast to the exterior and interior will of God, appearing to man in sensible images and intelligible species, the "essential will" of God is "purely spirit and life, totally abstract, and stripped bare of all forms and images of created things, corporal or spiritual, temporal or eternal." As such, human reason cannot apprehend it, since "it is nothing other than God himself" (III, 1, 218-19). To demonstrate this identity, Benet produces several arguments. First, he alludes to a text from Bonaventure: since there is nothing in God which is not God, and since will exists in God, the will of God must be God.<sup>36</sup> Secondly, if God's will were not his essence, there would be some potentiality in God, and God would not be *pure act*, as most doctors teach. Thirdly, if God's will were not his essence, there would be something in one part of him that is not in another, and God could not be said to be

<sup>32</sup> Jean Orcibal, "'La Règle de perfection' de Benoît de Canfield: a t'elle été interpolée?" *Divinitas*, 2(1967), 845-74.

<sup>33</sup> Emery, 72-147, *et passim*.

<sup>34</sup> *De doct. ign.*, II, 3, 71-72.

<sup>35</sup> Colomer, *De la edad media al renacimiento*, 185-89. Colomer, 159-66, shows that Cusanus inherited the principle that theology is circular from Ramón Lull.

<sup>36</sup> Bonaventure, *In primum librum Sententiarum, Opera omnia* I (Quaracchi, 1882), d.8, p.2, q.4, 3 *ad opp.*, 173; d.45, a.1, q.1, 798-99.

“infinitely perfect in all perfection.” Thus, one would needs say that there is some limit to God’s will and to his essence. Hence, both will and essence would be finite and not infinite, if finite limited, if limited created, and if created, then they are not the creator. Finally, in Anselmian fashion, Benet argues that if God’s will were not infinite, someone would have had to limit it, and that one would be greater than God, *ad infinitum*. However, both the will of God and the divine essence are infinite, and since there cannot be two infinities, the will of God must be identical with God’s essence (III, 1, 219-20).

To support his reasoning, Benet adduces several authorities. He quotes Hilary concerning the absence of composition in God, Peter Lombard concerning God’s simplicity, and Augustine and Boethius concerning God’s substantial unity (III, 1, 221-23). Fundamentally, however, Benet’s arguments follow from two main premises, God’s pure act of being and his infinity. From the same two premises Benet later deduces the All of God and the nothing of the creature. Considering God in terms of his pure act and infinity serves Benet’s spiritual doctrine well. As Bonaventure teaches, being is not predicated metaphorically of God, for *qui est* is a proper name for God.<sup>37</sup> Hence, when one speaks of God’s being, he speaks properly of God’s essence, as Benet intends in the third book of the *Règle de perfection*. Bonaventure’s discourses concerning God’s pure act of being, we shall see, are the primary source for the doctrine of All and nothing developed by Benet and other Capuchin writers. Appropriately, in his emblem for the *Règle de perfection* Benet inscribes the unpronounceable *tetragrammaton* on the face of the sun which represents God’s essence and will.<sup>38</sup> The notion of the infinity of God is useful to Benet’s purpose, for it defies conceptions formed by the human imagination and reason. Moreover, God’s infinity implies the relative nothingness of the creature, for how can the finite be something when the infinite is everything? At this point, we might note that according to Bovelles’ modern commentator, the two names that apply best to God in Bovelles’ mystical theology are “being and infinity.”<sup>39</sup>

Benet’s arguments are more suggestive than rigorous. Nor did Benet intend otherwise. After asserting the identity of God’s will with God’s essence, Benet admonishes the reader not to seek or contemplate the divine will “under some images, forms, or similitudes, however spiritual or subtle they may be” because all such images are unworthy of their object (III, 1, 224). Benet does not wish the contemplative, who must rise above all images, to risk complacency in intellectual species. It is probably for this reason that Benet does not use the arguments of Bonaventure, or, unlike his Capuchin confrère Laurent de Paris, those of

<sup>37</sup> I *Sent.*, d.22, q.3, 394-97.

<sup>38</sup> *Reigle de perfection*, “Explication de ceste Figure”. On the *tetragrammaton* see Cusanus, *De doct. ign.*, I, 24, 48-49.

<sup>39</sup> Victor, *Charles de Bovelles*, 177.

Thomas Aquinas, which demonstrate the convertibility of the divine will and the divine essence.<sup>40</sup> “Scholasticall” reasonings like these suggest to the imagination, if not to the intellect, that there are divisions among God’s acts.

From God’s infinite, undivided act of being Benet deduces the most extreme coincidence of opposites conceivable, that between All and nothing. In the Franciscan manner, Benet does not develop this doctrine for purely speculative reasons but rather for ascetic and moral ones. It is necessary therefore, to interpret Benet’s doctrine of All and nothing in the light of his contemplative teaching.

Benet distinguishes two forms of contemplation in the supereminent life which, although they differ in their “accidents” or in the soul’s experience, are nevertheless one in “essence.” The first of these, which Benet calls *passive annihilation*, is the effect of the “actual drawing of God.” It occurs in ecstasy, when the soul is drawn above the senses and intellectual powers into immediate union with God in the *apex mentis*.<sup>41</sup> Inspired by the psychology and trinitarian exemplarism of John Ruysbroeck,<sup>42</sup> Benet teaches that the immediate union between God and the *apex mentis* produces certain effects which flow into the three faculties of the soul. In the will, the only faculty capable in this life of extending to God immediately, the soul experiences a “flowing of fervent desires into God.” In the intellect, the soul is purged of all images and experiences a total “denuding of spirit.” Finally, in the memory, the soul recollects a “continual nearness and close vision” of its “object and blessed final end” (III, 4, 235; see III, 4-7, 235-67). Although in this contemplation the soul does not see God’s essence face to face, it does perceive that God is the immediate “source and foundation” of the illumination it receives, that God is more present to the soul than it is to itself, and that the soul

dwells, resides and lives uniquely in him, and not at all in itself, whence it follows that the soul is all in God, all God’s, all for God and all God, and

<sup>40</sup> Bonaventure, I *Sent.*, d.45, a.1, q.1-2, 797-802; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q.19, a.1, 3,5; Laurent de Paris, *Le Palais de l’amour divin entre Jésus et l’âme chrestienne* (Paris, 1614), 318, 957-58. All citations and translations from Laurent’s text in the body of the paper are from this edition.

<sup>41</sup> On this term which Benet uses, see E. van Ivánka *Plato Christianus* (Einsieden, 1964), 315-51.

<sup>42</sup> On Ruysbroeck and Benet, see Mommaers, “Benoît de Canfeld et ses sources flamandes,” *Revue d’histoire de la spiritualité*, 48 (1972), 401-434, 49 (1973), 37-66; Emery, 432-40. Lefèvre d’Etaples published Ruysbroeck’s *De ornatu spiritualium nuptiarum libri tres*, trans. William Jordaens (c.1360) (Paris, 1512). Benet and Laurent, however, probably read the work in the translation by the Carthusian Laurentius Surius, *Ioannis Rusbrochii Opera omnia* (Cologne, 1552; repr. Farnborough-Hants, Eng., 1967), 303-372. The Capuchins’ Carthusian friend, Richard Beau Cousin, translated Ruysbroeck’s work into French from Surius’ Latin: *L’Ornement des nopces [sic] spirituelles* (Toulouse, 1606).

nothing in itself, nothing of itself, nothing for itself, nothing itself; it is all in the spirit, will, light and power of God, and nothing in its own spirit, will, light, and natural power (III, 6, 259).

Thus although the intellect does not comprehend God's essence, in experiencing the soul's nothingness, it intuits the All of God's existence.

Such elevated moments of contemplation do not perdure in this life. However, it is possible, Benet teaches, to maintain a perpetual, habitual, and immediate union with the will of God. Benet's second form of contemplation, *active annihilation*, preserves the essence, if not the experience of ecstatic union, even while one is immersed in the sensible world and engaged in the duties of the active life. But whereas in passive annihilation intuition of God's All and the creature's nothing is the effect of union, in active annihilation this intuition is a means to union. Active annihilation is "more remote from feeling, more supernatural, more naked, and more perfect" than passive annihilation. Passive annihilation takes place when the soul is elevated, stripped bare, and drawn outside itself by the "actual drawing of the will of God." In active annihilation, the soul is drawn solely by the "virtual drawing of God" by which it remains united to God when "impeded exteriorly with images and occupied in affairs." During active annihilation an extraordinary coincidence of opposites occurs: exterior things are rendered interior, "corporeal things become spiritual and natural things become supernatural" (III, 8, 267-68).

The practice of active annihilation depends upon the knowledge that there is nothing else but the essential will of God. One acquires this knowledge through the "light of a pure, simple, naked, and habitual faith, aided by reason, ratified and confirmed by experience, and not subject to the senses, . . . but indeed contrary to them" (III, 12, 300). This light reveals to the soul that God is All and the creature nothing, a truth so paradoxical that it confounds conception, and thus annihilates the very act of intellect that tries to comprehend it. In this way, the soul suffers the same "denuding of spirit" that it does, by another means, in passive annihilation.

As Benet says, the "naked faith" in one's nothingness before the All of God is "aided by reason." To this purpose Benet advances another series of philosophic and theological arguments. Again, Benet reasons from God's pure act of being and infinity. It is a well known maxim, Benet points out, that being and goodness are convertible. Scripture says, however, that no one is good except God (Luke, 18:19); it follows, therefore, that no one has being except God. For this reason, God revealed his name to Moses as *Ego sum qui sum*. Moreover, God is infinite. If the creature were something, however, God would not be so, for his being would end where the creature's begins. Benet confirms these rapid deductions with a text from Bonaventure who himself quotes Jerome:

“God alone truly is, compared to whose essence our being is nothing” (III, 8, 269-70).<sup>43</sup>

Benet’s reasoning here is as abbreviated as elsewhere, and doubtless for the same reasons. In order to impress the truth of God’s All and the creature’s nothing in the soul of the reader, a truth one cannot adequately express “by words,” Benet prefers another device. In the tradition of pseudo-Dionysius and other neo-Platonic, Christian contemplatives, Benet uses a “dissimilar similitude,” which does not allow confusion of the image with the object.<sup>44</sup> A creature, Benet says, is nothing but a “pure dependency” on God. In relation to God, a creature is as rays of light are in relation to the sun. As the rays of the sun depend entirely on their origin without whose continual communication and sustaining they would not be able to subsist, so the creature depends entirely on the creator without whose continual maintenance the creature would not be able to be. As the rays of the sun, therefore, must be referred entirely to the sun, so the creature must be referred to the creator, according to the maxim, “all being which is such through participation, must be referred to the being which is such by essence.” When the sun withdraws, its rays disappear; likewise, if God were to withdraw from the creature, the creature would vanish. Nevertheless, although there is nothing in the creature but God, as there is nothing in rays of light but the sun, the creature, considered in itself, is not God. Rather, like rays in relation to their origin, the creature is a certain “dependency” or “spark” of God’s being. When one considers a creature in itself, it appears to be something; but when one contemplates the creature in relation to God, it is nothing (III, 8, 272-273):

for as the sun assumes and appropriates to itself all its rays as beams issuing and going out from it, and as when it recalls them to their origin, its great light swallows them up and annihilates them and reduces them to nothing; so likewise the creator assumes and appropriates the creature to himself, as some spark gone out from him, and recalls it to himself as to its center and origin, and in his infinity he annihilates it and reduces it to nothing. (III, 8, 274).

Thus, although the creature may be considered apart from God as something, it is “nothing considered in the immensity of God, and in his infinite being.”

Benet’s similitude provokes two reactions among commentators. Those who wish to save Benet’s orthodoxy say that he confuses the

<sup>43</sup> Bonaventure, *I Sent.*, d.8, p.1, a.1, q.1, *arg. pro aff.* 1, 150; d.22, q.3, *arg. con.* 4, 395.

<sup>44</sup> For medieval commentary on this theme, see, for example, Hugh of St. Victor, *Exposition in Hierarchiam Coelestem*, PL 175.961, 988-89; Richard of St. Victor, *In Apocalypsim Joannis*, PL 196.686-90; Dionysius Cartusianus, *Commentaria in librum de Coelesti seu Angelica Hierarchia, Opera omnia XV* (Tournai, 1902), 32-34. See also E.H. Gombrich, “*Icones Symbolicae: Philosophies of Symbolism and their Bearing on Art*,” in *Symbolic Images: Studies in the Art of the Renaissance* (New York, 1972), 145-60.

psychological and ontologic orders.<sup>45</sup> Others argue that Benet verges towards pantheism.<sup>46</sup> Neither view, I believe is correct. On the one hand, in active annihilation the knowledge of the All of God and the nothingness of the creature is not a subjective experience but an objective truth upon which to base practice. On the other hand, as we shall see, the main source for Benet's doctrine is impeccably orthodox. None the less, one can understand the confusion of commentators. Judged in terms of Aristotelian logic, the above text is at least ill-sounding. Perhaps, however, the nothingness of the creature in relation to God might better be understood in terms of the coincidence of opposites.

The analogy of light and its diffusion of rays, applied to spiritual progress, has a long tradition among mystical writers.<sup>47</sup> Benet knew this tradition well. However, his precise use of the analogy in the above text, applied to the relative being of the creature, has, I think, a specific source. In arguing the creature's nothingness, Benet alludes explicitly to only one authority: Bonaventure. Indeed, Bonaventure uses this analogy in a work not properly mystical, his commentary on the *Sentences*, and there in the context of an argument similar to Benet's. When commenting upon a question concerning God's presence in all things, Bonaventure makes a triple distinction among the ways in which one thing may be united to another. First, one thing may be united to another through a *presence*, *dependence*, and a *concomitance* in matter, as the virtue (power) of a liquid is united to its matter. Secondly, one thing may be united to another immaterially, through a *presence* and *dependence*, as the soul is united to the body. Thirdly, one thing may be united to another in a purely immaterial and independent way, as the sun is present to the air in the radius of its light. It is in this third manner, Bonaventure says, that God is present in all things.<sup>48</sup>

The omnipresence of God, as understood by Bonaventure, elucidates Benet's doctrine of All and nothing. Bonaventure's influence upon Benet of Canfield is not unexpected. Although Capuchin scholastics were eclectic, Bonaventure nevertheless was the official doctor of the Order.<sup>49</sup> Perhaps more important, the spiritual teaching of Bonaventure was the basis for training Capuchin novices.<sup>50</sup> Bonaventure's influence upon Benet on the immediate questions is confirmed by the writings of Benet's fellow Capuchin, Laurent de Paris. Benet and Laurent lived at the same time

<sup>45</sup> Optat de Veghel, 293-94, 316n.1.

<sup>46</sup> Jean Orcibal, "Divinisation," *Dictionnaire de spiritualité*, III (Paris, 1957), 1446-52.

<sup>47</sup> Emery, 148-249, *passim*.

<sup>48</sup> I *Sent.*, d.37, a.1, q.1, 638-39.

<sup>49</sup> Camille Bérubé, "Les Capuchins à l'école de saint Bonaventure," *Collectanea Franciscana*, 44 (1974), 275-330.

<sup>50</sup> Louis Prunières, "Tradition bonaventurienne et spiritualité capucine en France au XVIIe siècle," *Collectanea Franciscana*, 44 (1974), 355-86.

in the convent of St. Honoré in Paris. If not written first, Laurent de Paris' *Le Palais d'amour divin* was printed in 1602-1603 before the *Règle de perfection*. The doctrine of the two works could not be more similar. Because of the similarity of their teaching, Benet and Laurent were coupled by friend and foe alike in a prolonged controversy over contemplation.<sup>51</sup> In response to this controversy, Laurent added treatises to a new edition of *Le Palais d'amour divin* in 1614.<sup>52</sup> These treatises amplify, with reason and authority, themes already present in the earlier edition.<sup>53</sup>

Although the *Règle de perfection* and *Le Palais d'amour divin* develop the same themes, the style of the two works is completely different. Where Benet is elliptical, Laurent is prolix. As a result, one finds explicit in Laurent's *Le Palais* what is usually implicit in Benet's cryptic *Règle*. In particular, in Laurent's work one will discover that the doctrine of the creator's All and the creature's nothing is an inference drawn from Bonaventure's teachings concerning God's pure act of being and consequent presence in all things.

Laurent de Paris' indebtedness to Bonaventure is evident in three treatises of *Le Palais d'amour* which treat a triad of divine attributes, Beauty, Truth, and Goodness.<sup>54</sup> On this subject Laurent either quotes or paraphrases closely long passages from chapters five and six of Bonaventure's *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*. On the principle that the divine attributes are convertible, Laurent identifies the divine Beauty with Being, which Bonaventure teaches to be the first name of God. Following closely chapter five of the *Itinerarium*, Laurent argues that Being-in-itself is so certain that it cannot be thought not to be. Hence, Being is the first thing noticed in the mind, for one can in no wise know created things, which suffer potentiality and privation, without knowing first that Being which is pure-in-act. In order to account for the mind's blindness to Being pure-in-act, Laurent borrows Bonaventure's analogy. As the physical eye loses itself in the variety of color so that it does not attend to the source of its light, so the mind, dispersed in a multitude of phantasms, does not see the act of Being upon which all created beings depend. From God's pure act of being, Laurent again following Bonaventure deduces that

<sup>51</sup> Jean Orcibal, *La Rencontre du carmel thérésien avec les mystiques du nord* (Paris, 1959).

<sup>52</sup> See note 40, above.

<sup>53</sup> Dubois-Quinard, 65-81.

<sup>54</sup> The usual scholastic triad is *unum, verum, bonum*. Laurent converts beauty and being, and these convertibles are added to truth and goodness. Laurent's immediate source is probably Dionysius Cartusianus, *De venustate mundi et pulchritudine Dei, Opera omnia*, XXXIV (Tournai), esp. a.1, 227-28, a.3, 229. Why Laurent uses the names Beauty, Truth, Goodness, when in fact he speaks of being, truth, goodness, is curious, since Paul Oskar Kristeller, "The Modern System of the Arts", repr. in *Renaissance Thought and the Arts* (Princeton, 1980) 167, has shown that the triad beauty, truth, goodness—as triad—seems to be an invention of the nineteenth century.

God is first, eternal, most simple, most actual, most perfect, and supremely one (127, 419-23).<sup>55</sup> Laurent concludes from these divine attributes that God is All to all created things, not as their formal essence but as the “most excellent cause of all the essences.” Laurent, in the *Itinerarium*, finds expression for God being All to all things without being any of them; because God is perfect and immense he is within all things but not contained by them, outside all things but not excluded, above all things but not aloof, below all things but not humbled (127, 428).<sup>56</sup>

Bonaventure’s terse formula expressing God’s presence in, yet separation from, all things, implies the coincidence of opposites between the All of the creator and the nothing of the creature. Laurent de Paris defines the sense in which God is All in a special treatise concerning God’s omnipresence, which in effect explicates Bonaventure’s formula. As well as relying upon the *Itinerarium*, Laurent’s treatise draws more detailed arguments from Bonaventure’s commentary on the *Sentences*.<sup>57</sup>

Commentators on the *Sentences*, including Bonaventure, declare that God is in all things according to his *presence*, *power*, and *essence*. Laurent emphasizes the last of these, since it is through his essence, his pure act of being, that God is most intimately present to created things. Nothing is more intimate to a creature than its being, and creatures receive their being immediately from God. Because creatures depend upon God’s being not only for their creation but for their preservation as long as they exist, God is present, essentially and intimately, in all of them, and in all of their acts (131, dup. pag. 465).<sup>58</sup>

God is intimately present to creatures at all times; so also is he in all places, for God gives places whatever being they possess, and the potency they have for giving place. Of course, God does not occupy place as a body does; rather, he is everywhere at once by virtue of his spiritual immensity.<sup>59</sup> God’s immensity and extensive power are identical with his essence; thus, where he is present through his immensity, he is present through his whole essence (131, dup. pag. 466). Laurent distinguishes in Bonaventure’s terms: whereas bodies occupy place by filling “the emptiness of distance,” God gives place its being by filling the “emptiness of essence” (132, dup. pag. 468).<sup>60</sup> Properly speaking, as Bonaventure says, God is substantially present to all creatures by reason of the “indistance of his essence” (133, 471-73).<sup>61</sup> From these terms of Bonaventure it is a

<sup>55</sup> Bonaventure, *Itin.*, V, 308-310.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, V, 8, 310.

<sup>57</sup> I *Sent.*, d.37, p.1, 632-34 (text of Peter Lombard); 637-51 (Bonaventure’s commentary).

<sup>58</sup> Bonaventure, I *Sent.*, d.37, p.1, a.1, q.1, 638-39.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, d.37, p.1, a.1, q.2; a.2, q.1-2, 640-645.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, d.37, p.1, a.1, q.2, 641.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, d.37, p.1, a.3, q.2, 647-49.



short step to a formula which but for a word is Cusanus' God may be called the "essence, indeed the superessence of all essences" (132, dup. pag. 468).<sup>62</sup> Laurent summarizes God's omnipresence in a traditional formula which he cites from Bonaventure's *Itinerarium*: God is an intelligible sphere whose center is everywhere and circumference nowhere (132, dup. pag. 467).<sup>63</sup>

Laurent defines the creature's nothingness as corollary to God's omnipresence, in another special treatise devoted to the topic. Here Laurent again acknowledges his debt to Bonaventure, and adds that his current topic might well be included in the treatise on God's omnipresence (145, 573). If God is independent, absolute, self-subsistent, and infinite Being, then one must necessarily conclude that a creature is "a pure, actual, total, continual, universal, essential dependence," in short, a "nothing" (145, 573). While God is the first of all things, man is the last in creation; while God is independent, man is wholly dependent; while God is absolute, man is subject to a thousand relations. Thus, man, who holds his being entirely from another, is nothing in himself, as is evident "by analogy and relation to him who alone is" (145, 575). Man's created being, then, is merely an effect of God's being, in much the same way that rays of light are effects of the sun that preserves them (133, dup. pag. 473). Benet of Canfield, we shall remember, refers to the same maxim, and develops the same similitude.

Like Benet of Canfield, therefore, Laurent de Paris deduces the creature's nothingness from the pure act of God's being. Benet did likewise from the infinity of God. Laurent too avails himself of this principle. His treatise on the divine Beauty, we have pointed out, is almost entirely a paraphrase of chapter five of Bonaventure's *Itinerarium*. Significantly, the only material in this treatise not taken from the *Itinerarium* concerns the divine infinity. Laurent states in this regard, without direct warrant of Bonaventure, that infinity is the "first and most intrinsic property" of God's grandeur (127, 424). It would seem that Laurent de Paris, and by implication Benet of Canfield, found this notion elsewhere than in Bonaventure.

In moving from consideration of Being to the second of the divine attributes, Truth, Laurent deviates from the progress of Bonaventure's *Itinerarium*. Bonaventure proceeds immediately from God's first name, Being, to his second, Goodness, which is God's third attribute in Laurent's scheme. It is precisely in the treatise on Truth, insinuated between Bonaventure's meditations on God's Being and Goodness, that the idea of divine infinity is most prominent in *Le Palais d'amour divin*.

<sup>62</sup> *De doct. ign.*, I, 16, 32: "omnium essentiarum simplicissima essentia".

<sup>63</sup> Bonaventure, *Itin.*, V, 8, 310. See *De doct. Ing.* I, 12, 25; I, 23, 46-47. The ultimate source of the maxim is pseudo-Hermes Trismegistus, *Liber XXIV philosophorum*. See Marie Thérèse d'Alverny, *Catalogus Translationum et Commentariorum* (Washington, 1960), 151-54.

Alluding to texts of pseudo-Dionysius, Laurent asserts that God is totally incomprehensible to the human intellect. Man's intellect, like his being, is impotent in relation to God. In fact, it cannot even grasp essentially created objects proportionate to it. This weakness of the human intellect is a consequence of God's All and the creature's nothingness. If one wishes to know the truth of created being, it is necessary to know God who is the "fontal and ideal" cause of all things, who causes all things to be and subsist, and who is more intimate to created things than they are to themselves. Such knowledge is impossible, since God is infinite, and man's finite mind cannot therefore grasp God (128, 433). Truth presents itself to the human mind in a multiplicity of things and operations. However, just as one cannot know numbers without first knowing the unity from which they unfold, so one cannot know the multitude of created things without knowing the unity upon which they depend. This unity, in Laurent's words, is "coincident" with Truth itself (128, 433-34). Elsewhere in *Le Palais d'amour* Laurent likewise speaks of God as the "numeral unity, the fountain of all numbers"; in God's being all creatures participate as all subsequent numbers unfold from the number one. God, in these terms, is the "punctual beginning" and "supereminent point of the whole universe" (301, 804-805). This idea reflects Cusanus, who in *De docta ignorantia* conceives God's infinite unity as a point.<sup>64</sup> In light of this arithmetical analogy, it would seem that the one "only point" to which Benet of Canfield reduces the spiritual life is more than a rhetorical adage.

The order of knowing follows the order of being. Thus, as a creature cannot wholly possess its own being, so in knowing it cannot adequately comprehend the being of other creatures. No matter how much one believes himself to know something, Laurent says, he knows that he could know it more truly. One realizes that, with a more penetrating eye, he can see visible objects yet more clearly; in truth, no visible object can be seen perfectly except by an eye infinite in power. The same may be said concerning intellectual sight. There is no circle so great, for example, that one could not conceive a greater, unless it be infinite, and this transcends imagination. Thus, not able to know infinite truth, one cannot even comprehend the truth of created essences, for these are radically contingent upon the "superessential," infinite Being. Laurent gives one more illustration. Whoever would know the virtue of a seed, which produces the roots, ears, stems, and leaves of a plant, must know its "seminal reason." This, however, is lost in the eternal reason, which causes the seed to subsist. In not knowing this Truth about a thing, one does not properly know it at all (128, 434).

Students of Nicholas of Cusa (d. 1464) will recognize these *formulae*, both in sound and sense, as coming from *De docta ignorantia* and *De*

<sup>64</sup> *De doct. ign.*, II, 3, 69.

*visione Dei*.<sup>65</sup> Laurent, concluding his discussion of man's impotent knowledge, confirms the association. The only real knowledge man can have, Laurent says, is that he knows nothing. This knowledge Laurent calls "the great science of learned ignorance" (128, 434). It appears that Laurent de Paris and Benet of Canfield, in deducing the creature's nothingness from God's pure act of his infinity, join the thought of Nicholas of Cusa to that of Bonaventure. Indeed, once alerted to the influence of Nicholas, one will discover that Benet's argument for the nothingness of the creature following from God's infinity resembles closely a text in *De visione Dei*.<sup>66</sup>

In a final contemplation of God's encompassing being, Laurent once more quotes his favorite text from Bonaventure's *Itinerarium*. This time, however, he adds a significant clause. God is above all without being elevated, below all without being beneath, outside of all without being foreclosed, within all, without being enclosed: in short, God is "the coincidence of all opposition and contrariety" (212, 663). For the only time in his work of over 1200 pages, Laurent de Paris cites Nicholas of Cusa in the margin.

Benet's and Laurent's synthesis of Bonaventure and Cusanus does not seem extrinsic or imposed. E. H. Cousins has shown that the coincidence of opposites was operative in Bonaventure's theology, and that Cusanus' thought indeed resembles Bonaventure's.<sup>67</sup> Lefèvre d'Étaples and Charles de Bovelles did not think that Cusanus' intellectual philosophy contradicted Aristotle's rational philosophy. Like Lefèvre and Bovelles, Benet and Laurent located the principle of the coincidence of opposites in mystical theology. Consequently, they perceived no contradiction between Cusanus' speculations and Bonaventure's many hierarchical, metaphysical conceptions. Contrary to what some notable moderns contend,<sup>68</sup> they did not consider God's essential infinity to efface the traditional hierarchy of being. Following Bonaventure,<sup>69</sup> Laurent de Paris carefully distinguishes God's uniform presence in all things, considered

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 3, 70-71; *De visione Dei*, ed. Jacobus Faber Stapulensis (Paris, 1514; repr. Frankfurt/Main, 1962, vol. 1), I, 99v; VII, 101v-102r; IX, 103r-v.

<sup>66</sup> *De visione Dei*, XIII, 105v. It is interesting that the seventeenth-century English Antinomian, Giles Randall, translated both the third book of Benet's *Règle (A Bright-Starre leading to and containing in Christ our Perfection*, London, 1646), and, in the same year, Nicholas' *De Visione (The Single Eye, entitled the Vision of God*, London, 1646).

<sup>67</sup> Ewert H. Cousins, "The Coincidence of Opposites in the Christology of St. Bonaventure," *Franciscan Studies*, 28 (1968), 27-45; "La 'Coincidentia Oppositorum' dans la théologie de Bonaventure," *Études franciscaines*, 18 (suppl. ann., 1968), 15-31; "Bonaventure, the Coincidence of Opposites and Nicholas of Cusa," in *Studies Honoring Ignatius Charles Brady Friar Minor*, ed. R. Almagno and C. Harkins (St. Bonaventure, N.Y., 1976), 177-97.

<sup>68</sup> Ernst Cassirer, *Individuum und Kosmos in der Philosophie der Renaissance* (Leipzig, 1927). See the remarks of Paul E. Sigmund, *Nicholas of Cusa and Medieval Political Thought* (Cambridge, Mass., 1963), 244-60.

<sup>69</sup> *I Sent.*, d.37, p.1, a.3, q.2, 646-47.

with respect to his infinite divine being, from his unequal presence in all things, considered in regard to his finite created effects (132, 468).

The influence of Bonaventure and Cusanus upon Benet and Laurent does not preclude a possible, intervening source for their teaching concerning the relation between creator and creature. If Charles de Bovelles did not directly influence (we have no explicit evidence), he surely anticipated the Capuchins' doctrine of All and nothing. In his work *De nihilo* (1511), largely influenced in its method by Cusanus, and in subsequent theological treatises, Bovelles conceived the relation between creator and creature logically as the relation between a positive term and its opposite negation. Since he defined God as essentially infinite being, Bovelles concluded that creation stood in relation to the creator as non-being or nothingness in relation to absolute being. Like Benet and Laurent, Bovelles deduced God's omnipresence from the divine infinity, which sustains the being of creatures against an underlying nothingness; as Joseph Victor observes, in such a doctrine the being of creatures is marked by a radical contingency and instability.<sup>70</sup> Among his many arguments for the nothingness of creatures, Laurent de Paris states the radical contingency of creatures in logical terms close to Bovelles'. This time citing Duns Scotus (II *Sent.*, d.50, qq. 4 & 5), Laurent states that the "relation of real and essential dependency, identical, really and essentially, with the creature itself" is the relation between a merely privative term (nothing) and the opposite, positive term by which it is defined. Only by means of its opposite "conserving, principle, and final term . . . namely God, self-subsistent Being" is the creature able to subsist (579). It is worth remarking that in this text Laurent evokes another authority, medieval and Franciscan, who predicated infinity positively and substantially of God.<sup>71</sup>

If there is no proportion between the infinite and the finite, between All and nothing, what then is the mean between God and his creation? Bovelles resolves the problem logically, by means of species of comparisons drawn chiefly from the works of Ramón Lull.<sup>72</sup> Benet and Laurent relied on their usual sources. Cousins has shown how terms of opposition in Bonaventure find their mean in the person of Christ.<sup>73</sup> Similarly, Christ is the mean between creator and created world in Nicholas of Cusa.<sup>74</sup> So also is he for Laurent de Paris and Benet of Canfield.

<sup>70</sup> Victor, *Charles de Bovelles*, 149-53, esp. 149. For Cusanus' *formulae* for the "nothingness" of creatures, see *De doct. ign.*, I, 16, pp. 30-32, I, 24, pp. 48-51, II, 3, pp. 69-72.

<sup>71</sup> Étienne Gilson, *Jean Duns Scot: Introduction à ses positions fondamentales* (Paris, 1952), 116-215. Victor, "The Revival of Lullism," 517-18, notes that many linked Lull and Duns Scotus, Lull and Bonaventure.

<sup>72</sup> Victor, *Charles de Bovelles*, 150-51.

<sup>73</sup> Cousins, "The Coincidence of Opposites in the Christology of St. Bonaventure," *loc. cit.*, 37-45.

<sup>74</sup> *De doct. ignorantia*, III, 2-6, 123-39; Cousins, "Bonaventure . . . and Nicholas of Cusa," 191-97.

When contemplating Goodness, the third of the triad of divine attributes, Laurent de Paris returns to paraphrasing Bonaventure's *Itinerarium*. Laurent deduces, like Bonaventure, the generation of the Son and the procession of the Spirit from the diffusive nature of Goodness, God's most proper name (129, 445-50).<sup>75</sup> But if the expansion of Goodness is marvelous *ad intra*, it is in a sense more so *ad extra*. God expresses his Goodness most fully in the union between God and man in Christ. This union achieves a final reconciliation of opposites. In the God-man, Laurent says quoting Bonaventure, one sees the primal first joined to the last of all, the eternal joined with the temporal, the most simple with the most composite, the most actual with the most suffering and altered, the most immense with the littlest, and the perfectly one with the individual composed and distinguished from all others (129, 451).<sup>76</sup> God's Goodness, revealed in the Incarnation, is even more manifest when one considers especially Christ's Passion, Laurent adds, for here one sees God united with the nadir of existence. Paradoxically, therefore, contemplation of God's highest name, Goodness, leads to contemplation of the greatest humiliation.

As contemplation of Christ is for Bonaventure and Laurent de Paris a necessary corollary to the highest form of contemplation, so it is for Benet of Canfield. Benet unites contemplation of the Passion to the contemplation of All and nothing. Although Benet states often that one must abandon all images in contemplation, in both passive annihilation, where images are anyway impossible, and in active annihilation he regularly excepts the Passion from this rule. In the first place the Passion is a special image, since in it "the inaccessible light is proportioned to man's capacity" (III, 20, 385). Although abstract images of the divinity seem more perfect than the image of the Passion, they are not really so, for they are one's own making, whereas the image of the Passion is given to man by God (III, 20, 383-85). Abstract images induce speculation; only the Passion, the image of God's love, can transform the soul in "fervor and living flames" (III, 20, 379).

Contemplation of the Passion pertains properly to active annihilation, and reveals in visible form the All of God united to the nothingness of the creature. It is important, Benet teaches, that one contemplate Christ's divinity and humanity together. Contemplating this way, one sees in a single person, as Bonaventure says, "the first and the last, the highest and the lowest, the circumference and its center, namely the book written without and within" (III, 20, 295-96).<sup>77</sup> Specifically, the paradox of the cross is the paradox of All and nothing. One sees on the cross the Son of God who, having assumed the form of a servant, "is annihilated and made nothing, as man is nothing" (III, 8, 270). We have remarked that

<sup>75</sup> Bonaventure, *Itinerarium*, VI, 310-12.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, VI, 5, 311.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, VI, 7, 312.

awareness of the All of God and the nothingness of the creature annihilates the very act of reason that tries to comprehend it. Likewise, correct contemplation of the Passion simultaneously admits corporal images and annihilates them:

in order to resolve this, it is necessary to rise above reason to faith, which looking at this man, recognizes him for God who is without form or image. And although the imagination represents the form of a man, nevertheless faith, transcending all sense and imagination, does not see any form since it sees God in such a way that, although we have the representation of a crucifix, the immensity of faith absorbs and annihilates it (III, 17, 357-58).

Christ on the cross, then, transcends all contradictions, or, to use Benet's words, the Passion is "the book wherein contrary propositions are reconciled" (III, 17, 353-54). For Benet of Canfield, Christ is the coincidence of opposites in whom God and redeemed man, that which is All and that which by nature is nothing, become one.

Primarily through the labors of Lefèvre d'Étaples and Charles de Bovelles, Nicholas of Cusa achieved authority as a doctor of mystical theology in early modern France. His principle of the coincidence of opposites supplied the sufficient reason for the mystical practice of the Capuchin friars, Benet of Canfield and Laurent de Paris. Capuchin enthusiasm for Cusanus continued through the seventeenth century.<sup>78</sup> And the essential point of Benet's and Laurent's mystical *ars oppositorum* entered the *Pensées* of another Frenchman:

What, after all, is man in nature? A nothing in comparison with the infinite, an all in comparison with the infinitely small, a midpoint between nothing and everything. . . . The finite is annihilated in the presence of the infinite, and becomes a pure nothing. So is our spirit before God; so is our justice before the divine justice. . . . It requires as much to reach the nothing as the all, and one leads to the other. These extremes meet and reunite in God, and in God alone. . . . The reality of things is an infinite sphere whose center is everywhere and circumference nowhere. In the end, it is the greatest sensible mark of God's omnipotence that our imagination is lost in this thought.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> See Charles Chesneau, *Le Père Yves de Paris et son temps (1590-1678)*, II (Meaux, 1946), 82-85, *et passim*.

<sup>79</sup> Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, Texte de L'Édition Brunschvicg (Paris, 1951), II, 72, 87-90; III, 233, 134. See Rosalie L. Colie, *Paradoxia Epidemica: The Renaissance Tradition of Paradox* (Princeton, 1966), 252-72.