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**Figurative Thinking and Mystical Experience in the
Baroque Age**

Maximilianus Sandaeus, S.J. (1578-1656), Explorer of the Mystical Language

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The *Pro theologia mystica clavis* (“Key to the mystical theology”) (Cologne, 1640) written by the Jesuit Maximilianus Sandaeus¹ takes the form of a dictionary providing definitions, explanations (by means of *disquisitiones*, a system of questions and answers) and quotations (from a range of authorities, including four favourites: Ruysbroeck, Tauler, Herp and Blossius, always quoted in Latin), with the aim to clarify the meaning of the most current mystical ways of speaking. It was conceived in defence of the Mystics, often criticised in this time and for whom Sandaeus already stood up a few years earlier in his *Theologia Mystica* (1627), where he tried to demonstrate the entire compatibility of the mystical and the scholastic traditions. Sandaeus now enters the battlefield again, but focuses this time on the question of language: in his view, the main problem concerning the Mystics is their use of a peculiar language, full of figures, obscure terms, neologisms, inappropriate wordings, that prevents them from being well understood... However, the content of their message is in fact totally orthodox and in accordance with the teachings of the traditional church and scholastic theology. According to

¹ R.P. Maximiliani Sandaei e Soc. Iesu Doctoris Theologi *Pro Theologia Mystica Clavis elucidarium, onomasticon vocabulorum et loquutionum obscurarum, quibus Doctores Mystici, tum veteres, tum recentiores utuntur ad proprium suae Disciplinae sensum paucis manifestum*, Coloniae Agrippinae, ex officina Gualteriana, 1640 (reprint Heverlee-Louvain, Éditions de la Bibliothèque S.J., 1963). See the recent articles by Anne-Élisabeth Spica, ‘La *Pro Theologia Mystica Clavis* de Maximilien van der Sandt : un inventaire lexical à valeur encyclopédique?’, in *Pour un vocabulaire mystique au XVII^e siècle. Séminaire du Professeur Carlo Ossola, textes réunis par François Trémolières*, Torino, Nino Aragno Editore, 2004, p. 23-41; and Christian Belin, ‘La métaphore iconoclaste chez Sandaeus’, in *Emblemata sacra. Rhétorique et herméneutique du discours sacré dans la littérature en images*, Turnhout, Brepols, 2006, p. 267-275.

Sandaeus, it follows that people just need a list of vocabulary in order to correctly understand what the Mystics say.

The question that arises is the following: if everything the Mystics say can be “translated” into scholastic or traditional language, then why, after all, do they need to use such a strange and problematic way of speaking? According to Sandaeus, they actually have no other choice (*quonam alio sermone exprimerent?*), for reasons that I will make clear in this paper. Before entering the subject, I want to point out once for all that all my effort will aim to summarize and clarify Sandaeus’s conceptions, as they appear or are suggested throughout the *Clavis*. Even though I do not repeat “according to Sandaeus” before every sentence, the ideas exposed are Sandaeus’s, not mine.

I will start by the definition that Sandaeus gives of his/the Mystical Theology. Already with the opening quotation of the book (from the Jesuit Alvarez), we learn that “the Mystical Theology rises up towards a very high *knowledge* of God²”. In the foreword, Sandaeus gives his own definition of the Mystical Theology: “Mystical Theology, if one looks at the etymology, refers to a hidden and concealed *knowledge* of God and the Divine³”. At the end of the foreword, Sandaeus summarises the true favours enjoyed by the Mystic: the first one is “that, at the same time, the Mystic’s intellect is wonderfully enlightened in the mysteries of the faith, and that his will is kindled and set on fire⁴; while the second favour, akin to the first, is that “the Mystic, united with God, even though he is uneducated and illiterate, is often raised by God’s teaching towards a very high *knowledge* of the supernatural things⁵”. It clearly appears that, in Sandaeus’s view, Mysticism brings an actual progress in knowledge, and not only a personal progress in faith, love and spiritual life.

Talking about knowledge, three questions have to be asked: how is it acquired? What is it about? And how is it expressed (first built and then circulated)?

² “*Mystica Theologia, ad altissimam quamdam DEI cognitionem erigitur.*”

³ “*Theologia Mystica, si etymon spectes, significat occultam, arcanamvé Dei ac Divinorum notitiam*” (p. 17).

⁴ “*et intellectus Mystici mirabiliter illustretur in mysteriis fidei; et voluntas accendatur, et inflammetur*” (p. 37).

⁵ “*Mysticus Deo unitus, quomvis cetera indoctus et illiteratus, Magisterio Divino saepe ad altissimam rerum transnaturalium cognitionem evehitur.*”

Now, this knowledge is acquired in a very specific way, highly distinct from the speculative way followed by Scholasticism: the Mystical Theology is *Practice-practica, et Affectuosa* (p. 18); it follows the two ways of *experience* and of *love*. Let us take a closer look at these two notions.

In the beginning of the 17th century, *Experience* had acquired new epistemological validity through the progress of scientific knowledge based on observation. Sandaeus himself gives the example of the modern sailors who explored *terrae incognitae*, and found that some traditional geographical views based on the Ancients' authority were actually wrong (p. 24).

However, the problem of experience is its individual touch, and especially in church matters: it is gained *nullo docente*, without listening to any master. Sandaeus is highly conscious of the danger involved, as the Reformation shows how disastrous it can be to reject the authority of the Church and pretend to be personally taught by the Holy Ghost.

Est insanus error Novatorum huius temporis, qui ut se subducant à Pastorum, Ecclesiae, et Conciliorum doctrina ac decretis, solum Spiritum-sanctum pro Magistro se habere iactitant. (p. 35)

He states that the humble Mystics, even though they enjoy the Holy Ghost's personal teachings, usually freely accept to submit themselves to other men in order to learn from them; and he recommends to the Ascetics to persevere in this humility, since it is always safer to learn from someone else than from oneself.

[...] humiles Mystici, [...] quamvis tanquam nobilissimi Spiritus Divino lumine copiosè illustrentur [...], libenter tamen propter Deum, aliis se submittunt, ut ab iis aliquid addiscant. [...] Monendos esse Ascetas, ne sibi facile persuadeant, sese ad talem apicem pervenisse, cum tutius semper sit, alieno magisterio doceri, quam suo.

Even though Sandaeus repeatedly states that Mystical Theology provides a higher knowledge of God and the Divine, we will find no "scoop" about God in his *Clavis*. His very method prevents him from it: whenever the Mystics say something about God that even slightly differs from tradition, Sandaeus explains that they speak "improprie", but actually mean the same old view. There is nevertheless a field where the Mystic can bring real novelty: the human soul, with its actions and powers. Immediately after having mentioned the discoveries made by modern sailors, Sandaeus goes on:

“Why could not the same happen to other commonly held opinions, for example about the actions and powers of the soul, so that they would be found untrue, under a veil of probability?” So the *terrae incognitae* explored by the Mystics are, in fact, their own inner beings...

Under the *lemma Homo interior (secunda disquisitio)*, Sandaeus goes into very detailed explanations about the cognitive faculties of man. In summary, he distinguishes three levels of cognitive knowledge: the first is the sensitive level, which enables us to know through the external senses and the internal faculties related to the information given by the senses (such as common sense, and also imagination); the second is the rational level, able to reason, deduce, conclude...; the third is the *intelligentia simplex*, which enables us to gain knowledge without preceding sensation or reasoning, receiving it directly from the divine Light; it is by this way that we know, for example, that the first principles are true (for instance: the principle according to which the whole is always bigger than the part). To each of these cognitive powers, is linked an affective power, able to be moved by the corresponding apprehension (sensitive, rational, or divine/natural).

But *love* is also an impulse able to *pull* each of the cognitive powers *above* the faculties inferior to it (Sandaeus speaks, at each stage, about a “*raptus super inferiores potentias*”): love is able to neutralise the lower cognitive processes and let the spirit work only with the higher ones. At the lower stage, the *amoris affectio* can bring man to concentrate so much on a mental image that he becomes totally blind to the external sensations from the surrounding world. At the medium stage, the *amor voluntatis* can cancel out even imagination, leaving all the free space to reason. Ultimately, the *amor ecstaticus* can bring man to know only through the light of God.

The path of Mystical experience involves a long and gradual progression in prayer and contemplation. At the first stages, it makes use of the traditional media of knowledge, including images. Every good image can teach something to the religious man, and it is advisable, tells Sandaeus, to travel along all those images, from the lower ones to the higher ones, and to extract all the truth they can give us.

⁶ “*Quidni igitur possit aliis quibusdam vulgo notis opinionibus, ac receptis, quae de [...] animae actionibus, atque potentiis circumferuntur, tale quid evenire, ut revera, falsitatem aliquam sub velo probabilitatis involvant?*” (p. 24)

Sed prius cunctae Imagines recto ordine percurrentdae: ut videlicet ab infimis ad medias, et à mediis ad supremas conscendam, quo nulla me veritas subterfugiat, (sub Imago interna).

But at the higher stage, the ultimate experience involves a relinquishment of this path of images to reach the naked Truth: “*Cum autem Imagines via quaedam sint ad nudam ac simplicem veritatem; si ad veritatem pertingere velim, paullatim abdicanda via est.*” The mystical union with God himself happens in the absence of any image, in what the soul experiences as a kind of very bright light or very deep obscurity.

It remains unclear, in Sandaeus’s explanations, whether all human cognitive powers are also made quiet during this union, or if some remain active, either efficiently or not (the intellect, even though active, would be unable to embrace something infinite, since it is itself finite⁷). The *secunda disquisitio* under the lemma *cognitio Dei* is the following one: “If, and in what way, the negative knowledge of God happens without any action of the intellect and without any image⁸?” The answer given by Sandaeus is not very clear: trying to escape the *spinosae subtilitates* causing passionate discussions among Philosophers and Theologians, Sandaeus moves the debate away from the cognitive powers of the soul he has defined elsewhere, and only relies on the distinction between knowledge accessible through faith (that requires no evidence) and knowledge accessible through reason (building on evidence).

Anyway, what is repeatedly stated is that the unitive experience with God, even though it is called a “vision”, happens in the soul without any image, and even without any concept. As a quotation from Tauler indicates (p. 362), neither the intellect nor the senses are able to grasp anything from the presence of God, because of God’s perfection and our own imperfection — to the point that, if some image or idea has been grasped, we can be sure that it was not God’s (even though, as Tauler adds, it can be something divine, such as an apparition of the Virgin Mary or of Christ, for instance — but we will focus here on the ultimate union with God).

⁷ As becomes clear from a quotation of Saint Grégoire: “*mens nostra nequaquam se ad comprehendendam incircumscripam circumstantiam dilatat, quia eam inopiâ suae circumscriptionis angustat*” (p. 363).

⁸ “*An et quomodo cognitio Dei negativa sit sine actu intellectus, et absque omni imagine?*”

The Mystical exploration brings man in a land beyond any human image and concept; but then, after that meeting with the unutterable/the unspeakable has taken place, how can they put words on this experience, for themselves and for the others? How to build and circulate this new knowledge about God – and, above all, as we have seen, about the human soul in its interaction with God?

Now we come to the problem of mystical language, its conditions of possibility and *why* it just *has* to be so particular and so inappropriate... Sandaeus does not discuss those points at length (his goal is rather to explain what happens *before* and *during* the mystical union, not *after*), but some parts of the *Clavis* give us interesting clues to reconstruct his views: mainly the third chapter of the foreword (called *Canones pro mysticarum loquutionum intellectu*) and some lemmas as *Experientia* and *Cognitio Dei*.

To be able to communicate his experience, the Mystic has to build on the remains of this experience. We have seen that, in theory, mystical union leaves no clear image or data. But it deeply transforms the inner being of the Mystic and does leave some “traces” in his soul. Those traces left in the soul are described by Sandaeus under the lemma *Experientia*, through a long quotation from Constantin de Barbanson: they are called “*vestigia et impressiones, interiores obscurae species*”, and also “*aenigmata*” and “*ideae*”. Barbanson clearly states that those impressions are not conceived by man’s imagination, but left in the darkness of the spirit by the experience of the divine operation. And after this experience, the various powers of the soul, including the intellect, can turn their attention to those traces and concentrate on them.

We find here again the traditional paradigm of the traces left by God, first in the Creation, then in the Bible, which enable man, by concentrating on these figures and trying to unveil their meaning, to gain indirect knowledge of God. This paradigm is the basis of the whole symbolic way of thinking, so pervasive in the emblematic culture that flourished in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, notably among the Jesuits – Sandaeus himself was a great specialist and practitioner of symbolics, and wrote a *Theologia symbolica*, among other books. In his *Clavis*, he also defines a way of knowing God that proceeds through “*imagines*” and “*similitudines*”, which we find among the creatures, or among the things we hear or read, and which we submit to a rational investigation (p. 361). The great differences with Mysticism are 1st) that the Mystic, instead of looking for visible traces left by the sea on a piece of land a long time

ago, is himself the land that has just been flooded over by the sea, and 2nd) that the *vestigia* the Mystic has to deal with are not clearly formed images (like creatures or biblical figures). Yet, the very process of trying to make sense from enigmatic traces can explain the affinity between the mystical and symbolic languages.

Furthermore, the only tools available to build and express *any* knowledge are concepts and images. So the Mystics will have no other choice than to use them, searching through existing vocabulary or creating new words – but always making clear, at the very time they use them, that their words are totally inappropriate. When using concepts, the Mystics will often ascribe them to God only through negation (*per negationem*) – it is the apophatic tradition, saying for example that God is *incretatus, incorporeus...* – or through excess (*per excessum*) – saying for instance that God is *super-substantialis* – (Sandaeus, p. 161-162). When talking with images, the Mystics will prefer the clearly dissimilar images⁹, and will often bring together opposing images (creating oxymorons). In the Mystical language, figures are not an ornamental piece of rhetoric, that one could replace with the “proper expression”, but the only way found to express, however inappropriately, something that has *no* proper expression. To quote Sandaeus: Mystics are forced to talk in this way by virtue of, on the one hand, the “height and incomprehensibility of the divine truths there are dealing with, and on the other hand, by means of the condition of their emotions, impossible to explain through other words¹⁰”.

Let us give some examples. As I already mentioned, the Mystics often describe their union with God as happening in a great and very bright light, or also in a very deep obscurity (“*caligo*”, in Latin). Those opposing images are regularly brought together, in expressions such as “*caliginosa lux*” and “*lucida caligo*” (p. 131). This oxymoron makes clear that what it is about is neither light, neither obscurity, but something beyond. Under the lemma *caligo*, Sandaeus explains that those two natural phenomena, although they greatly differ from each other *in genere qualitatis*, may come together in a mystical sense *propter eiusdem generis effectum*, because their effect is of the same kind (that is, because they both prevent man from seeing

⁹ *Canones*, point 5: “*In Divinis explicandis dissimilia plerumque adferunt. Nempe, ne errorem, si similibus utantur, inducant.*”

¹⁰ “*tum rerum divinarum, de quibus agunt celsitudine ac incomprehensibilitate, tum affectuum alia eloquutione inexplicabilium conditione*” (p. 20).

anything)¹¹. Here it becomes clear that the images of light and darkness are not about what God really is, but about the effects he creates on the human soul.

It is also interesting to note that the effects made by God on the soul are described in terms borrowed from the sensible and bodily experiences (here, vision). This is a common feature of many mystical expressions (the soul is said to “taste” God, to exit from itself, to liquefy, to be brought to death...) All those expressions seem to suggest a spiritual experience which, although happening at a much higher and inner level than that given by the external senses, shares the immediate evidence and the possible violence of the bodily feelings. Let us have a look at the lemma *raptus* in the *Clavis*. Sandaeus starts by stating that the word is used by the Mystics *sensu translatio*, and then he proceeds with a *disquisitio*: “What analogy is there between the mystical spiritual *raptus* and the bodily one¹²?” The elements of answer he gives concern the transfer from one place to another (*transfere de loco in locum*), but also the sudden violence of the process: “*violentia quaedam repentina, qua mens subito avellitur sensibus, et ad Divinam inspectionem ac amorem contra modum naturae suae, celeriter ac potenter attollitur*”. The soul is wrested from the senses, but the sensible comparison remains meaningful because it gives an idea of the violence and speed of the process, that goes against the natural way of operation of the soul (*contra modum naturae suae*).

It is already time to conclude. In view of Sandaeus’s aim (that is, to save and keep alive the Mystical tradition), his lexicographical method may not be the best one. By systematising and theorising the mystical vocabulary, by articulating it and reducing it to the scholastic tradition, Sandaeus plays down its subjective and potentially subversive character – in a sense, he kills the vitality and spontaneity of Mystical literature and builds its commemorative monument. Yet, in view of the aims pursued by our research team, Sandaeus’s lexic, by its insistence on vocabulary questions, provides fascinating insights into the complex relationship between figurative thinking and mystical experience in the Baroque age. The analysis I proposed today is of course intended to be further refined, taking

¹¹ “*Quamvis autem Lux in genere qualitatis, plurimum differat à Caligine, ac proinde distinguantur significatione naturali, tamen significatione mystica, omnino conveniunt, propter eiusdem generis effectum*” (p. 131).

¹² “*Quam analogiam habeat raptus spiritualis mysticus ad corporeum?*”

into account Sandaeus's other writings about figurative uses of language and situating them more precisely within the complex cultural and religious context of his time.

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