
LOVE'S DEEPEST ABYSS

A Contemplative Ecology of Darkness

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Abstract: “Love’s deepest abyss is her most beautiful form,” so claims Hadewijch of Antwerp, the great medieval Flemish mystic. This strange and alluring idea, shared by many of the apophatic tradition, reflects the sense that the abyssal (sometimes conceived of as a void, a desert, or darkness) is essential to the work of love, and that love can only be known by relinquishing the narrow conception of the self and becoming lost in the depths. The idea of the abyss has reemerged in our own time as part of a painful grammar of loss: a way of engaging and responding to social, political, cultural, environmental, spiritual, and personal losses too deep to name but impossible to ignore. It has also become critical to the work of reimagining the immense value of what we are losing, rekindling our capacity to love what is most precious to us, and helping us recover a sense of a shared life with all sentient beings (something often referred to in the Christian mystical tradition simply as “the common life”). And it has become part of an emerging “contemplative ecology of darkness”—a radical spiritual practice that can help us learn again how to behold ourselves and other living beings as part of a larger whole.

Love’s deepest abyss is her most beautiful form.
—Hadewijch of Antwerp

Deep calls to deep
at the thunder of your cataracts;
all your waves and your billows
have gone over me.
—Psalm 42:7

INTRODUCTION

The idea of the abyss has long haunted our thinking about the divine. Endlessness, bottomlessness, vastness: these and other images of immensity recur throughout mystical and contemplative discourse and serve as a reminder of the significance of the ineffable and incomprehensible within religious thought and practice—Job’s whirlwind, the deep that calls to deep, Dionysius’s divine darkness. There is an undeniable allure in the prospect of becoming immersed within an immensity that can never be fully known, that opens out endlessly within and beyond, but there is also an inevitable sense of dread at the prospect of letting go of the ground of identity, of becoming utterly consumed by this bottomless depth. Here, we draw close to Rudolf Otto’s *mysterium tremendum*



et fascinans—the power of the holy that we can neither fully comprehend nor resist.¹ There is a suggestion here that, whatever else it may mean to seek out the mystery of the divine, it is not safe, that to become open to this immensity requires a willingness to face an incomprehensible darkness, to risk everything, including the very idea of an enclosed, buffered self, for the sake of a more expansive, inclusive vision of reality—a reality the Flemish mystic Hadewijch of Antwerp calls “Love’s deepest abyss.”²

This vision of radical, abyssal love emerged in a historical moment marked by profound loss and uncertainty and reflected a desire, on the part of certain brave souls, to seek out the truth of their lives in God beyond the surface of received wisdom, a truth that could only be discovered by relinquishing everything and entering the depths.³ This vision of radical relinquishment has retained much of its power and allure for us, something that can be seen in the remarkable persistence of contemporary writing on apophatic spirituality or the *via negativa*, or what is sometimes referred to simply as the “darkness of God.”⁴ No small part of this allure for us, I think, has to do with the honest engagement of this spiritual tradition with the reality of absence and loss—the loss of self, ground, even God. There is something here that echoes the sense of absence and loss that has become woven into the heart of so much contemporary experience, including all that we are losing from the natural world. But it also points to the kind of vulnerability and openness that becomes possible amid loss, when we relinquish our own narrow way of beholding reality for the sake of something more capacious and deep.

In this essay, I want to consider the potential of this ancient mystical vision for helping us navigate and respond to the sense of loss that is currently afflicting us so deeply in our relationship with the natural world. In particular, I want to ask whether this vibrant love mysticism rooted in darkness can help us not only acknowledge the depth of our loss but also rediscover our capacity for beholding ourselves and other living beings as part of a larger whole—not unlike what Rainer Maria Rilke means when he speaks of learning to “see everything / and ourselves *in* everything / healed and whole forever.”⁵ Such work has an inescapably contemplative character, especially if one takes seriously the huge risk involved in plumbing these depths—of opening oneself to acknowledging these losses and learning to participate humbly and lovingly in a world of other living beings.⁶ Sometimes, in such reckoning with the depths, there arises an inescapable sense of what Simone Weil calls *malheur* or “affliction”—an experience of suffering so severe and unrelenting that we can look at it only by “considering it at a distance.”⁷ Here, she contends, the “external I” is destroyed and we are challenged to “accept the void in ourselves.”⁸ Such emptiness and loss can be bewildering and does not always yield any sense of resolution or meaning. Still, sometimes there is a sense being ushered across a mysterious threshold into a richer, deeper world, into a “contemplative ecology of darkness,” rooted in love.

Part of this contemplative work involves coming to recognize that loss, affliction, and vulnerability are deeply shared; that they are part of our common condition; and that any response to this reality will also have to be shared. Entering the darkness enables us to acknowledge and embrace our shared vulnerability and to open ourselves to the prospect of meeting and standing with the lost and forsaken other (who is also oneself). It encourages us, challenges us, as *Laudato Si’* puts it, “to become painfully aware, to dare to turn what is happening to the world into our own personal suffering and thus to discover what each of us can do about it.”⁹ This statement startles us with its directness and moral force, especially its refusal to succumb to the temptation to imagine

that the concerns and suffering of others have nothing to do with us, or to imagine that we are not moving through the night together.

It also creates a climate that can contribute to the work of reimagining community life. Often experiences of loss are utterly isolating, leaving one cut off from oneself, others, and God. This is reflected both in the often-raw personal character of many accounts in the Christian mystical tradition and in accounts of loss that have become so pervasive in our own time. The sense of loneliness and abandonment is often deeply personal. Still, such experiences almost always arise within a particular social, cultural, and political context and often reflect the deep erosion of the social fabric and the loss of community, something Michel de Certeau's work on the rise of mysticism in the early modern period has so clearly demonstrated.¹⁰ Because of this, one can discern in many accounts of apophatic thought a profound concern for responding to this loss and for understanding what it might mean to reconstitute community.

Here, the utterly personal character of each person's journey into the night becomes joined to the fate of others and to the question of how the life of the community can be reimagined and rekindled. The relinquishment of all security in the night becomes bound to a commitment to stand with others in their loss and dislocation. It reveals, in the depths of the night, the sense of shared vulnerability and shared participation in what many medieval mystics called simply "the common life." Apophatic spiritual practice, rooted in love, becomes part of an ethic of accompaniment and a resource for the recovery of a more vibrant and durable sense of community.

THE ABYSS OF ALL BEINGS

Let me begin with a brief example of this distinctive apophatic spirituality from the work of Hadewijch of Antwerp, taken from one of her "Visions," where she describes a strange and difficult encounter she had with darkness:

I was in a very depressed frame of mind one Christmas night, when I was taken up in the Spirit. There I saw a very deep whirlpool, wide and exceedingly dark; in this abyss all beings were included, crowded together, and compressed. The darkness illuminated and penetrated everything. The unfathomable depth of the abyss was so high that no one could reach it. I will not attempt now to describe how it was formed, for there is no time now to speak of it; and I cannot put it in words, since it is unspeakable.¹¹

This account is not easy to interpret or understand. But, situated as it is within a "Vision," in which the author testifies to having been "taken up in the Spirit" and given a glimpse of remarkable things, it evokes a powerful religious experience, even if the meaning of the experience remains to a great degree illegible, even to the one bearing witness to it. The image of the abyss—"wide and exceedingly dark . . . [of] unfathomable depth . . . so high that no one could reach it. . . since it is unspeakable"—occupies the heart of the vision and underscores the ineffability of the experience. The only hint at something "sayable" and possibly comprehensible comes in Hadewijch's claim that within this abyss "all beings were included, crowded together, and compressed." Still, she immediately returns to the apophatic language she has been employing throughout, noting that "the darkness illuminated and penetrated everything."¹²

I want to pause for a moment over that image of “a very deep whirlpool, wide and exceedingly dark . . . [an] abyss [in which] all beings were included, crowded together, and compressed,” and ask whether it might hold some potential meaning for us as we struggle to comprehend the abyss of loss through which we currently find ourselves moving. I am thinking in particular of those incomprehensible losses arising from the increasing number of places becoming degraded and damaged, often beyond any hope of repair; of precious and irreplaceable species going extinct at ever faster rates; and of the rapidly rising (if not completely calculable) cost of global climate change—to the earth itself as well as to those human beings with the fewest resources to respond or protect themselves from the onslaught. And not only this, but also the sense of unspeakable love and regard for all that we are losing, something that often remains obscure and not entirely accessible to us, but which often pierces and haunts us. It is this sense of the incomprehensible depth—of life itself and of what we are at risk of losing—that makes the language of the abyss so compelling and necessary in the present moment.

There is something so resonant in Hadewijch’s idea of an abyss that makes present not only the darkness of God and our own spiritual experience—ineffable and not completely knowable—but also “all beings” with whom we share this darkness. There is a posture of humility and openness to mystery that can help us come to know, be present to, and recognize—in this “wide and exceedingly dark” space—the power of our shared life with “all beings . . . crowded together, and compressed.” And to experience for ourselves, as she affirms elsewhere, that “Love’s deepest abyss is her most beautiful form.”

The abyss of love manifests and makes present something Hadewijch and many of her contemporaries referred to simply as “the common life.” This idea, whose origins can be traced back to the earlier days of Christianity and that became so important in the late medieval Christian mystical tradition, reflects the sense that an encounter with the unknowable deep is essential to the work of love, that is, to the work of cherishing life held “in common.”¹³ In *The Spiritual Espousals* of John Ruusbroec, for example, we read that “the faculty of loving, is heated to rich outflowing, to fidelity, and to love in commonness (*in minnen inder ghemeynheit*). For this gift establishes in us a broad common love (*wide, ghemeyne minne*). Those who are most deeply sunken away in God . . . [are] the most utterly common in outflowing love (*ghemeynst in uutfloeyender minnen*).”¹⁴ In Hadewijch’s thought, this is related to the idea of *wholeness*, in which God is conceived of as “the Goodness / that makes all richness flow, / and the wholeness (*gheheeleit*) / that makes all of life into a whole (*gheheeleke*).”¹⁵ One catches a glimpse here of a beautiful and dynamic “spiritual ecology,” in which “sinking away” into the darkness of God—the mysterious space Hadewijch calls “the deep, insurmountable darkness of love”—is expressed always as an “outflowing love.” This continuous flow of love, within and without, constitutes the common life and “makes all of life into a whole.”¹⁶

There is something undeniably alluring in this idea, a sense that whatever it might mean to relinquish oneself to love cannot be encompassed by the narrow, restrictive categories of identity and meaning that so often shape our ideas about the giving and receiving of love. It is wider, deeper, and more expansive than anything that can be fully expressed in language or entirely grasped with the mind. It is ineffable. To fall, ecstatically, into this immensity is to find oneself, little by little, freed from the constraining force of ego and the debilitating power of fear—whole, unencumbered, alive in love. But it is also to risk becoming utterly lost, no longer able to say where

you are, or who you are, or what will become of you. “This is the dark silence in which all the loving are lost,” says John Ruusbroec.¹⁷ Here, in this densely packed phrase, Ruusbroec expresses the kind of experience that he understood to lay at the very pinnacle (or depth) of the encounter with the divine: darkness, silence, love, and loss, all knitted together as part of a mysterious whole. To know oneself as completely in the thrall of the Beloved is to become lost in an abyss, moving through a dark silence. But it is also, potentially, to find oneself drawn into a deep and abiding sense of community.

These ideas, which first came to expression nearly a thousand years ago, have begun to reemerge in our own time as part of our own grammar of loss and renewal: as one way of engaging and responding to social, political, cultural, and environmental losses too deep to name but impossible to ignore, something Forest Grander describes as “the loss that all other loss fits inside.”¹⁸ So too are our *feelings* about what we are losing, including feelings of love for all that is being lost, feelings often so painful and discouraging that rather than speak of them we simply fall silent. We find ourselves moving through a kind of dark silence born of loss and grief.¹⁹ But there is also the question of whether an honest reckoning with this abyss of loss can help open up a space for a different way of imagining our relationship with other living beings, whether the relinquishment of ego and attachment this loss is inviting us into can contribute to a rekindling of love for the living world. Whether it might be possible to reimagine the common life as an ecomystical way of thinking and living that can speak to our own needs and concerns and perhaps contribute to the work of healing.

Will anything less than a radical relinquishment, a descent into a dark silence and a rebirth into love, allow us to meet the extreme challenges of this moment? I wonder. I want to consider, therefore, how the practice of spiritual relinquishment—so necessary and important to the ancient and medieval Christian spiritual traditions—might be reimaged in the present moment, how learning to open ourselves to the abyss of unknowing might help us recover our capacity to express and embody love for one another and for our damaged and diminished but still-beautiful world.

NIGHT THE ASTONISHING

The abyss of loss and unknowing and bewilderment through which we are currently living is so vast and far-reaching that we often find ourselves struggling to find language capable of expressing it, or grasp its meaning and significance, or respond to it. It feels at times ineffable or unsayable. Even so, the very extent of our shared bewilderment has helped bring into being a rich and varied poetry of loss, a contemporary apophatic discourse that evokes without ever completely plumbing the depths of the vast unknown through which we find ourselves moving. “I wondered if you thought we were lost. / We weren’t lost. We were *loss*,” says Robin Coste Lewis, reflecting on the centuries-long legacy of violence against black bodies.²⁰ Here, loss is not a temporary condition or an inconvenient predicament. It is everything—rooted in history, written on the body, and possessed of a tenacious capacity to continue inflicting harm, an erasure of hope. I think too of Spanish poet Vicente Aleixandre, writing in the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War and Franco’s violent repression, who speaks of the enduring reality of “that profound darkness where weeping doesn’t exist.”²¹ Or the stark space Bolivian writer Jaime Saenz calls “the other side of the night . . . a night without night, without / earth, without shelter, without rooms, without furniture, / unpeopled.”²² A sense of loss so profound that no way forward or around or through it can be

found—not now, perhaps not ever. I think too of the deep pathos of the question posed by Aracelis Girmay: “What could she do / but swallow loss?” When everything has been stripped away, what remains can barely be brought to language or accounted for with thought. “They live. There is nothing left / to do . . . but live.”²³

They live. Here is a beautiful and unexpected affirmation of what is still possible for us in the face of grievous loss. Still, it is a long road, and there is no way to avoid the darkness that descends along the way. What does it mean, then, to relinquish oneself to what W. G. Sebald refers to as “Night, the astonishing, the stranger to all that is human . . . ?”²⁴ To find yourself compelled to acknowledge, as Alejandra Pizarnik does, that “sometimes we suffer too much reality in the space of a single night.”²⁵ Is there a way to give meaning to such suffering? Even spiritual meaning? Or is that another kind of evasion, a way of skirting the intractable character of loss and grief? The Trappist monk and writer Thomas Merton, writing to Czesław Miłosz in June 1961, describes his own growing uncertainty about how to respond to this question:

My darkness was very tolerable when it was only dark night, something spiritually approved. But it is rapidly becoming an ‘exterior’ darkness. A nothingness in oneself into which one is pressed down further and further [though] perhaps here in this nothingness is infinite preciousness, the presence of a God who is not an answer, the God of Job, to Whom we must be faithful above all, beyond all.²⁶

There is little sense here of assurance, or confidence that darkness will yield a meaning that can be fitted into a larger pattern of significance. And in this, Merton’s comments echo the way language of darkness, void, and abyss has increasingly come to be employed in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries—to evoke an awareness of collective loss and absence so deep and far-reaching that every linguistic or conceptual strategy for responding to it fails, and the prospect of finding meaning or resolution feels impossibly distant. “All Absence,” says Edmond Jabès, “means presence to nothingness, means awakening to the void.”²⁷

These different intimations of darkness are not all pointing to the same kind of experience, nor should they be included within a single frame of meaning. But often the boundaries between different kinds of encounters with the night are not so easy to discern, and the language and images used to describe and respond to them seem to inhabit a shared semantic field. Reckoning honestly with this ambiguity and fluidity and thinking critically about both difference and shared meaning is part of what it means to think about and respond to darkness in the contemporary moment. And it is critical to the effort to articulate an ecocontemplative spirituality of darkness that we learn to move within and respond to this ambiguous, uncertain space of emptiness and unknowing. Still, the question remains: Can we, should we, think of this space as having a contemplative character that, with careful attention, can lead us to a deeper engagement with the living world? Or is it perhaps something else—an emptiness that remains unknowable, illegible, unintelligible, utterly inaccessible to our experience or understanding? It is not always easy to say. But the stark losses in the natural world that are cascading over us in the present moment and our feelings of helplessness and incomprehension that so often arise in response to them are moving us to reconsider our own relationship with the dark and whether it can teach us something about how to proceed. Is there something about our inclination to fall silent in the face of such grievous loss,

and our recognition that both the loss and our experience of it remain ineffable, that is inviting us to rethink the value and meaning of the contemplative spaces of unknowing? Especially important here is the question—expressed long ago by Hadewijch and her contemporaries—about whether an encounter with darkness and unknowing can help us move toward a new understanding of what it means to love.

This is not at all unlike the way Aldo Leopold and other environmental thinkers have articulated the fundamental challenge facing us during this time of acute environmental crisis. More than fifty years ago, in his hugely influential *A Sand County Almanac*, Leopold asserted: “No important change in ethics was ever accomplished without an internal change in our intellectual emphasis, loyalties, affections, and convictions. . . . We can be ethical only in relation to something we can see, feel, understand, love or otherwise have faith in.” Leopold was speaking, amid the profound environmental losses of the mid-twentieth century, of the need to extend and deepen environmental ethics to include something that might best be described as a spiritual transformation. Although Leopold himself never used this language, he helped open a space for thinking about this dimension of environmental responsibility through his own sensitivity to the mysterious—and not wholly knowable—presence of other living beings. In a justly famous section of *A Sand County Almanac*, “Thinking Like a Mountain,” Leopold recounts his own struggle to understand what it means to truly see and value the presence of other living beings—for their own sake, but also as part of our responsibility to respond to and care for a living system so intricate, complex, and yes, mysterious that we can never hope to plumb its depths. This struggle became real for him, he relates, on a particular day when he and his companions came upon a pack of wolves in the rimrock country in Southern Arizona and did what they had always done before in such circumstances: opened fire. But something strange and unexpected happened to him that day: “We reached the old wolf in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes. I realized then, and have known ever since, that there was something new to me in those eyes—something known only to her and to the mountain.”

What exactly was this new thing? And what was its significance for Leopold? One part of it has to do with his dawning realization of the fallacy in his thinking about how the natural world *works*, specifically how different beings interact with one another and with the larger whole: “I thought that because fewer wolves meant more deer, that no wolves would mean hunters’ paradise.” As he came to realize in time, such a change would also completely undermine the delicate ecological balance between wolves and deer, creating an unchecked boom in the deer population and leaving them free to denude entire mountains. Still, as important as this dawning ecological knowledge was to him, there was something even more significant that came from this experience: the recognition that wolves and mountains *know* things about the world that are not entirely accessible to us, that there are deeper and vaster forms of knowing than we are willing to acknowledge or live, and that any hope we have of learning to live in the world with genuine care and regard will require learning to respect and respond to this mystery.

Learning to “think like a mountain” involved for Leopold a radical transformation of *awareness*, rooted in a recentering of the natural world within his affections and ethical commitments. More than an idea only, Leopold began to envision a practice, and an entire way of living, that would make it impossible to imagine ourselves either as distant from or superior to other living beings. At the heart of this practice was a new kind of *awareness*—born of humility

and openness to the other and relinquishment of the idea of human exceptionalism. At the center of this practice was a new *awareness*—born of humility, openness to the life of the other and a relinquishment of the idea of human exceptionalism—of our shared participation in an ineffable mystery. The heart of this new environmental ethic was a deeply contemplative vision of shared life. That is in part why Leopold found himself drawn to ground his influential “earth ethic” in the call to “see, feel, understand, love or otherwise have faith in” this great mystery—affection and respect for the unknown moving together as part of a whole.

Returning to that moment of encounter, it is worth underscoring its strange, unexpected ineffability, and the response that seemed to acknowledge the vast space of unknowing opening before and perhaps within him, a dawning awareness of the preciousness, intricacy, and mystery of other living beings. There was also an affectively charged recognition of the environmental and spiritual impoverishment that their diminishing numbers signified—neither of which he could fully articulate to himself or others. Additionally, he had an awareness that not everything about this encounter or its meaning could be *said*, that part of learning to “think like a mountain” would mean refraining from attempting to explain or account for everything, learning to respect and live within silence.

This, it seems, is a crucial part of what it means to face and live with the immensity of environmental loss. We often find ourselves falling silent, whether from grief or anxiety at all we are losing or from awe in response to the fragile and broken but still-beautiful world. “We ourselves are prey,” notes Shierry Weber NicholSEN, “sometimes consciously, sometimes beneath the surface of our awareness, to a host of desperate anxieties—about the holocaust of nature, the collapse of the world, the failure of a future. These we leave almost wholly unspoken.”²⁸ This “unlanguage” we experience, NicholSEN observes, is rooted in and is itself an expression of a kind of trauma—an “elemental anxiety” that Timothy Morton argues is “the characteristic attunement of an ecological age.”²⁹ The world is coming undone. We sense this and carry it in our bones. Still, our capacity to acknowledge it and bring it to conscious awareness is severely limited by the immensity of the catastrophe itself—it is too much to take in.³⁰ And so we experience, within ourselves and all around us, something that Harold Searles argues is the inevitable result of this habit of dissociation and evasion, a “severe and pervasive apathy.”³¹

Apathy born of elemental anxiety—it is difficult to imagine a more dispiriting condition than this. Still, it rings true to much of our experience of the world. Nor should we pretend that there is any simple way out of this predicament, either in terms of the environmental damage we are inflicting upon the world or our own psychological and spiritual dislocation that is so intimately bound up with this damage. But if we are to have any hope of making a meaningful response to this crisis, it seems clear that we will have to find a way of facing the anxiety that afflicts us. Here we encounter something akin to the teaching so often found in spiritual traditions acquainted with darkness: you must be willing to embark into the night, risk coming undone in the bottomless depths, engage the soul-wracking power of the elemental unknown. “Ecological awareness,” Timothy Morton suggests, “is necessarily elemental.” In the frisson that comes from drawing close to other living beings or gazing out onto the endless immensity of the night sky, or plunging into the churning ocean, there sometimes surfaces within us a palpable sense of the elemental. Yet the elemental character of ecological awareness is also, and increasingly, expressed in the boundless sense of anxiety we feel at the prospect of the growing environmental catastrophe. It is, he

suggests, an “elemental anxiety . . . an existential *Ganzfeld effect*, the term for a visual experience that comes upon one during a blizzard. The effect renders *here* and *there*, *up* and *down*, *foreground* and *background* quite meaningless.”³²

Here, with this strange, unexpected image, we begin to approximate the radical sense of disorientation, estrangement, and bewilderment so many of us are experiencing in the present moment. As with many of the images arising within the ancient traditions of spiritual darkness—desert, ocean, void, darkness—we are invited to consider here the full weight and reality of what it is to be lost in an immensity far beyond our capacity to comprehend or navigate. Certainly this is not something we can easily absorb into our consciousness. Nor is it possible to assign a clear, coherent meaning to it. The loss of all bearings and orientation that we feel inside this immensity can indeed feel like a kind of death. Still, it can also signal the potential for a new way of seeing, living, and being, freed from the old constraints: humbler, more open and receptive to the life unfolding before and within us. This is part of what Leopold’s experience suggests. And something comparable can be heard in the testimony of growing numbers of writers, artists, seekers, and activists seeking to decenter themselves—that is, listen more carefully and with greater humility—in relation to the living world. Here, we catch a glimpse of what Stacy Alaimo describes as the emerging “posthumanist perspectives that renounce mastery, transcendence, and stable, terrestrial frames of reference that center the human subject within visible horizons.”³³ Instead, we are being invited, in this moment of acute environmental crisis, to risk opening ourselves to an immensity with no visible horizons.

“ALL THINGS ARE AS I AM”

These ideas have become part of my own experience and thinking and affective life in a way they never were before, especially the sense of emptiness and littleness and lostness—no longer an abstraction, but a visceral, embodied reality. Some of this has to do with my own growing awareness of what is happening in the world and how it feels to open myself to the pain of this shared loss. But it is also deeply personal, rooted in the raw, hollowed-out feeling of seeing my own life come apart and finding my once-secure (or so I thought) identity fractured and frayed, scoured out: a deep sense of displacement, born of waking up alone, far from home, having become a stranger to myself—and the recognition that there is no way back, at least no way that I could securely navigate.

I found myself drawn during this time to a wild, solitary place along the Lost Coast of Northern California where I could pause and enter the silence, grieve my loss and reconsider who I was, and who I might yet become. That wild, beautiful place was healing. Each day, as I moved out into the presence of the sky, trees, the silky and glistening kelp, cormorants, terns, gulls, the pulsing ocean, I found myself thinking: “This is everything. And I am part of it.” Slowly, as I opened myself to this wild world, my preoccupation with who and what I am (or was) began to fade from view. Something less solid and well-defined, more open and expansive, started taking hold of me. I could not easily name this something. But I found myself beginning to sense the possibility of what Henry David Thoreau describes as the precarious self, a sense of self born of radical loss and nourished by grief: empty, open, free, and capable of giving and receiving love—a vision of the self that takes seriously the emptiness at the heart of experience and seeks to reconstitute the very idea of community around this open space.

Sometime later, I read Branka Arsic's brilliant and original study of Thoreau's work, *Bird Relics*, which argues that loss and grief are at the very heart of his thinking about human identity in relation to the natural world and deeply inform his radical rethinking of human exceptionalism. She sheds new light on one of the most enduring and important aspects of Thoreau's work—his insistence that “no living form is more accomplished than another, and life doesn't therefore unfold hierarchically and progressively but, more democratically, moves simultaneously in a variety of directions.”³⁴ For Thoreau, taking this idea seriously meant removing himself more and more from his own reflections on the natural world, in deference to those life forms toward which he was directing his gaze—a gesture of ascetic relinquishment for the sake of the world itself. Arsic suggests that Thoreau was able to formulate what she calls “a complex materialist epistemology,” leading him to radically rethink both the dualistic divide between mind and matter as well as the very idea of subjectivity. At the root of his work was a way of thinking “predicated on radical dispossession and self-impoverishment verging on self-annihilation.” This commitment to weaken the self, to cultivate a “precarious self,” Arsic suggests, stands in stark contrast to the images of strong individualism so often associated with Thoreau's thinking, and it creates the ground for radically egalitarian ethics and politics, a vision of community in which human beings participate in a shared world with other living beings but do not dominate or exert power over them.³⁵

Loss, grief, and mourning occupy a central place in Thoreau's thinking about the precarious self, and they contribute significantly to his understanding about how we can come to cultivate a greater sense of belonging in and reciprocity with the natural world. The death of his brother John in 1842 has long been acknowledged as deeply impactful on Thoreau's thinking and writing about the natural world.³⁶ But Arsic offers valuable insight into his understanding of what he came to think of as a “perpetual grief”—something that infuses all of life with significance and becomes the ground of all knowing, including what we can know of the natural world.³⁷ It is also critical to understanding one of Thoreau's most important contributions to contemplative thought and practice: his sense that it is possible, even necessary, for us to “fuse with the natural.” Arsic notices and lifts up the radical character of this idea but also interrogates it thoughtfully and carefully. She asks, “Why exactly would a self wish to fuse with the natural? What kind of knowing would self-cancellation generate; what kind of self would be capable of enacting its own cancellation; and finally, *how exactly*, by what practices such a cancellation of the self or such a fusion with the natural might occur?”³⁸

There are echoes here of questions that emerge in the writing of Hadewijch and other Christian mystics: What happens to the self that opens itself to an annihilating encounter with the divine? Does it still exist? Can it bear to be “forgotten,” as Marguerite Porete puts it, even for the sake of love? These questions arise within very different thought worlds than the one Thoreau inhabited. Still, they are instructive in helping us consider the high stakes of Thoreau's struggle to understand what happens to the self that seeks to become radically open to the natural world. Arsic's examination of these questions in Thoreau's work draws upon the thought of Cora Diamond, especially her essay “The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy.” Here, Diamond focuses on “epistemological responses to experiences in which ‘we take something in reality to be resistant to our thinking it, or possibly to be painful in its inexplicability.’”³⁹ It is what Diamond calls “the difficulty of reality” that draws Arsic's attention in particular: “the pain and death of others, for instance—that is so intense that it instantaneously dismantles the analytical categories

and concepts we typically use to mediate reality, filling reason with terror, leading it not toward the safety of abstract thinking but to the awe of embodied knowing.”⁴⁰ How, she wonders, can we resist the temptation to respond to such difficult reality by “avoidance and deflection”—fitting or trying to fit such experience into recognizable categories of thought, something that risks reducing the complicated and bewildering experience of pain into a kind of argument?

This is precisely what Thoreau refuses to do, suggests Arsic, especially in response to his brother’s death. He does not “deflect loss and pain into the safety of rigorous argument, even if they can unhinge us; or alternately . . . he accepts the risk of unseating ‘ordinary modes of thinking’ embedded in attending to the ‘difficulty of reality.’”⁴¹ He questions the validity of thought that allows the mind to become separated from the body and pushes through the prejudices of accepted and limiting categories of thought to open the possibility of an encounter with *reality* itself. Thoreau says:

Let us settle ourselves, and work and wedge our feet downward through the mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice, and tradition, and delusion, and appearance, that alluvion that covers the globe . . . through church and state, through poetry, philosophy and religion, till we come to a hard bottom and rocks in place, which we can call *reality*, and say, This is, and no mistake . . . Be it life or death, we crave only reality.⁴²

To abandon such judgments, values, and traditions, Arsic suggests, is “in fact to abandon everything, to start thinking from scratch, in a different way, in a real way, in a way that would enable thought to settle in the real, in its own body and so to become embodied.” This is precisely what Thoreau seeks to do. Embodied knowing, in the sense that Thoreau understands it, is no vague romantic ideal, but an attempt to respond to what Arsic calls “a pressing epistemological crisis, a crisis generated precisely by the unspeakable loss that reality presses on us. Thoreau’s response to the pressure of such loss—a pressure that is nothing other than grief . . . responds to what is unbearable in reality by *bearing with it*, not by deflecting it.”⁴³

It is this practice of radical honesty, born of loss and grief, that allows Thoreau to engage in what Arsic calls “an absolute renunciation of the ‘I’”—a self-relinquishment that allows things to be what they are, freed from the “demands of our desires or the judgements of our identifications.”⁴⁴ Here, again, we come up against the deep challenge of learning to accept and stand within the ineffable, something Sharon Cameron expresses simply and beautifully as: “how to regard aspects of the world that can’t be grasped and that may even leave us speechless.” Cameron argues that this is a question with serious ethical importance, for it has the potential to radically reframe our very sense of what it means to be in relationship with other living beings. “What hangs in the balance in such a confrontation,” she notes, “is how to respond—how to be in relation—to aspects of the world with which we are not affiliated, but from which we are also not estranged, which call to us, the way voiceless things, or things that lack our voice, can be said to call to us to see them, unobstructed by the shadow of categories or ideas.”⁴⁵ The “eroding boundaries of the personal mind” that result from this relinquishment make it possible to reimagine what it means to inhabit the world, or as Pierre Hadot puts it, to “perceive our *unity with* the world,” without defining, appropriating, or dominating it—and being present to experience it in a simple, openhearted way, lost within it.⁴⁶

Toward the end of *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, a work that, more than any other, reflects the grief at the heart of Thoreau's experience, he recalls a moment he shared with his brother John:

As we sat on the bank eating our supper, the clear light of the western sky fell on the eastern trees, and was reflected in the water, and we enjoyed so serene an evening as left nothing left to describe. . . . All things are as I am. . . . I am astonished at the singular pertinacity and endurance of our lives. The miracle is, that what is *is* . . . that we walk on in our particular paths so far, before we fall on death and fate. . . . So much only can I accomplish ere health and strength are gone, and yet this suffices.⁴⁷

This suffices. That simple phrase evokes so much, a moment in time that will not come again and that, even in memory, suffices. His brother's presence beside him, the clear light of the western sky falling on the eastern trees, and the harsh realities of death and fate—there is nothing left to describe: what is *is*. All things are as I am.

This recollection of a moment shared with his brother camping on the Merrimack near Hooksett is shadowed by grief, something Thoreau alludes to later in *A Week*: "Our darkest grief has that bronze color of the moon eclipsed."⁴⁸ Here, grief and the beauty of the world mysteriously coalesce, become part of a unity that can never be fully expressed or understood. Still, it can be lived into, and this becomes the primary focus of Thoreau's attention. In this beautiful openness to the world, to the life he has been given to live, arises a recognition that he is part of things and that the boundaries that distinguish his life from the life of everything around him cannot be fully known or described ("All things are as I am"). He gives himself over joyfully to what he calls simply a "*natural* life . . . a *purely* sensuous life." "Our lives," he says, "should go between the lichen and the bark."⁴⁹

Here we find intimations of something long known to us but too often forgotten: that it is possible to relinquish your own hard-won identity, to become lost within the wild world, and to open yourself to becoming part of things. It is possible to become what Freeman House calls a "mindful witness." There is an inescapably personal dimension to such work, rooted in the felt sense of being touched by and subsumed into the living world ("All things are as I am"). But it is also more than personal: "As our individual mindful witness is turned purposefully outward," House suggests, "we are transformed; we become part of a piece of the planet's own memory. We find individualism, the holy grail of modernity, not diminished but grown into a mature interpenetration of individualities; we grow larger." We become part of "the whole that promises relief from our unbearable isolation."⁵⁰ Relief, yes, but it is also something more—the promise of an ongoing contemplative ecological practice, born of radical openness to the lives of others.

SEEING INTO THE LIFE OF THINGS

What will such a contemplative practice look like? And how can we set about describing and reflecting upon it without reducing it to something either overly generalized or too abstract to hold our attention and concern? It can help to listen carefully to those whose fine-grained reflections upon the natural world provide us with a diverse, varied, and morally challenging philosophy of perception. It is here, in the particularity of a given encounter with this place, this animal, this tree,

this sky, or this eroded or flooded or poisoned landscape, and in the halting, always-provisional efforts to bring such encounters into language, that this grammar begins to become intelligible. Sometimes such encounters unexpectedly open onto something significant and profound. We are overcome by what William Wordsworth has described as “the deep power of Joy,” with which “We see into the life of things.”⁵¹ Or we notice again something as simple and fundamental as “the earth under our feet” and begin to consider our own relationship to this living reality in a new way. “I feel that everything is really made of earth,” says Clarice Lispector, in response to one such moment of awakening. “Such unity. And why not the soul as well? My soul is woven from the finest earth.”⁵² Here one senses the mysterious process by which an encounter with the minute particular can open out onto a feeling of being part of something larger, part of the very *life* of things—and by which the boundary between inside and outside becomes porous and fluid and the distinction between what is alive and not alive begins to fade. Perceiving the living world in this way becomes part of a sustained spiritual-ethical practice.

The efforts to name this still-emerging sensibility in the present moment are striking in their range and diversity. Allan Hodder, for example, calls attention to an attitude he describes as a “mindful naturalism,” a sense of oneself as so deeply immersed within the rhythms of the natural world that any notion of human identity separate from that larger reality becomes impossible to conceive. Fiona Ellis speaks of an “expansive naturalism,” a sense of nature as capable of revealing and making present to us a great immensity. Timothy Morton notes the importance of an ecological-spiritual sensibility that will enable us to discover “the liminal space between things.” And Cathy Rigby describes the growing desire to engage in the work of “rematerializing religion and spirituality” that is giving us new access to a sense of the material world’s numinous power.⁵³

Such language—often willfully indeterminate in relation to any specific commitment to theism—captures something important about the way, in modernity and postmodernity, we often find ourselves approaching questions of spirituality. In particular, it reflects something important about the way spirituality in the present moment is becoming increasingly detached from religious traditions and ideas, although not necessarily the ideas that have shaped them. Still, the distinction or divide between spirituality and religion is sometimes oversimplified, and the enduring fact of their interdependence and complementarity remains one of the most significant dimensions of much contemporary religious experience.⁵⁴ Scholarship in both spirituality and lived religion is helping to provide us with a more textured and nuanced understanding of the shifting spiritual landscape than we have had before, highlighting the complexity and ambiguity of the relationship between practice and belief in the current historical moment.⁵⁵ This has important bearing on what has been described variously as green religion, eco-spirituality, and contemplative ecology.

The question of how or whether we can retrieve ancient traditions of spiritual thought and practice, especially as part of an effort to articulate a meaningful eco-spirituality, is also complex and challenging, particularly in an historical moment that feels so culturally, spiritually, and politically fractured. Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age* has cast a long shadow over much recent thinking about how or whether faith or spiritual experience, including spiritual experience rooted in ancient sources, can be reimagined (or recovered) in light of the intense “cross-pressures” that are such a prominent part of our so-called secular culture.⁵⁶ Some have questioned Taylor’s sharp distinction between the secular and the religious, his nostalgia for a particular idea of the past, and his vision of a restored whole.⁵⁷ But the question remains: Is it still possible for the secularized

and “buffered” self to engage and retrieve ancient spiritual traditions, even if partially and imperfectly? Or has too much changed for us to find meaning there?

I have already signaled my own sense that it is indeed possible to listen deeply to and be shaped by ancient spiritual traditions. Still, the challenge of struggling with the gaps and contradictions and silences of our own historical experience is real. Postmodern spiritual experience is, for many, deeply fragmented and marked by profound loss, and the work of retrieval needs to take this reality seriously. One possible approach to this work has been articulated by David Tracy, who (following Simone Weil and Walter Benjamin) speaks of the inevitably fragmentary character of such retrieval—and the need to attend carefully to what he calls the “saturated images,” or “fragments,” of ancient spiritual traditions, fragments that cannot be fitted easily into any totality system but that retain a capacity for becoming “events opening to Infinity.” Partial, provisional, and open, these dynamic fragments can help us recover and reimagine, in terms that acknowledge how uncertain and bewildering so much of our own experience has become, what Tracy describes as “the very excess of intelligibility in infinity and excess of intelligence in the radical incomprehensibility of God.”⁵⁸

LOVE’S DEEPEST ABYSS

There are few places more fruitful for undertaking this work than in the night—that empty, open space that Christian mystics associate with the ineffable depths of spiritual experience—what they often refer to simply as the abyss of God or, as in Hadewijch’s work, “the abyss of love.”⁵⁹ Those drawn into this space often find themselves confronted by a silence that gathers around loss and darkness, by all that cannot be said, or known, or conceived. Thought, at least discursive thought, recedes. The unthinkable, arising from “the radical incomprehensibility of God,” emerges and makes its presence felt. This sense of an encounter with the mystery beyond thought and concepts is also known to us. “Whoever said that I should count on mind?” asks poet Ellen Bryant Voigt. “*Think it through, think it up*—now that I know so much, / What’s left to think is the unthinkable.”⁶⁰ Here, contemplative practice confronts the myriad (and sometimes contradictory) ways darkness, loss, and absence manifest themselves in the depths of ordinary human experience. Words fail. But not always and not always completely, which is why we find ourselves challenged to cultivate what Reginald Gibbons calls “apophatic poetics,” ways of using language that attend respectfully to what it means to try to give voice to a way of speaking and writing that is respectful of and attentive to the need for silence in the face of the ineffable, all the while retaining a deep respect for the silence out of which it arises.⁶¹

What will it mean for us to cultivate an apophatic poetics of the natural world, an ecocontemplative practice and poetry born of the commitment to listen deeply and carefully to all living beings and to our own felt response to the presence of those beings? Will it mean opening ourselves to “the life of things” with the deepest possible regard? And will it require us to respond to the deep mystery that our encounter with this life invites us into? The letters, visions, and poems of Hadewijch can, I believe, help in this work. Perhaps the finest and most original writer in the late medieval Flemish mystical tradition, she pushes language to the limits in her effort to express what it means to enter the abyss and to discover there the ground of love. And while Hadewijch’s work certainly cannot be considered ecological in the way we use this term today, her unwavering focus on *minne* or love as the ground of all being and as the source of “the common life” gives her

work real resonance in this moment of ecological fragmentation in which we also are searching out a common ground for expressing and living into our deepest regard for the natural world—not least because of her willingness to risk everything for the sake of love to become lost in what she refers to as a “wild, wide oneness.”⁶²

The willingness to risk relinquishing hard-won markers of identity and open ourselves to cultivating a more indeterminate and precarious self is, it seems, becoming critical to our capacity to open ourselves to the lives of other beings. This is part of what Aldo Leopold realized that day on the rimrock in Arizona in the company of a dying wolf, something that allowed him for the first time in his life to begin to imagine what it might mean to “think like a mountain.” So too it is with Henry David Thoreau and the painfully vulnerable self that he discovered following the death of his brother, and his dawning realization that “all things are as I am.” Michel de Certeau cites Hadewijch as an exemplary figure in the long tradition of spiritual wanderers who became “consecrated to the total loss in the totality of the immense.” Displacement, uncertainty, and precarity marked the lives of these figures and were significant elements of Hadewijch’s life as a Beguine. “He or she is mystic,” says Certeau, “who cannot stop walking and, with the certainty of what is lacking, knows of every place and object that it is *not that*; one cannot stay *there* nor be content with *that*. Desire creates an excess. Places are exceeded, passed, lost behind it. It makes one go further, elsewhere. It lives nowhere.”⁶³

To live nowhere, to be moved and dislocated by desire, always moving between here and there, describes not only a way of life, but a condition of the soul, something that Hadewijch’s often-mournful poems make so clear:

Now light, then again heavy,
Now dark, then again clear.
In freeing comfort, in restrained fear,
In taking and in giving,
Those disposed to
The quest of love
Forever have to live here.⁶⁴

The “here” that she describes is, in truth, no place that can be grasped or known. It is in between, on the way somewhere else. And often it is marked by the pain of absence.

Ah! I speak from the anguish of my heart,
My adversity is all too great,
And lacking love is death to me,
For I am denied fruition of her.⁶⁵

This anguish becomes a fundamental character of her spiritual landscape. “I am astray inside myself as no one else is,” she says.⁶⁶

Uncertainty, instability, and insecurity remain critical elements of her deepening awareness of the darkness of faith, and of what it means to open oneself to love. It is only by becoming open to lostness and unknowing and insecurity, she claims, that one can hope to know oneself, and God. But this knowledge is fleeting, paradoxical, and painful, for what it elicits in us is not only the

palpable sense of God's nearness and intimacy, but also a feeling of great distance and absence, that sense of standing waveringly on the rim of the abyss. It is more than a little strange to consider that this dramatic, dynamic process—the continuous movement back and forth between intimate beholding and painful absence—is for Hadewijch nothing less than the manifestation of *minne* or love, the very heart of mystical awareness. To become a lover, she claims, is to find oneself caught in this endlessly fruitful and endlessly painful movement: “Now light, then again heavy, / Now dark, then again clear.” For those drawn to enter the abyss of love, there is no security or stability; rather, there is only the experience of wandering through a country of storms, madness, suffering, forsakenness, and absence.

Wandering, homelessness, and exile figure significantly in Hadewijch's thought and reflect her sense of how difficult it is to ever know with certainty where one is or where one is going. The words “journey” or “road” (*weghen*) and “wander” or “stray” (*dolen*) recur continuously in her work. But the itineraries this language evokes are neither easy nor pleasant: “I wander in the land of aliens,” she says in one of her Stanzaic poems.⁶⁷ In another, she declares:

On dark roads of misery
Love indeed lets us wander
In many an assault, without safety,
Where she seems to us cruel and hostile.⁶⁸

And elsewhere:

Often I cry for help like one in despair.
And suddenly I am unhorsed, on foot.
—What use is it, alas, to recount my misery?⁶⁹

These potent metaphors reflect how deeply the uncertainty and insecurity of the road shaped her own experience of self and her search for God. Still, we should not imagine these images as being far removed from the actual experience of the wandering Beguines during this time who, by virtue of the life they had chosen, often found themselves displaced and moving through difficult and uncertain landscapes: “Here,” notes Tanis Guest, “it is not the difficulties of the spiritual journey which are imposed on the roads, but the condition of the roads which is aptly compared to the inward struggle.”⁷⁰ This struggle became central to the ethos that for Hadewijch defined how the journeying soul should think of herself: “Prefer wandering in continual exile far from the Beloved,” she says, “to coming out (after the enjoyment of much happiness) somewhere below him.”⁷¹ Loss and wandering becoming a way of life and a chronic condition of the soul, mostly because the thought of coming out “somewhere below” the Beloved is too painful to bear. It is better to wander, better to hasten, and join “those who have glimpsed that truth, on the dark path. Untraced, unmarked, all inner.”⁷²

This, I think, is the kind of experience Hadewijch is describing in that Christmas vision to which I alluded earlier. I want to return to that vision here at the end to consider again what it meant for her to find herself displaced, lost in a great abyss—and to think with her about the possible implications for ecological thought of such radical displacement of the self. Here is how she describes this extraordinary moment:

I was in a very depressed frame of mind one Christmas night, when I was taken up in the Spirit. There I saw a very deep whirlpool, wide and exceedingly dark; in this abyss all beings were included, crowded together, and compressed. The darkness illuminated and penetrated everything. The unfathomable depth of the abyss was so high that no one could reach it. I will not attempt now to describe how it was formed, for there is no time now to speak of it; and I cannot put it in words, since it is unspeakable.⁷³

What sort of experience is Hadewijch describing here? Is it an experience of mystical ecstasy, a moment of intense psychological dissociation, or something else, not completely accessible through conventional language or concepts, a sense of ineffable immersion within a mysterious depth? As is often the case with mystical texts, the sheer density of images makes it challenging to arrive at a single or simple reading. But this is also part of what makes such an account so powerful and alluring. We, like the narrator, cannot get to the bottom of it. And that sense of endlessness exerts its own imaginative pull, drawing us into the space and inviting us to think with the mystic about what is happening and what, if any, relationship we might have with this abyssal reality.

“I was taken up in the Spirit,” Hadewijch says, employing language long favored among seers, prophets, and visionaries in the Christian spiritual tradition (e.g., Rev. 1:10; 4:2). This language helps us to locate her experience, both theologically and literarily, within a tradition that has long celebrated the dislocating force of intense ecstatic experience. *Ekstasis*—the sense of being drawn “outside oneself” by the power of the Spirit—is rarely a comfortable or easy experience. In fact, it is often an utterly bewildering, even painful experience, sometimes arising from and other times leading to a sense of real psychological vulnerability. We catch a glimpse of that here when we read that Hadewijch was in a “very depressed frame of mind” when she was taken up in the Spirit. It is tempting to read our own modern sense of depression into this text. But, as various commentators have noted, it is likely more complex than that. And whether we read “depressed” or “completely dejected” or “dismayed” (all viable translations of the text), it seems clear that we are also being given a glimpse here of a powerful and disorienting spiritual experience that Hadewijch herself associates with the sense of being drawn into a great and mysterious depth.⁷⁴ What she sees there—a “very deep whirlpool, wide and exceedingly dark”—is not an image exactly, but a kind of vortex that threatens to swallow up all light, all possibility of seeing. Still, she does see something or perhaps senses a vital *presence*. “All beings were included” here, she says, suggesting the encompassing, inclusive, radically communal character of this space. She is present to others and they to her, in this space that is simultaneously luminous and dark. The “darkness,” she says, “illuminated and penetrated everything.” There is no way of reaching the end of this immensity. It is a space of sheer endlessness, beyond reach (for us at least). And it is “unspeakable,” unable to be contained or fully expressed in language. Only silence remains. Even so, Hadewijch circles back and, appearing to contradict herself, identifies this mysterious abyss as “the entire omnipotence of our Beloved.”

This formal theological expression points to but also falls short of capturing fully the formidable and destabilizing power of the soul’s encounter with *minne*, which Hadewijch says “is terrible and implacable, devouring and burning without regard for anything.” Elsewhere she likens it to a desert: “It is a wonder not understood that has taken my heart captive in this way and causes

[me] to wander in a desert wilderness. Such a cruel desert was never created as that which love can create in her landscape.”⁷⁵ And in one of her letters, she notes simply that such *minne* “is at all times untouchable but so deep to touch.”⁷⁶ Here we begin to sense the strange power and wildness of love in experience and to understand better why Hadewijch insists that it can never be contained or fully grasped or known.

To be drawn into the abyss of love is to be confronted by its essential, radical unknowability. She describes this matter-of-factly, but also with a real sense of loss:

Love’s nature is to me unknown
For her being and her depths
Are hidden from me.⁷⁷

What does this mean experientially? Hadewijch describes it this way:

[The lover] so far falls down into nothing
That what [s]he then sees and hears
And understands in the nature of Love
Seems to [her] remote and unreachable.⁷⁸

What kind of love is it that remains unknown, hidden, remote, and unreachable? Is it a love in which loss and absence define the terms of the relationship, and yet which, impossibly it seems, is never far away? “To lose one’s way in her is to touch her close at hand,” says Hadewijch.⁷⁹ She nowhere attempts to explain or account for this paradox. But she stands fast in her insistence that “Love’s deepest abyss is her most beautiful form.”⁸⁰

Hadewijch knew so well what it meant to inhabit the darkness and what it could mean for our efforts to learn how to love. The precarity and the pain of loving are always bound up, for her, as it was for her near contemporary John Ruusbroec, with the question of how love can be manifested in what she calls “the common life,” that is, the embodied expression of love in community. This is, according to Hadewijch, what love wants to create within us—a deepened capacity to stand with others, especially the lost and forsaken, in a simple, compassionate embrace. But to realize this capacity within ourselves, we must be willing, as she says:

To be wholly devoured and engulfed
In her unfathomable essence,
To founder unceasingly in heat and cold,
In the deep, insurmountable darkness of Love.

Hadewijch took utterly seriously the question of what it means, for the sake of love, to risk everything, “to be wholly devoured and engulfed” by love, to live with a sense of shared vulnerability, refusing to stand aloof from the loss, absence, and pain running through our lives. To open ourselves to “the insurmountable darkness of love” is, she was convinced, the necessary work of the common life.

CONCLUSION

“We are measured by vastness beyond ourselves,” says Acoma poet Simon Ortiz. And yet, more often than we care to admit, it is a “vastness we do not enter.”⁸¹ We remain aloof from the immensity that calls to us in and through every living being. And the common life remains distant from us, unrealized. Still, in this moment of unspeakable and incomprehensible loss in the natural world, we are returning again to the urgent question of what it might mean to open ourselves to this vastness wholeheartedly and without reserve—and how our ethical response to other living beings can be strengthened and deepened through this work. There are different ways of thinking about and speaking of this reality. With Hadewijch, and others in the Christian mystical tradition, we can ask what it will mean for us to learn (again) how to fall into “Love’s deepest abyss,” that immense, mysterious space where “all beings are included.” With Aldo Leopold, we can consider the great risk and possibility of allowing our own narrow concerns (and identity) to open out onto a larger whole and learning to “think like a mountain.” And with Henry David Thoreau, we can ask what it will mean for us to cultivate a “precarious self” capable of “fusing” with the natural world—and what it will mean for us to recover the simple, encompassing awareness that “all things are as I am.”

The recurring presence of the abyss, vastness, and immensity—in mystical discourse, and in so much modern and contemporary writing about the natural world—is suggestive of the depth of unknowing into which we must journey to recover a sense of true intimacy with the beloved Other. What Hadewijch refers to as “the deep, insurmountable darkness of love” stands as an important reminder that the power of love is vast, dark, and potentially transformative. And that we must learn to inhabit the abyss of love, for our own sakes and for the sake of our fragile but still-beautiful world.

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NOTES

¹ Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey (Oxford University Press, 1958).

² Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, trans. Mother Columba Hart (Paulist, 1980), 344.

³ It is good to recall here that Hadewijch, Ruusbroec, and other renowned mystics from this period lived through an historical moment of profound and devastating loss, during which the Black Death reduced the population of the region by almost half. Ole J. Benedictow, *The Black Death 1346–1353: The Complete History* (Boydell, 2004), 110–118.

⁴ Such questions surface both directly and indirectly in apophatic spiritual traditions and in many contemporary responses to that tradition. See, for example, Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511583131; Kevin Hart, *The Dark Gaze: Maurice Blanchot and the Sacred* (University of Chicago Press, 2004); William Franke, *A Philosophy of the Unsayable* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2014); Ray L. Hart, *God Being Nothing: Toward a Theogony* (University of Chicago Press, 2016); Catherine Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible: Negative Theology and Planetary Entanglement* (Columbia University Press, 2014); Jean-Luc Marion, *Negative Certainties* (University of Chicago Press, 2015); Sarah Coakley, *Power and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender* (Blackwell, 2002), doi.org/10.1002/9780470693407; and Matthew Eggemeier, “A Mysticism of Open Eyes: Compassion for a Suffering World and the *Askesis* of Contemplative Prayer,” *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 12, no.1 (2012): 43–62, doi.org/10.1353/scs.2012.0013.

⁵ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies*, Eighth Elegy. Cited in Pierre Hadot, “The Sage and the World,” in *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson, trans. Michael Chase (Blackwell, 1995), 258. A. Poulin translates it slightly differently: “He sees / all, himself in all, and whole forever.” Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies and the Sonnets of Orpheus*, trans. A. Poulin (Mariner, 2005), 57.

⁶ The central ideas in this essay both draw upon and extend thinking that appeared in two earlier works: Douglas E. Christie, *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind: Notes for a Contemplative Ecology* (Oxford University Press, 2012), doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199812325.001.0001; and *The Insurmountable Darkness of Love: Mysticism, Loss, and the Common Life* (Oxford University Press, 2022), doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190885168.001.0001.

⁷ Simone Weil, “The Love of God and Affliction,” in *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (Harper, 2009), 72. Simone Weil, “Affliction,” in *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Emma Crawford and Mario Von der Ruhr (Routledge, 2002), 80–84. Robert Zaretsky, *The Subversive Simone Weil: A Life in Five Ideas* (University of Chicago Press, 2021), 15–38, offers an astute and sensitive analysis of the meaning of this idea in Simone Weil’s thought, giving particular attention to how her experience of social suffering in prewar France gave rise to her understanding of affliction. See also Constance Fitzgerald, “Impasse and Dark Night,” in *Women’s Spirituality: Resources for Christian Development*, edited by Joann Conn (Paulist, 1986), 287–311, for a reflection on spiritual darkness that echoes many of the themes and questions found in Weil’s work.

⁸ Simone Weil, “To Accept the Void,” in *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Emma Crawford and Mario Von der Ruhr (Routledge, 2002), 11.

⁹ Pope Francis, *On Care for Our Common Home: The Encyclical Letter Laudato Si’* (Paulist, 2015), §19.

¹⁰ Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable*, vol. 1, *The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. Michael B. Smith (University of Chicago Press, 1992).

¹¹ Hadewijch, *Complete Works*, 289. Relatively little is known about the life of Hadewijch, apart from what can be gleaned from her writings. She was almost certainly a Beguine, a group of women who lived in quasi-monastic communities but without taking formal vows. Her writings, which come to expression in a variety of literary genres—visions, letters, poems in couplets, and poems in stanzas, show that in addition to her native language of Dutch, she was familiar with theological writings in Latin and French, as well as French courtly poetry. She is considered one of the creators of Dutch lyrical poetry. For an excellent English-language introduction to Hadewijch’s life and works, see Paul Mommaers, *Hadewijch: Writer—Beguine—Love Mystic* (Peeters, 2004). On the question of how literary genre shapes Hadewijch’s thought, especially her poetic work, see Hadewijch, *Poetry of Hadewijch* (Peeters, 1998); Saskia Murk-Jansen, *The Measure of Mystic Thought: A Study of Hadewijch’s Mengeldichten* (Kümmerle, 1991).

¹² Columba Hart's English translation of this passage presents certain difficulties, in part because of the phrase "very depressed," which suggests a meaning in English that does not easily align with the Dutch. In contemporary English usage, "depressed" has come to be closely associated with a specific clinical diagnosis, one whose meaning is often highly contentious. The Dutch simply says: "Ic lach op enen kerstnacht tenen male ende wart op ghenomen inden gheeste," which does not contain any adjective that means anything like "depressed." Van Mierlo, the critical editor, notes that *ic lach* probably means "bedridden" but with the combination of *tenen male* it probably means "dejected." After *enen kerstnacht*, *tenen male* does suggest "completely," so Van Mierlo says that she was probably feeling "down." Most of the modern translators offer some form of this "dejection" or "depression"; so Willaert has "saddened" and Mommaers has "dismayed." According to Mommaers, the dismay is the result of not feeling the Christmas event interiorly, and the whole vision is intended to respond to the fundamental question (which is especially present in Flemish and Rhineland mysticism): What good is it that Christ was born in Bethlehem if he is not also born in your own soul? I am grateful to John Arblaster for his help with thinking about the meaning of this passage. These comments serve as a reminder of the need to take care in evaluating those elements of Hadewijch's work that seem to our ears to reflect certain psychological struggles. Mommaers, *Hadewijch*; F. Willaert, *De Poetica Van Hadewijch in de Strofische Gedichten* (Brill, 1984).

¹³ In the history of Christian spirituality, the idea of the common life is often associated with the "Devotia Moderna" movement and the work of Geert Groote (1340–1384) and the "Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life." See John Van Engen, *Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life: The Devotio Moderna and the World of the Later Middle Ages* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014). But the roots of the idea are older and can be found in the writings of Marguerite Porete, John Ruusbroec, Hadewijch of Antwerp, and others, where it connotes both something fundamental to the very life of God (the life of the Trinity is conceived of as an expression of the "common life") and to the human experience of God as manifested in the shared life of community, which extends to include all living beings. The common life, the sharing of life with others, is understood to be the highest expression of the mystical life. See also Rik Van Nieuwenhove, "Ruusbroec, Jordaens, and Herp on the Common Life: The Transformation of a Spiritual Ideal," in *A Companion to John of Ruusbroec*, ed. John Arblaster and Rob Faesen (Brill, 2014), 204–236, doi.org/10.1163/9789004270763_009; James A. Wiseman, *Ruusbroec's Mystical Vision in "Die gheestelike brulocht" Seen in the Light of "Minne"* (Peeters, 2018); Jessica A. Boon, "Trinitarian Love Mysticism: Ruusbroec, Hadewijch and the Gendered Experience of the Divine," *Church History* 72, no. 3 (2003): 484–503.

¹⁴ John Ruusbroec, *Spiritual Espousals*, b1763–1773; *Brulocht*, b2047–2057, in *The Complete Ruusbroec*, English translation with the original Middle Dutch text, ed. and introduced by Guido de Baere and Thom Mertens (Brepols, 2014).

¹⁵ See letter 6 in Hadewijch, *The Complete Letters*, trans. Paul Mommaers (Peeters, 2016), 87.

¹⁶ Hadewijch, *Poems in Couplets* 16, *Complete Works*, 356–367.

¹⁷ John of Ruysbroeck, *The Adornment of the Spiritual Marriage; The Sparkling Stone; the Book of Supreme Truth*, trans. C. A. Wynschenk Dom (Christian Classics, 1974), 178. This translation is adapted from Wynschenk's in light of the work of the recent Brepols edition. The Middle Dutch reads: "Dit es die doncker stille daer all minnende in sijn verloren" (*Brulocht*, c253–254). Wynschenk's translation reads: "This is the dark silence in which all the loving lose themselves." In the critical edition, the English translation reads: "This is the dark stillness in which all the loving are lost" (235). The Middle Dutch word *stille* can be rendered as "stillness," but also as "silence." In English, both words evoke the depth and mystery that for Ruusbroec is at the heart of this experience. And in the Christian contemplative tradition, both "silence" and "stillness" express significant elements of spiritual experience. For the purposes of the present work, the English word "silence" carries greater weight and meaning.

¹⁸ Forrest Grandier, "What It Sounds Like," in *Be With* (New Directions, 2018), 27.

¹⁹ This idea is central to Shierry Weber Nicholson's argument in her book *The Love of Nature and the End of the World: The Unspoken Dimensions of Environmental Concern* (MIT Press, 2002).

²⁰ Robin Coste Lewis, "Plantation," in *Voyage of the Sable Venus: And Other Poems* (Knopf, 2015), 4.

²¹ Vicente Aleixandre, "Lightless," in *A Longing for the Light: Selected Poems of Vicente Aleixandre*, ed. Lewis Hyde (Copper Canyon Press, 2007), 63.

²² Jaime Saenz, *The Night*, trans. Forrest Grandier and Kent Johnson (Princeton University Press, 2007), 33.

²³ Aracelis Girmay, "On Living," in *Kingdom Animalia* (BOA Editions, 2011), 30.

- ²⁴ W. G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, trans. Michael Hulse (New Directions, 1998), 173.
- ²⁵ Alejandra Pizarnik, *The Galloping Hour: French Poems*, ed. Patricio Ferrari, trans. Patricio Ferrari and Forrest Grander (New Directions, 1998), 27.
- ²⁶ Thomas Merton and Czeslaw Milosz, *Striving Towards Being: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Czeslaw Milosz*, ed. Robert Faggen (Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1997), 120, 122.
- ²⁷ Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Margins*, trans. Rosemarie Waldrop (University of Chicago Press, 1993), 129.
- ²⁸ NicholSEN, *Love of Nature*, 10.
- ²⁹ Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 78.
- ³⁰ On the idea of the “Shifting Baseline Syndrome,” a theory that helps to explain why we fail to notice declining populations of animals or other significant environmental erosion, see Peter F. Sale, *Our Dying Planet: An Ecologist's View of the Crisis We Face* (University of California Press, 2011), 153–166.
- ³¹ Harold Searles, “Unconscious Processes in Relation to the Environmental Crisis,” *Psychoanalytic Review* 59, no. 3 (1972): 361–374. Cited in NicholSEN, *Love of Nature*, 1.
- ³² Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 78–79.
- ³³ Stacy Alaimo, “Violet-Black,” in *Prismatic Ecology: Ecotheory Beyond Green*, edited by Jeremy Jerome Cohen (University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 245, doi.org/10.5749/minnesota/9780816679973.003.0012.
- ³⁴ Branka Arsic, *Bird Relics: Grief and Vitalism in Thoreau* (Harvard University Press, 2016), 129–130.
- ³⁵ Arsic, *Bird Relics*, 21–22.
- ³⁶ See, for example, David M. Robinson, *Natural Life* (Cornell University Press, 2004), 48–76; H. Daniel Peck, *Thoreau's Morning Work: Memory and Perception in A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, the Journal, and Walden* (Yale University Press, 1990), 3–36.
- ³⁷ Arsic, *Bird Relics*, 30–31.
- ³⁸ Arsic, *Bird Relics*, 254.
- ³⁹ Cora Diamond, “The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy,” *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* 1, no. 2 (June 2003): 2, doi.org/10.1353/pan.0.0090.
- ⁴⁰ Arsic, *Bird Relics*, 255.
- ⁴¹ Arsic, *Bird Relics*, 256.
- ⁴² Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, ed. J. Lyndon Shanley (Princeton University Press, 1971), 97–98.
- ⁴³ Arsic, *Bird Relics*, 257; emphasis mine.
- ⁴⁴ Arsic, *Bird Relics*, 270, 274.
- ⁴⁵ Sharon Cameron, *The Bond of the Furthest Apart: Essays on Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Bresson and Kafka* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 11, doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226414232.001.0001.
- ⁴⁶ Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 261.
- ⁴⁷ Henry David Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (Penguin, 1998), 235–236.
- ⁴⁸ Thoreau, *Week on the Concord*, 284.
- ⁴⁹ Thoreau, *Week on the Concord*, 304, 307.
- ⁵⁰ Freeman House, *Totem Salmon: Life Lessons from Another Species* (Beacon, 2000), 202.
- ⁵¹ William Wordsworth, “Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey,” in *William Wordsworth: A Selection of His Finest Poems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 58.
- ⁵² Clarice Lispector, *Selected Crônicas*, trans. Giovanni Pontierro (New Directions, 1996), 62.
- ⁵³ Allan Hodder, *Thoreau's Ecstatic Witness* (Yale University Press, 2001), 66; Fiona Ellis, *God, Value, and Nature* (Oxford University Press, 2014), doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198714125.001.0001; Timothy Morton, “The Liminal Space Between Things: Epiphany and the Physical,” in *Material Ecocriticism*, ed. Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann (Indiana University Press, 2014), 269–282; Cathy Rigby, “Spirits That Matter: Pathways Toward a Rematerialization of Religion and Spirituality,” in *Material Ecocriticism*, ed. Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann (Indiana University Press, 2014), 283–290.
- ⁵⁴ Sandra M. Schneiders, “Religion vs. Spirituality: A Contemporary Conundrum,” *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 3, no. 2 (2003): 163–185, doi.org/10.1353/scs.2003.0040.
- ⁵⁵ David D. Hall, ed., *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice* (Princeton University Press, 1997); Nancy T. Ammerman, ed., *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives* (Oxford University Press, 2007), doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195305418.001.0001; Meredith B. McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (Oxford University Press, 2008),

doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195172621.001.0001; Ruth Frankenburg, *Living Spirit, Living Practice: Poetics, Politics, Epistemology* (Duke University Press, 2004), doi.org/10.1215/9780822385523.

Recent research suggests the growing significance of eclectic spiritual practice among communities that cannot be easily located on traditional maps of religious belonging or identity: Courtney Bender, *The New Metaphysicals: Spirituality and the American Religious Imagination* (University of Chicago Press, 2010); Kelly Besecke, *You Can't Put God in a Box: Thoughtful Spirituality in a Rational Age* (Oxford University Press, 2014), doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199930920.001.0001; Ariel Glucklich, *Everyday Mysticism: A Contemplative Community at Work in the Desert* (Yale University Press, 2017).

⁵⁶ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Harvard University Press, 2007).

⁵⁷ See Michael Warner et al., eds., *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age* (Harvard University Press, 2010); especially Simon During, "Completing Secularism: The Mundane in the Neoliberal Era," 105–125, who offers an insightful reading of the "mundane" that is neither religious nor secular; and William Connolly "Belief, Spirituality, and Time," 126–144, who argues that the alternative to transcendence is not only an exclusive humanism, as Taylor suggests, but also what he describes as an "immanent naturalism" or "mundane transcendence"—expressions that avoid the reductions of a closed understanding of immanence and leave open possibilities for engaging a nonreligious or transreligious transcendence. Thomas Carlson, *With the World at Heart: Studies in the Secular Today* (University of Chicago Press, 2019), 209, doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226617671.001.0001, argues persuasively for an understanding of secularity "that should be counted also fundamentally religious."

⁵⁸ David Tracy, *Fragments: The Existential Situation of Our Time* (University of Chicago Press, 2020), 1–33.

⁵⁹ Hadewijch, *Complete Works*, 299. On the complex relationship of eros and abyss in medieval Christian mysticism and the challenges and possibilities of interpreting this language in the contemporary moment, see Grace M. Jantzen, "Eros and the Abyss: Reading Medieval Mystics in Postmodernity," *Literature and Theology* 17, no. 3 (2003): 244–264, doi.org/10.1093/litthe/17.3.244.

⁶⁰ Ellen Bryant Voigt, "Autumn in the Yard We Planted," in *Shadow of Heaven* (Norton, 2002), 76.

⁶¹ Reginald Gibbons, "On Apophatic Poetics (I & II)," in *How Poems Think* (University of Chicago Press, 2015), 87–122.

⁶² Hadewijch, *Mengeldichten*, poem 26, in *A Companion to John of Ruusbroec*, ed. John Arblaster and Rob Faesen (Brill, 2014), 371, doi.org/10.1163/9789004270763.

⁶³ Certeau, *Mystic Fable*, 299. On this concluding section of *The Mystic Fable*, see Amy Hollywood, "Love Speaks Here: Michel de Certeau's *Mystic Fable*," *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 12, no. 2 (2012): 198–206, doi.org/10.1353/scs.2012.0047.

⁶⁴ Hadewijch, *Poetry of Hadewijch*, 67.

⁶⁵ Hadewijch, *Poetry of Hadewijch*, 70–71.

⁶⁶ Hadewijch, *Poetry of Hadewijch*, 43.

⁶⁷ Hadewijch, *Poetry of Hadewijch*, 213.

⁶⁸ Hadewijch, *Poetry of Hadewijch*, 247.

⁶⁹ Hadewijch, *Complete Works*, 153. On the question of loss, displacement, and exile, see Ray Wakefield, "Homeless Mystics: Exiled from God," in *Weltanschauliche Orientierungsversuche im Exil / New Orientations of World View in Exile*, ed. Evelyn M. Meyer et al. (Brill, 2010), 37–43, doi.org/10.1163/9789042031692_003.

⁷⁰ Tanis M. Guest, *Some Aspects of Hadewijch's Poetic Form in the "Strofische Gedichten"* (Martinus Nijhoff, 1975), 192–193.

⁷¹ Hadewijch, *Complete Works*, 59.

⁷² Hadewijch d'anvers, *Écrits mystiques des Béguines*, 134. Cited in Certeau, *Mystic Fable*, 299.

⁷³ Hadewijch, *Complete Works*, 289.

⁷⁴ See note 11 above.

⁷⁵ Hadewijch, *Mengeldichten*, poem 22, 26–30. Cited Murk-Jansen, *Measure of Mystic Thought*, 65. Jansen observes: "Hadewijch here describes the agony of loving and, as the love that binds the soul to God originates in God, she attributes her distress both to the act of loving and to the object of that love, God. This is a further example of the way in which Hadewijch uses the difficulty of distinguishing between the word *minne* meaning the emotion, and her use of the word to refer to the divine to enrich the content of her poetry." See also Steven Rozenski Jr., "The Promise of Eternity: Love and Poetic Form in Hadewijch's *Liederen* or *Stanzaic Poems*," *Exemplaria* 22, no. 4 (2010): 305–325, doi.org/10.1179/104125710X12730486676225.

⁷⁶ See letter 3 in Hadewijch, *Complete Letters*, 15, 37.

⁷⁷ Hadewijch, *Complete Works*, 311.

⁷⁸ Hadewijch, *Complete Works*, 312.

⁷⁹ Hadewijch, *Complete Works*, 344.

⁸⁰ Hadewijch, *Complete Works*, 344.

⁸¹ Simon Ortiz, “Culture and the Universe,” in *Out There Somewhere* (University of Arizona Press, 2002), 104–105.