

THE RHINELAND MYSTICS



THE RHINELAND
MYSTICS
An Anthology

Introduced, edited and translated by
Oliver Davies

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An Anthology
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*To Alice,
and the gift of new life*

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Preface

This book is the result of a great love for the mysticism of the Rhineland and a conviction that the achievement of these mystical writers deserves not only scholarly evaluation but an accessible introduction to their work for the purposes in particular of personal meditation. There is always a danger that great spiritual writing will be confined to academic circles or will remain trapped in major libraries in obscure languages or in inadequate translations. Some writers have fared better than others in these respects, but all are deserving of a central place in the devotional life of our age. It is my hope that these writers from the medieval Rhineland will feed many, as they have fed me.

Oliver Davies
Mieders, Tyrol
Feast of the Nativity 1988

PART 1

Introduction

The Mysticism of Being

The fourteenth century writings represented in this book constitute one of the greatest flowerings of the mystical spirit in the experience of the Christian Church. This alone would serve to recommend them, but there is an additional reason why these writers enjoy such a special importance for us today. That is the *communicability* of their particular kind of spirituality.

Anyone who has read widely in the field of medieval mysticism will know that a good deal of it only appeals to the specialized tastes of scholars tutored in an idiom of expression and a sensibility which is quite foreign to our modern experience and preferences. We need think only of the emaciated figure of St Bernard of Clairvaux whose physical presence became so abhorrent to his brethren that they requested that he live in separate quarters. A gastric disorder, probably brought on by severe penitential practices, caused him to be sick so frequently that a hole had to be dug for this purpose beside his stall in the choir. We might think also of the young Henry Suso who expressed his deeply felt piety by carving the initials IHS into the flesh of his own chest ('so that the blood flowed copiously'), or of the baroque visions of the saints which were the lot of Elisabeth of Schönau. There is no doubt that in terms of spiritual idiom and practice a good deal of the life of the Middle Ages, and of its greatest saints, seems remote and alien to us, and challenges our modern belief that sanctity must have something to do with psychological and physical 'wholeness'. The presentation of much medieval material to a modern readership therefore requires more than the translation of the words used; it requires an editorial translation of the entire world-view, the literary and spiritual conventions which support and engender it. If we want to penetrate that world in its own reality, then we will need the services of an

editor, an interpreter, who can help us discover the deeper and often familiar meanings which lie behind a seemingly alien culture.

What do we mean therefore when we say that, in general, the writings of the fourteenth century Rhineland mystics do *not* require that kind of interpretative exercise? What constitutes their communicability? The answer is to be found first in the kind of mysticism which was theirs as gift and, second, in the terminology which they adapted and developed in order to communicate that gift to others.

The word the Germans use for the mysticism of the Rhineland is *Wesensmystik*, which we may translate as a 'mysticism of essence' or, since we are not so inclined to think in terms of 'essences' today, as a 'mysticism of being'. The meaning is clear: rather than drawing on the spiritual and cultural traditions of their contemporary world for their inspiration, the Rhineland mystics were concerned to penetrate to the deepest, timeless levels of purely *inward* experience. They knew God in the inner recesses of the human soul, as a Presence, as an infinitely transcendent potentiality. Above all, they conceived of the commerce between God and his human creatures in *existential* terms, and they explored the paths of mystical knowledge in a language that was spare, effective and philosophically grounded. It is with regard to the latter point, of course, that they were closest to their age, for much of the terminology of Eckhart and Tauler, Ruusbroec, the *German Theology* and the *Book of Spiritual Poverty* owes a good deal to the philosophical discussions of the late Middle Ages. And yet it seems that that particular way of talking about mystical experience has over the centuries worn exceptionally well: 'super-essential', 'detachment', 'ground of the soul', 'nothingness', 'ceasing to become'. Other of their characteristic phrases derive from earlier texts (biblical, patristic and medieval) and reflect a union of tradition with the poetic imagination: e.g. 'spiritual poverty' (Matt 5.3) 'birth of God in the soul' (Origen, St Gregory of Nyssa), 'the touch of God' (St Gregory the Great).

The Rhineland mystics were, of course, creatures of their own age (as are we all), and yet we almost feel that their